

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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New Frontiers in Ethnographic and Comparative Education Research: The Relational Turn and Emotion Culture

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How do we expand our definitions of quality?

We need to look upstream from typical measures of educational quality to identify and support other influences that lead to high quality and equitable educational opportunities for all students. My recent research has focused on school cultural supports for staff members; and teachers' creative and innovative efforts to help students develop components of academic mindsets.

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

It is important for ethnographic and comparative researchers to be precise about how their research findings contribute to larger processes of public, practitioner and policymaker understanding, as well as scholarly knowledge production. We need to push for complementarity between diverse forms of knowledge production. All the while we need to seek to have broader impacts beyond academia, heeding Norma Gonzalez's 2005 observation that, "We can't influence educational communities if we produce knowledge only for colleagues."

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?

A continuing challenge here is to educate our colleagues about the centrality of researcher positionality in the evolving ethnographic challenge of understanding meaning and practice in context. We should forcefully argue that because ethnography captures lived experience, its findings are endowed with "ecological validity" which is absent in interventions and experimental research (Levine, 2007, p. 397).

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

One promising approach is to conduct what Frederick Erickson refers to as "scaled down" policy research. This refers to a "practice-based approach to education policy research" - which seeks to capture educational innovation as it unfolds on the ground over time (2013, p. 1). Such an approach captures and honors the local judgments and creative efforts of practitioners and school leaders.

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

Recent research has documented the importance of the quality of teacher-student as well as teacher-teacher relationships on educational outcomes (Hattie, 2009). For example, Bishop's extensive work in New Zealand showed how developing more Maori family-like relationships in school had a profoundly positive effect on student

belonging, engagement and achievement; this approach has also been successfully adapted among schools serving primarily First Nations students in Western Canada. The quality of relationships among staff members also has a strong influence on key indicators of school improvement such as relational trust, collective efficacy, and academic optimism.

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?

Research in neuroscience as well as the sociology and anthropology of emotion suggests that these relationships powerfully shape and are shaped by local emotional valences such as empathy, optimism, confidence, trust, and commitment. While it is important to acknowledge, from a comparative perspective, that such emotions are always locally contingent, the global press for education credentials is likely leading to recognizable patterns in cultures of school achievement across international contexts. In this spirit, mapping local emotional ecologies in educational spaces seems to offer some promise in transforming understandings of how schools can provide more equitable opportunities for all students.

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?

Research generated from such approaches needs to enter into institutional relationships that affect policy and practice. Dorothy Holland says the process involves entering into “a series of linkages among actors” (2001, 14). Ethnographic and comparative work that is “scaled down” and that is characterized by “ecological validity” can have powerful impacts: First, it can balance decontextualized, interventionist, experimental, and quasi-experimental research on topics that concern us, and encourage leaders and policymakers to deeply consider what is actually happening at the local level; and second, it can support and guide the creative efforts of local practitioners and leaders to solve problems. Nancy Hornberger (2013) recently referred to the ethnographer’s role in this work as an “interpreter who supports local prophets”.

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