

## Rethinking Educational Ethnography: Methodological Quandaries and Possibilities

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This issue of *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia* explores varied theoretical, methodological, contextual and personal aspects of conducting ethnographic work in complex and fast-changing human social environments. The articles are purposefully diverse in the ways their authors conceptualize ethnography and utilize ethnographic lenses to answer their research questions. Ethnography is now an established and well-regarded systematic approach to researching social and cultural life in its complexity. It has been used in education for over half a century, both in *ethnographies in education*, which foreground questions arising from education, and the *ethnographies of education*, which study discipline-related questions (e.g., sociology, psychology, economics) in educational settings (Green and Bloome 1997). However, the question of how to conduct ethnographic research is not a fully settled issue and has been debated for nearly a century. Some authors argue that it takes long-term participant observation and particular disciplinary and theoretical dispositions to uncover cultural practices of a group studied (e.g., Atkinson 2015; Walford 2008), while others emphasize the ethnographic logic as the primary determinant of ethnographic work (Agar 2006; Green, Skukauskaite,

& Baker 2012). Overall, there is a common agreement that ethnography is not a mere research method. It is a way of thinking (Atkinson 2017), a philosophy of research (Anderson-Levitt 2006), a logic of inquiry (Green et al. 2012) and a way of seeing the world that seeks to understand people, their actions, language and interactions from a cultural relevance and emic (insider) perspective frame, as it is situated in multiple contextual layers impacting and impacted by individuals and their communities. As Beach makes visible in his article on ethnography in this volume, there is no one way of doing ethnography or thinking ethnographically. Scholars can engage in doing full-scale ethnographies of a particular culture or they can develop more focused micro-ethnographic (Green & Wallat 1981) studies of particular aspects of people's everyday lives.

Green and Bloome (1997) have made a useful distinction between doing ethnography, adopting an ethnographic perspective and using certain methods, such as participant observation, that originally stem from ethnography.

[...] *doing ethnography* involves the framing, conceptualizing, conducting, interpreting, writing, and reporting associated with a broad, in-depth, and long-term study

of a social or cultural group, meeting the criteria for doing ethnography as framed within a discipline or field. [...] *adopting an ethnographic perspective*, [means] that it is possible to take a more focused approach (i.e., do less than a comprehensive ethnography) to study particular aspects of everyday life and cultural practices of a social group. Central to an ethnographic perspective is the use of theories of culture and inquiry practices derived from anthropology or sociology to guide the research. [...] *using ethnographic tools*, refers to the use of methods and techniques usually associated with fieldwork. These methods may or may not be guided by cultural theories or questions about social life of group members (p. 183).

A full ethnography or a study utilizing an ethnographic perspective draws on relevant theories of culture, social life, people's activities, actions and language to guide systematic examinations of the ways members of a cultural group collectively and individually construct patterned ways of being, doing, talking, making sense, learning and living in a group. The use of methods (tools) that derive from ethnography does not make a study ethnographic. Certain methods, such as fieldwork, observation, sound or video recording, activity mapping or interviewing can be utilized within a broad range of other research designs. Therefore, it is important for researchers to make transparent their disciplinary and epistemological foundations. These epistemological foundations influence the ways researchers ask the research questions, formulate a research problem, choose relevant theories and literature and develop a particular design for a study, including methodological choices for access, participant selection, data collection

and data analyses, as well presentation of study outcomes.

Given the diverse range of possibilities within ethnography, in this *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia* issue, we include studies that utilize ethnographic theories and dispositions in a variety of ways. The articles originated in presentations at Rethinking Educational Ethnography conferences in Sweden (2015) and Lithuania (2016). The international Rethinking Educational Ethnography network, in collaboration with Network 19 of the European Educational Research Association, has held the previous conferences in Helsinki, Porto, Barcelona, Napoli and Copenhagen. The fifth conference, "Rethinking Educational Ethnography: Methodological Challenges in Online and Offline Ethnography," was organized by the Faculty of Librarianship, Information, Education and IT at the University of Borås in Sweden, June 11–12, 2015. The sixth conference, themed "Rethinking Educational Ethnography: Transparency in Ethnographic Epistemologies," was held at Klaipėda university in Lithuania, July 1–2, 2016, with the support of Prof. Ingrida Baranauskienė, then dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Education. Building on prior experiences and research, in these conferences, international presenters were asked to consider the new challenges ethnographers face as they study educational and social processes in the dynamic social and technological contexts education. Researchers were also urged to make visible their epistemological perspectives and methodological decisions they make as they explore complex educational practices, perspectives and contexts.

For this *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia* special issue, authors who spoke at the 2015 and 2016 conferences were invited to develop their papers for publication. Once the authors selected to submit papers to *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia*, the manuscripts were sent out to two reviewers for blind reviews. The reviewers were purposefully selected to include one experienced and one newer scholar who were familiar with ethnographic epistemologies. Our goal in selecting reviewers with varied depths of expertise was to provide the authors with perspectives from different kinds of readers who might resemble the readers of this journal as well.

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank the members of the Rethinking Educational Ethnography network, many of whom contributed to this issue as authors and/or as reviewers of the manuscripts. We are also grateful to the professional service of our external reviewers, whose constructive critiques and feedback helped strengthen the work published in this international volume. The external reviewers who contributed to the volume include (listed in alphabetical order by last name): Begoña Vigo Arrazola (University of Zaragoza, Spain), W. Douglas Baker (Eastern Michigan University, US), Ingrida Baranauskienė (Klaipėda University, Lithuania), Stephanie Couch (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US), Maria Fátima de Cordoso (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil), Anita Eriksson (University of Borås, Sweden), Rūta Girdzijauskienė (Klaipėda Univer-

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## Overview of the Articles

The first section, *Ethnographic Lenses and Possibilities*, includes three articles by Dennis Beach (Sweden), Alba-Lucy Guerrero (Colombia), and Audra Skukauskaitė (US & Lithuania). Dennis Beach presents a historical perspective on the developments in educational ethnography and emphasizes the characteristics of ethnography that are important in designing ethnographic research, focusing on varied phenomena in education. He presents a more European and sociological, rather than the American and anthropological perspective on ethnography, making visible the need for researchers from different disciplinary, national and theoretical backgrounds to engage in “hermeneutical conversations across groups” (Kelly 2006, p. 43) and develop broader and deeper understandings of ethnographic perspectives and possibilities.

Alba-Lucy Guerrero explores ethnographic possibilities of researching children’s agency in creating knowledge about their lives and experiences. The author presents collaborative ethnography with children as an approach that re-envision children’s participation in research and provides multilayered understandings about their everyday worlds. Guerrero also makes visible how traditional ethnographic practices of observing, interviewing and fieldwork can be enhanced through children’s active participation and photo narratives.

Audra Skukauskaite focuses on the ways principles of interactional ethnography enable the systematic analyses of interview records. The author draws on sociolinguistic, discourse analysis and

linguacultural concepts as foundations for examining interview discourse in its larger sociocultural contexts. Interactional ethnographic principles and their application in interview analysis are presented.

The second section, *Contexts of Opportunities and Constraints in Ethnographic Studies*, includes three articles that emphasize the importance of understanding how contexts create opportunities and constraints in educational processes and practices. In the first article, Audra Skukauskaitė and Liudmila Rupšienė examine the teaching and learning of qualitative research in doctoral education. Taking into account the historical contexts for the doctoral preparation of researchers in Lithuania, the analysis of learning in a qualitative methods class makes visible the great progress Lithuania has made in the past two decades in preparing researchers for epistemological diversity.

In the second article, Catarina Player-Koro and Dennis Beach employ network ethnography to study how public and private actors impact educational policies surrounding the education of teachers in Sweden. The authors make visible the detrimental policies and practices that exploit, rather than contribute to solving, educational problems and questions. Network ethnography helps the authors uncover how one specific actor of the Swedish educational policy network intersects with educational policies, issues and solutions in ways that advance the goals of the private actor rather than contribute to improving teacher education in Sweden.

In the third article, Juana M. Sancho-Gil and Fernando Hernández-Hernández

explore how a DIY learning culture, which developed outside the university, is being entered into an institutional context of Barcelona University. Considering cultural and institutional contexts, the authors demonstrate the institutional rigidities and flexibilities that enable possible integrations of out-of-school and school learning processes and practices.

The third section, *Ethnographic Spaces and Methodological Explorations*, includes four articles that explore how varied ethnographic spaces foster methodological innovations and new research possibilities. In the first article, Judith Green, Monaliza Chian, Ethny Stewart and Stephanie Couch examine how entering an ethnographic archive as a research space raises questions about ethnographic records and the construction of the archive itself. By analyzing the perspectives of external and internal ethnographers who share a common Interactional Ethnographic frame, the team of scholars makes visible the challenges and limits to certainty in creating multifaceted understandings of developing interdisciplinary programs in higher education.

In the second article, Jonathan Tummons explores issues of conducting institutional ethnography in a field that includes

virtual spaces for fieldwork and researcher interactions. Through a reflexive account, the author makes visible the methodological quandaries that arise in such research. Drawing on the conceptualizations of ethnography as multisited and distributed, Tummons offers methodological pluralism as a possible solution to addressing issues arising in researching complex processes of medical education in a digital age.

The third article by Cecilie Fog-Petersen, Karen Borgnakke and Sidse Arnfred explores video library as an ethnographic space, which enables examinations of medical student learning. An ethnographic lens and the multiple theories that the team employ enable the authors to provide a contextualized account of how medical students enter psychiatry as a discipline and a professional practice.

In the last article, Margit Saltofte explores photography as an ethnographic space that fosters reflexivity and deeper understandings of fieldwork in ethnography. By analyzing how Danish “techno-anthropology students” create their portfolios of anthropological work, the author makes visible how photos and visual representations enhance student experiences of participant observation and the learning of research.

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