

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Symposium statement: Implications for Methodology: Towards a more Equitable Future

Lesley Bartlett, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

How do we expand our definitions of quality?

Across the field of CIE, our notions of educational quality are beholden to what is easier to measure, validly and reliably. It's a case of '[treasuring what you measure](#).' However, we do not do enough to problematize the measures themselves—what they are based on, how they came about, how the assumptions, beliefs, and practices of certain disciplines (e.g., psychology or political science) influence them. We have what historian of science [Theodore Porter \(1996\)](#) called a “trust in numbers” that has encouraged us to avoid the politics of measurement (much as [Ferguson](#) described) and ignore what [Radhika Gorur calls](#) the performativity of international assessments. Further, because CIE is a “big tent” field, with multiple disciplines represented, we seem to have tacitly agreed not question the politics of each other's methods.

This polite stance extends, as well, to understandings of quality in research. Researchers across CIE have wildly different notions of what constitutes quality research. We have reached a sort of truce, an agreement to disagree. For example, notions of causality in economics and in anthropology vary a great deal.

One way in which the field has attempted to expand these definitions of quality (either educational quality or research quality) is simply through the proliferation of ideas, the “thousand flowers bloom” approach. Ideas get heard and are generally respected. But genuine engagement is rare, and it means that the dominant disciplines (e.g. psychology) continue to exert the most influence over educational policy and practice, especially in the study of ‘learning’ itself.

To what extent do methods complement or compete in terms of audience, value and outcome?

I have not seen many examples of simultaneous mixed-methods studies where I felt that the methods were equally valued (though see, e.g., [Joan DeJaeghere et. al.](#)'s longitudinal, six year research project in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda). In such cases, qualitative work is often reduced to mere description or decoration. However, I do think that a sequential model of mixed methods is hopeful. For example, one might use a qualitative approach first to generate theoretical insights, and then a quantitative design to examine the generalizability of the work. Or one might find a trend or relationship using quantitative methods, and then explore it more processually and contextually using qualitative methods.

Recently, I've been spending a lot of time thinking about case study methods. Case studies are widely used in educational research and by scholars who embrace very different epistemological positions. However, the traditional methodological literature on case studies does not reflect these divergent theories of knowledge. As [Fran Vavrus and I](#) have argued, this epistemological and methodological misalignment results in limited studies. We

propose shifts in how we in the field conceptualize case studies, and we offer a fresh defense of the value of comparison in qualitative research.

Is it possible to engage with researcher reflexivity and the decolonization of methods while conducting research that is seen as "scientific" and that has the impacts we desire?

I'm not convinced that it is possible to combine decolonized methods and "scientific" research. Decolonizing research methods that I've seen to date require scholars to move away from the post- or neo-positivist paradigm and take apart the notion that scientific research can be reduced to a set of prescriptive methods (see, e.g., [Popkewitz](#), [Latour](#)).

It calls to mind the valiant efforts by anthropologists of education like [Margaret Eisenhart](#) and [Peter Demerath](#) to defend the scientific value of ethnography. It was an absolutely necessary move, in order to ensure that ethnography and qualitative research more broadly would not be completely ignored by funders and policy-makers. But in some ways it requires scholars to bend to the criteria of post-positivist research. What does it mean when we discuss anthropology as the "science of context," or when we insist on [validity in qualitative research](#), even as we seek to redefine it?

How do our various ontological and epistemological identities find a space in the development, implementation and dissemination of research?

I am not convinced that we have created a space as a professional society to seriously consider our ontological or epistemological identities. There are certainly individual members of CIES who do so, but this critical work has not received the attention it deserves. And yet our epistemological stance in particular has serious implications for how we select topics, frame research questions, develop a conceptual framework, design studies, and analyze data. A colleague of mine, [Rachelle Winkle Wagner](#), is currently co-editing a volume on how different critical theories (e.g., Bourdieu, or du Bois) shape data analysis strategies; more explorations like this one could be useful in our field.

What are the research and policy trends in the area of educational equity?

There is, of course, research on programs, policies, and pedagogies that are meant to promote equity. For example, I have recently been reading work by [Socorro Nunes](#) on the Brazilian Landless Movement's teacher education program and on academic literacies; work by [Rebecca Tarlau](#) on the Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Movement) and education more broadly; work by [Kathryn Moeller](#) on public-private partnerships in the field of education and their impact on gender programming; work by [Ana Gomes](#) and her colleagues at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais to produce children's books in indigenous languages in Brazil; and [Ayesha Kurshid's article](#) on the "regulated empowerment" of women in Pakistan.

There is also, in education, an effort on the part of researchers to [decolonize](#) and [humanize](#) research methods (e.g., using various forms of PAR, activist ethnography, critical media ethnography, or counter-stories) and theory (such as Patel's notion of ['answerability'](#) or [Dumas on anti-blackness](#)). There are fascinating discussions of [epistemological racism](#), [race-based epistemologies](#), and indigenous epistemologies (see, e.g., the 2005 special issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* on [Indigenous Epistemologies and Education: Self-Determination, Anthropology, and Human Rights](#)).

I am intrigued by work such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos's [Epistemologies of the South](#) and [If God Were a Human Rights Activist](#), and [Arturo Escobar's World Anthropologies Network](#), which is a "self-organizing, non-hierarchical and decentralized anthropology network that builds chiefly on subaltern anthropologies and that questions current patterns of knowledge production, opening up anthropology to a plurality of styles, modes of thinking, practices, and inquiries about culture world wide." Nonetheless, I admit that I am seriously challenged to understand how we can pluralize without relativizing knowledge and how we can think about different material, social, and symbolic conditions for learning and thinking without falling into determinist or culturalist modes of explaining epistemologies (e.g. as "Western" or "indigenous").

How can we better acknowledge, address and value pluralism in the context of research, policy and advocacy?

We certainly need to do a better job of listening to one another and pointing out, respectfully, the assumptions underlying our own stances and those of others. I think, for example, of the work being done by [Bryan Maddox](#), an anthropologist, and his colleagues at the [Laboratory of International Assessment Studies](#) to critically engage with psychometricians who are designing and developing literacy assessments.

But, as I mentioned above, there is a danger that, in pursuing pluralism, we will fall into a relativism that does not benefit us as a field.

What are some examples of education research practices that promote and enact a socially just and transformative ethos anchored by an ethics of engagement between researcher(s) and the researched?

I have learned a great deal from projects I have had the chance to co-develop and carry out with scholars in other locations, such as the work with [Fran Vavrus and colleagues at Mwenge University](#) in Tanzania, or the [study](#) led by Mary Mendenhall that Sarah Dryden-Peterson and I participated in, along with faculty from University of Nairobi. These projects have required me to think carefully about privilege of various forms; academic languages and literacies; the material, social, and symbolic conditions of research; the value of multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-national research teams; and the ethical successes and challenges of research partnerships. Fran Vavrus and I wrote an extended reflection and analysis of [comparative pedagogies and epistemological diversity](#) that reflects some of that thinking. However, I must recognize that these cross-national research teams did not transform relationships between researchers and researched.

I feel I've done a better, but still incomplete, job of that with long-term, ethnographic field projects, such as the 5-year project [Ofelia Garcia and I](#) did with bilingual educators and students in a New York City high school for newcomer immigrant youth.

I'm intrigued by [Scheper-Hughes](#) when she discusses "the primacy of the ethical in a militant anthropology," the "[dilemmas](#)" of engaged anthropology as discussed by [Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry](#) and by [Ida Susser](#). I admire many of the ethnographic projects that have, I feel, achieved an ethics of engagement. In her book [Mothers United](#), Andrea Dyrness describes her work as a "collaborative ethnographer," and a democratic teacher/learner. Nonetheless, perhaps it's my post-structural training in grad school, but I remain skeptical of research that seems too certain of its emancipatory stance or contributions. I feel more comfortable, I suppose, with studies like one by [Miriam Thangaraj](#), whose revelatory ethnography of well-meaning efforts in India to move children out of labor "at the loom" and into schools had unintentional consequences, or the work by [Diana Rodriguez Gomez](#) on when and how the "refugee" label was made consequential for Colombians displaced in Ecuador.

What challenges and opportunities are associated with the policy uptake and broader use of findings from non-dominant, innovative and social justice-oriented education research approaches?

The most obvious major challenge is that, as scholars move beyond traditional methodological approaches, they are less able to convince policy-makers who are bound to positivist notions of research. Qualitative researchers have to decide whether, and how, they are going to confront those assumptions. But there has also been a proliferation of audiences of academic work, through podcasts, blog posts, op-eds, etc. We (and I include myself here) need to get better at writing for diverse audiences, using visuals, producing short films and audio podcasts, and using other tools to reach people with our work. I admire, for example, how [Mica Pollock](#)'s new book, *School Talk*, and [Ali Michael's](#) book *Raising Race Questions*, and the work both have done lately to engage teachers and teacher educators with that content. Will Brehm's [FreshEd](#) is expanding the reach of work in our field. I am also inspired by the videos and other media work done by [Lalitha Vasudevan](#).

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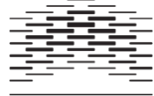


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