The development of ethnography in educational research in the Nordic countries.

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Ethnography became an established method in educational research in the Nordic countries from the end of the 1990s, following the foundation of the ETNOPED network of researchers led by Sverker Lindblad and Staffan Larsson (Sweden), Sigrun Gumundsdottir (Norway), Karen Borgnakke (Denmark) and Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahelma (Finland), which helped move ethnography of education from a marginal and regionally uncoordinated research method to a powerful and organized part of the Nordic education research field (Beach, 2010; Larsson, 2006). Yet as these authors and also Hammersley (2006, 2018), point out, ethnographic research in education is still a diverse and contested field of practice with different understandings of how ethnography should be done and to what (kind of) ends.

In this symposium we will attempt to paint an updated broad picture of ethnography in education research and its development, covering all Nordic countries, by looking initially at the general past growth of ethnography of education there, along with discussions of present developments and possible future ones too. This will also involve presentations that have been invited to think forward in relation to ethnography of education in the region, whilst also looking back at ethnographic practices in education and their social relations and material histories (Beach, Bagley and Marques da Silva). After this, research addressing respectively and conjointly Gender Equity and Justice in Education will be given particular attention.

There are different reasons for adopting this particular focus. They include the prevalence of ethnographic research addressing these matters in recent decades; not the least in the wake of and related to first the NordCrit and then the JustEd research
networks sponsored by NordForsk; and the continuing need for research of this kind given recent turns in the national political economies of signs and material practices in the Nordic countries and globally and the growth of rightwing populism and rising insecurities for economically and materially dispossessed groups.

Hammersley’s (2018) question related to what ethnography is and whether it can and should survive within educational research, given the fundamental disagreements among educational ethnographers today about ontological, epistemological, and axiological matters on the one hand, and the current commodification of university research on the other, will also be considered, as will research on justice and equity as a point of suture for meaningful future ethnographic research in education in the region.

References


Individual contributions

1. Introduction to the symposium idea, aims and content: Dennis Beach and Staffan Larsson
2. Staffan Larsson and Dennis Beach. Epost: dennis.beach@hb.se
3. Karen Borgnakke, Copenhagen University. Epost: karenb@um.ku.dk
4. Elisabet Öhrn’s rural project group. Epost: elisabet.ohrn@gu.se
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6. Ylva Odenbring and Sirpa Lappalainen, Gothenburg University and University of Eastern Finland. Epost: ylva.odenbring@gu.se
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Introduction

Dennis Beach and Staffan Larsson

The symposium has been developed through cooperation across two networks: “Gender and Education” and “Justice through Education”. Its focus is on ethnographic methodologies and their development in education research in the Nordic countries in recent decades, with a particular focus on matters of research for justice through education and education equality.

On developments in ethnographic research. The case of two Swedish universities.

Staffan Larsson & Dennis Beach

Ethnographic approaches developed gradually during the 1980ies and 1990ies from several sources. The general emergence of a strong turn towards qualitative research had opened this opportunity and the establishment of ethnography has been described in a text from the early 2000ies as stepwise, ending with a number of pre-conferences to NERA’s yearly congress, starting 1998 (Larsson, 2006). This paper starts here, asking: What happened after the establishment phases were passed?

We choose to investigate the choice of methodology in all dissertations in educational research at two universities: Göteborg and Linköping since the start of the education departments at these universities: 1966 – 2018 in Gothenburg and 1971 – 2018 in Linköping. 165 theses at Linköping and 374 at Gothenburg were found. We looked initially for dissertations where qualitatively interpreted observations were used. We then looked within this batch for dissertations where labels such as ethnography, field research and similar were chosen. Lastly, we noted the primary methodological references legitimating the choice of ethnography or qualitatively interpreted observation. A quantitative calculation of the distribution of two categories was then made:

1. Dissertations which were labelled ethnography/fieldwork or similar notions.
2. Dissertations where qualitatively interpreted observations were at least a part of the method used (including the ethnographic).
The result pointed at an absence of any qualitatively interpreted observation until the 1990ies followed by a relatively stable growth at both universities, but somewhat more pronounced in Gothenburg. In Linköping there is a dip in the period 2010 – 2014. In the last period 2015 – 2018 around 60% of all dissertations have at least some qualitatively interpreted observation.

Regarding the work that is labelled ethnography/fieldwork, there is a similar growth pattern. In the last period 34 % of theses carried such a label in Gothenburg, while it was 25 % in Linköping and in Gothenburg this figure had been at least 20 % in every period from 2000 but a bit more uneven in Linköping, with a top in 2005 – 09 at 38%.

In addition to the data relating to thesis publications we also plan to develop, analyse and discuss data pertaining to the relative success in getting research grants for ethnographic projects and how Nordic ethnographic work gets attention internationally. One might expect doctoral courses, supervisors to be significant. But on the broader scale questions can be posed about a growing interest in phenomena where ethnography can be seen as the logical methodological answer.


*Technology in Education, between political demands and teachers’ functions. Cross-case analysis from Denmark and Brazil.*

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In the last two decades, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) integration in education has been on the highest agenda for public policies worldwide. At the macro level of the political discourse, the introduction of new tools in the educational context is supposed to change the way pupils access information, elaborate it into knowledge and develop new skills. In addition, it points to teaching reforms, raising demands for ‘high professionalism’ of the teachers, which includes functions such as ‘learning management’ and ‘digital formation’. At the micro level, we observe teachers at a crossroad between the expectations of the policy-makers, and their concrete activities in situated classroom settings. The contrast about the educational policy discourse and the everyday
dilemmas that the professionals face in school contexts raises the need of a better understanding of the teachers’ functions. The paper addresses this conflict, referring to results from case studies undertaken in four different countries – Denmark, Italy, Ethiopia and Brazil – between 2000 and 2019. Based on meta-ethnographic analyses across fieldwork, this paper will sharpen the focus on cross-case analysis from Denmark and Brazil and exemplify the main themes and research findings about the practical consequences for teachers' functions. The empirical-analytical framework shows, at the policy level, an increasing amount of top-down policies, which extend the demands for a wider spectrum of teacher functions, such as student-centered and collaborative work in the classroom; group mentoring; ICT-based activities to address the subject matter; interdisciplinary school projects; digital learning management. At the practical level, the meta-analysis explores how these demands created a work overload for teachers, who are expected to integrate ICT in their daily practices, otherwise being considered ‘resistant’ by academic and political assessments. Cross-case demands and cross-case dilemmas result in a conflict between intentions and practicalities, given by the contextual conditions of the policies implementation process. The paper concludes by discussing how in meta-analysis the decades 2000–2019 are marked by a shift, where the powerful discourse about the ICT-based learning paradigm and top-down directed demands for change did not implement alternative teaching practices, but provided teachers with a greater accumulation of functions.

References

Going there and being there, and being here: Ethnographic encounters with gatekeepers in school ethnography
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This presentation explores fieldwork encounters from our various school ethnography research projects and specifically those with gatekeepers on one hand
who are able to allow or deny our access to the field and on the other hand act as regulators concerning data production. Our theoretical inspiration comes from Sara Ahmed, who in *Strange Encounters* (2000), investigated the relations between embodiment and community constituted through processes of inclusion and exclusion, which she further analyses as encounters including surprises and conflicts. In this paper, we examine whether Ahmed’s idea on strange encounters can be applied to theorise challenging social relations between ethnographer and gatekeepers.

We have developed an affective research design, where each author of the presentation has brought along a data example describing emotionally laden encounters to the joint analyses. Affective refers here to the force of emotions to provoke as well as paralyse inspiration, thoughts and actions. Our presentation is divided in three section. First the section, ‘Going there’ deals with the negotiations related in official research permissions applied from municipal school stakeholders.

Second, the section ‘being there’ focuses on examples describing affective moments of feeling included or excluded during the field work. Those moments are worthy of analysis because ethnographers’ professional capability is easily connected to their success in ‘getting with’ people (see e.g. Anderson, 2004).

Our preliminary findings show that during the twenty years period, negotiations concerning the access to the educational institutions, have turned out to be more intensively regulated, complex and emotionally burden processes. Regulations, such as GDPR might be used not to protect individuals but the institutions. The presence of the ethnographer might reveal inner tensions of school community, which potentially materialise as affective reactions towards ethnographer. Therefore, we argue that not only the vulnerability of participants but also the vulnerability of the ethnographer needs to take account in research process.

Even though schools are not traditionally considered as the most challenging research environments compared with institutions such as hospitals, prisons or child welfare institutions, the relevance of collegial support has proved to be obvious. Collective ethnography, where data generation does not rely on shoulders of individual ‘heroic’ ethnographer might be in future the most sustainable way to conduct school ethnography. School ethnography is a research approach, which has
established its position in Nordic Countries, therefore it is necessary to discuss on the changed conditions of ethnographic knowledge production.


Ethnography, Gender and Social Class in Early Childhood Educational Research: A Meta-Analysis
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Ylva Odenbring, University of Gothenburg, Sweden (presenting author)

This presentation draws from a meta-analysis of ethnographic research conducted in the Nordic context related to gender and social class in early childhood education. Research on education and gender or social class published in Nordic and non-Nordic scientific journals as well PhD theses published in the Nordic countries has been considered and the analysis has been guided by the following research questions:

1) How have the aims of the research been defined in educational ethnography on early childhood education?
2) How and to what extent have issues of gender and class been conceptualised in the studies?

The analysis suggests that even though Nordic countries have a reputation for being ‘role model countries’ in terms of equality and social justice, gender and especially social class have rarely been explicitly the focus of ethnographic research in early childhood educational research despite gender inequalities and gender stereotypes quite often being reproduced in everyday practices in early childhood institutions. However some research indicates that gender norms are challenged. As for ethnographic studies focusing on children’s class position, we found these studies to be even rarer and the issue of social class seems to have been avoided or maybe even ignored. The few studies there are indicate that social injustice covers the everyday life in early childhood settings and challenges possibility for children to participate on equal terms.
The lack of ethnographic research on gender and class raises several questions. Providing early childhood education for all children has been and still is an important part of how equal rights and educational policies are framed in the Nordic countries. Secondly, an equal educational system plays an important role in compensating for unequal childhoods and educational inequalities. We argue that ignoring issues of social justice as they apply to gender and social class in ethnographic research is problematic. Ethnographic research has the advantage of being able to highlight and pinpoint how intersections of gender and social class form part of children’s identity work as well as their understanding of themselves as learners. It also has the advantage of being able to explore and critically discuss practitioners’ gendered and classed expectations of children’s abilities and future prospects. Moreover, if educational ethnographers continue to avoid research focused on processes, in which gendered and classed inequalities are reproduced in everyday life of early childhood educational institutions in the Nordic countries, important issues regarding social justice will also remain unexplored.

**Gender, schooling and living in rural areas**

*Elisabet Öhrn, Dennis Beach, Monica Johansson, Per-Åke Rosvall & Maria Rönnlund*

This presentation takes as a starting point the dominance of urban studies in educational research and the metrocentricity that operates nationally and internationally in relation to educational policy making. It draws on a recently completed research project investigating youth’s presentations and experiences of education in different rural researched places (Öhrn & Beach, Eds, 2019). The project explored the under-researched rural dimension by use of ethnographic data from six different schools in six different types of rural area. The data are used in the presentation to discuss rural understandings and responses to socio-spatial issues, and focusses especially on gender issues. Gender (and class) dimensions appear in terms of both the education opportunities experienced by pupils, the choices they are able to (and do) make, and educational outcomes. This is perhaps unsurprising, for as indicated earlier by Forsberg (1998) the presence of intensive capitalist production in a place always has very important consequences for the local historical and gendered division of labour and all other subsequent social relationships. But nevertheless in the present investigation gender relations seem to be less stereotyped than in much previous rural research, and they also appear to be related to other
aspects of social structures, social relations and structuration processes than those of the economy alone (also Forsey, 2015; Pini & Leach, 2016).


*An explorative staging of camcorders generating a gender and justice perspectives on pupils’ collaborative coping strategies in a goal and result steered school context at a Swedish municipal lower secondary school.*

*Charlotta Rönn, PhD student, Mid-Sweden University*

The increasing migration rate in the Nordic countries has led to growing numbers of minority pupils at schools and new needs in the local school context. A study was carried out with a focus on pupils’ informal schoolwork related communication with peers. The purpose with this study was to seek to understand the culture of pupils’ collaborative coping strategies in a goal-and-result oriented educational context, when orienting in a system comprising self-regulated learning, formative assessment, tests and national tests. Questions to be stressed are:

1. What collaborative coping strategies have pupils developed when dealing with individual written assignments and national tests in a goal and result related school context?
2. How could the pupils’ coping strategies be understood in a performative school context?

The analysis shows that the culture in the class related to the social networks and digital tools, created a gap between the pupils in the class, resulting in several excluding aspects such as: a) language mastery, b) gender, c) tools and socio-
economic issues, d) space, e) academic (self)esteem and independence, f) social
punishments and denied credit of their work and know-how, but also g) in
expressing their own opinions and making themselves heard. This can be related not
only to gender equity but also to justice in education. Due to the developed coping
strategies, the boys had less access to the high achieving girls’ competence and
support than the girls had in a goal and result related school context with a focus on
both formative and summative assessments. Moreover, pupils less fluent in the
target language (Swedish and English as a foreign language) profited less from the
developed collaborative coping strategies between peers than the ones more fluent in
the languages both when it came to lesson related written assignments and national
testing. The study could be considered as one point of departure for further research
on justice and equity for future ethnographic research in education in the Nordic
countries.

Feminist ethnography in Finland: history and current trends
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Whilst first ethnographers in Sweden were mainly male, in Finland the emergence of
ethnographic research in the 1990s was strongly influenced by feminist sociology of
education. Specific in the feminist perspective is in bringing political ideas of social
justice and ethical considerations into ethnographic research, rather than a specific
feminist methodology. Feminist ethnography in Finland as elsewhere started by
challenging the absence of the perspective of girls and women and by contesting
dichotomic understanding of gender. From the early stages already gender was more
a starting point than the only focus in Finnish research, and studies were informed
by intersectional understanding of differences and inequalities. An example is the
first large ethnographic project of Tuula Gordon and myself with six PhD students,
titled Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools – with Reference to Gender (1993-
1998). New funded ethnographic projects and plentiful doctoral students gathered
around the network (EDDI) organized by this project and the Nordic network
ETNOPED. Feminist ethnography achieved a stable position in Finnish educational
research in the early 2000s.

The early ethnographic studies in Finland were already informed by the textual turn,
and they combined feminist to cultural, material and post-structural perspectives.
Gradually the post-structural frame has strengthened with post-human and neo-
material reflections among the new generations of feminist ethnographers. Doctoral studies, for example, have included profound theoretical analysis that troubles the position of the researcher, widens the idea of the ethnographic field or problematizes the early feminist ideas of ‘giving the voice’. At the same time, possibilities to conduct long-lasting ethnographic fieldwork and write monographies has diminished, the use of technical tools has displaced pen-and-paper-work and methodologies of collective, multi-sited ethnographies have developed. Drawing from an analyses of doctoral thesis and some relevant journals I will suggest that in Finland feminist ethnography, even if changed, has remained a respected field of studies within educational, social and youth studies.