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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO THE INITIAL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION OF TEACHERS*

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Educational ethnography has become part of the research tradition of both sociology and anthropology, that is, "research on and in educational institutions based on participant observation and/or permanent recordings of everyday life in naturally-occurring settings" (Delamont & Atkinson, 1980). While most graduate students of education will today be familiar with ethnographic research, this paper outlines a way in which first year students can also make creative use of some aspects of this approach.

During their professional education, pre-service teachers are expected to make the transition from the status of student to that of teacher. For some this is an abrupt and difficult process, while for others it is painless. All pre-service teachers are expected to acquire a professional identity and it is within this process that ethnography can make an important contribution.

In a four year course of secondary teacher preparation in North Queensland, three phases of school-based instruction became apparent. The first phase extended over the first two years of the course and could be categorised as a period of sensitising based on observations made in a variety of local schools. It was expected that students would become aware of some of the issues involved in teaching and in classroom interaction. The second phase was one of more advanced school experience in which students began teaching classes under supervision, and the third phase, not undertaken until the fourth year, and not actually reached by all students, involved such things as the teaching of minority groups, classes with learning disabilities and so on. It is with the early stages of the first phase that this paper is concerned. The following observations are based on an experiment in a sociologically-oriented first year course in

* (An earlier version of this paper was read at the New Zealand Sociological Association Conference, University of Waikato, New Zealand, November, 1980).

Education at James Cook University. Local schools became integral parts of the first year education programme as students attempted to relate theory to practice and practice to theory.

Entry to the Schools

Students entered local secondary schools partly because of their predecessors' complaints that, during their course they read about schools, teachers, and pupils, talked about them in tutorials and wrote essays on them, but never actually saw school life first-hand. Many students had recently graduated from high schools themselves and a minority of staff in the Education faculty thought that the first year course should act as an occupational de-compression chamber and opposed the idea of such students re-entering schools at this early stage of their programme. The purpose of putting students into schools was, however, twofold. In the first place they were required to complete an ethnographic exercise of their choice, around which lectures, tutorials, seminars and readings were based. Secondly, it was expected that, in entering the schools, not as teachers, nor as pupils, consideration of where they stood in relation to the teaching profession would be encouraged.

A. *The Explanation*

(i) *The Principals*

Before the first-year course could be re-designed to include a significant ethnographic component, Principals of the eight Townsville secondary schools had to give it their approval. The idea of accommodating up to forty first year students (depending on the size of the institution) did not appeal to most Principals, and two decided not to allow the programme to operate in their schools. The remaining Principals agreed that the course could operate in their schools along the proposed lines only for a year, after which it would be reviewed. The next step was to explain the course objectives to teachers.

(ii) *The Teachers*

Teachers in Queensland schools are used to having student-teachers in their classes to learn to teach, for which they are generously paid. However, the idea of introducing first year students to their classes to observe and not teach, and ultimately write a cultural description of what they had seen did not appeal to all teachers. The fact that it was voluntary, and unpaid, resulted

in some teachers dismissing the experiment forthwith. Many though, saw the change as a welcome attempt by the university to leave the ivory tower and show students the "real life of the schools" and there were more than enough volunteers for the course to begin.

(iii) *The students*

Most students entered schools they were not familiar with. Students who had been pupils in single-sex schools were encouraged to go to co-educational establishments, students who had been educated in private schools were placed in State schools. Students who intended to ultimately become science teachers were forbidden to go near the science department and were instead placed in physical education, manual arts or humanities classes. Similarly language students were likely to be placed in mathematics, chemistry or art classes. In this way it was hoped that students would enter new educational settings. The initial task was to establish mutually satisfactory times to enter these "foreign" classrooms with the teachers so that university timetables were not unduly disrupted. Every student was in this way paired off with a different teacher.

B. *Student-Fieldworker Roles*

After entering classrooms as observers, most students experienced a good deal of confusion about what they were supposed to do. Each was equipped with a set of notes intended as a guide in such a situation, the first section of which drew attention to "problems facing the teacher", the second to "life in the school" (or the experience of being a pupil) and the third to issues in school organization. Within each section there were ten themes (e.g., the teacher is often faced with a large class which must be "taught" as a group even though it may not be homogeneous). For such a theme there would be five or six suggestions on how to begin looking at the matter. The choice of topic was left to the student and this became the initial task after settling into a class.

After a short period in the classroom, students were brought back to the university for discussions, all of which began with a request not to identify the school or teacher being observed. In discussing what had been seen, many students expressed confusion that they were observing several things happening at once. It became very clear

that it was not possible to discuss one aspect of teaching (e.g., decision-making) without focussing on other aspects. At this point students could be referred back to some of the lectures and readings in the course, in which this had been discussed. Some students expressed anxiety about not being in "exciting" classrooms, but it was stressed in discussions that all aspects of what was observed were potentially significant. As students began to focus on themes for close observation, the help they received from other members of the discussion group increased. Students could be referred to Spindler (1974), Wax (1971), Wolcott (1971, 1975), Khleif (1974), Waller (1932), Mason (1973, 1974), Feer (1975), Tikunoff (1975) and many others for help in their school situations. With this, theory and method began to assume new importance in the urgency most students felt in coming to terms with what they were observing.

Many students expressed a different sort of confusion — that of not being a teacher and not a pupil. It was useful to be able to refer to Mason's (1974) fieldwork experience in an inner-city Vancouver school at this point. While Mason adopted the role of "writer", it was suggested that students simply tell pupils that they were carrying out an exercise for a university course. The problem of how the information should be recorded was more difficult. It was suggested that students, if possible, sit at the back of the class or in an unobtrusive place initially, and not thumb through notes. Information was often recorded immediately after a lesson in the initial stages, and more open note taking began when the student's presence ceased to be a distraction to pupils.

C. *Participant or Observer?*

A number of teachers did not like the idea of their classrooms being recorded by first-year student ethnographers when the student simply sat at the back of the room and watched and/or took notes. It was suggested by the writer to both teachers and students that the latter could, in such a situation, assume the role of "voluntary teaching aide". The Queensland Teachers' Union made it clear that it thought teachers should be paid for allowing first year students into their classes (even though it was pointed out that the university could not finance this), and it insisted that under no circumstances was a first-year student to teach a class. Such opposition from the Union was known to all members of the course,

hence the voluntary nature of the assistance offered to teachers. In a few cases student ethnographers became participant-observers of classrooms by becoming "voluntary teacher aides" and putting material on the OHP, cleaning blackboards and helping with other minor classroom tasks. No Voluntary Teacher Aides reported that being a participant in the situation under observation impeded their ethnographic work.

In the "report-back" sessions at the university, some students had stories to tell of "illegal" activities in the classrooms they were in such as a teacher picking a pupil up by the hair. This raised questions in the discussion about the role of the ethnographer, objectivity, ethics in research, and finally, what other ethnographers had experienced as reported in the literature.

D. *The Significant Friend*

As students proceeded with their observations, some teachers became interested in what they were doing. Many students reported that teachers became major sources of information and were prepared to answer questions, particularly about pupils in the class. Other students, particularly those placed in less-formal classes such as art, physical education and manual arts, were able to establish positive relationships with pupils. In such cases the "significant friend" or "key informant" was able to provide valuable background information to the observations that had been made. In several cases students returned to schools for out-of-class discussions with such valuable informants, usually teachers.

E. *Ethnographic Data*

Students were encouraged to note everything that they saw in schools, no matter how trivial it appeared. While many students did not do this, others produced considerable volumes of field notes. A common problem began to be: how do I focus all this on my problem? Some students had made detailed notes from interviews (the questions for which were all based on field notes) and several had, in the final stages of their fieldwork run small questionnaires with the school's approval.

In writing reports from the material that was gathered in the schools, a lot of help was necessary to lift discussion beyond simple description. This was found to be a tedious and, for many, a frustrating part of being a school ethnographer.

The Analysis of Culture

Wolcott's view of ethnography as "the science of cultural description" was used in post field-work classes. It was necessary to ensure that students were aware of some of the theoretical issues underlying their cultural descriptions. Questions were asked in class about the meanings of such concepts as a "negotiated order", "reciprocity", "treaty between unequals" and "the class as a small society". It was stressed that students were to reflect on their field work experiences in coming to an understanding of these terms (and in providing answers in class).

A. *Culture and the School*

Because students had been in a variety of schools (single sex and co-ed, state and church, large and small), group discussions on school culture were vigorous. As most students had been in schools and in parts of those schools that were "foreign" to them, details of the school's culture were often particularly vivid. School ceremonies were described, as well as traditions, folklore and even aspects of material culture. The questions "how is that significant in your school's culture?" or just "so what?" were asked repeatedly and had such interesting outcomes as grammar-school ethnographers being able to help state co-educational fieldworkers to work towards answers.

Students were encouraged to fit their observations together and to do this, a good understanding of culture is essential. While students could easily reach a superficial understanding of the concept, the ability to use "culture" in an anthropological sense was extremely difficult to attain, particularly when it was realised that there were many sub-cultures within the school.

B. *Cross-cultural Sensitization*

Many members of the course reported their initial feelings of shock at being in a large school when they had been educated in a small one, and particularly, of watching a class learn, say, French when in the final years of their own secondary education they had concentrated on science. Some students reported feelings of shock at the behaviour of some of the younger classes (e.g., "I'd never have got away with it at my school"). One girl left her school after a particularly "exciting" lesson involving threats by the teacher and counter-threats by pupils, and could not be persuaded to return.

Most students, in the post-fieldwork discussions, repeatedly discussed what they had seen in the "foreign" school situation they had just left within a framework of their own school experiences as pupils. This emerged as a major feature of the way students reflected on their recent experiences. A cultural perspective of pupil and teacher behaviour was emphasised in the course at this stage as a means of sensitising students to the meanings of pupil activities, rituals, expressions and so on. The aim was to see the multitude of parts within the whole culture of the school when analysing field notes, not to interpret what was observed solely from the student's own experience.

C. *Interpretation*

Pelto (1970) suggests a variety of techniques that the ethnographer may employ. Students in the course used many of these including: unobtrusive measures, structured interviews, participant observation, key-informant interviewing and brief questionnaires. After completing field notes, then attending classes designed to encourage consideration of the theoretical aspects of what had been observed, students were expected to write an ethnographic report. A major problem was "Where do I begin?". The most useful advice the writer could offer was to begin with a significant incident and tell what followed from this. Mason's (1974) question, "What's going on here?" when subsequently posed after a lengthy description, often pointed students in an interpretive direction.

Above all it was emphasised that in describing culture in the schools, students were describing a process. The human aspect of an ethnographic report was stressed — of watching events and putting them into an appropriate framework.

Ethnography and Professional Education

For most members of the first year course the ethnographic section was a high point, even though it involved extra commitments of time and energy. Students were placed in situations that they had to interpret as well as describe. For most, the library became a vital source of information, as did the discussion groups that were held to monitor progress. Before going into schools the course had covered in lectures and readings a number of large issues that are fundamental to any study of the social foundations of education: that children do not come to school from

homogeneous social backgrounds and that this is reflected in school organization and outcomes; that the school can be seen as a small social system in which people hold different role expectations; and that the school plays an important part in the socialization of the child together with the family and the peer group. In having to describe some of the situations that had been heard in lectures or discussed in books, most students became very interested in locating such information for themselves to help in their ethnographic reports. Lectures and library material were, in the writing of the ethnographic reports, related to actual issues observed in the schools. The link between theory and practice (as observed) was made by most student-ethnographers.

Nearly all the ethnographic reports were written either on an aspect of teaching or on the pupil's social situation. While students carried course notes that suggested things that may be looked for in a particular situation, as the ethnographies progressed it was found that the links between pupil life and teaching tended to become clearer and many-faceted. Teachers and pupils modifying one another's behaviour through bargaining, negotiation and defining the situation, ceased to be simply academic. Pupil life and teacher life both had to be focussed within the culture-as-process concept if either was to be explained by the student ethnographers.

Ultimately ethnographic studies have a sensitizing effect on the ethnographer. Teacher "problems" cannot be seen as such without looking at pupils and the cultural context within which they are located. The science of cultural description involves "walking in someone else's shoes" according to Wolcott (1975) and to do this the ethnographer must have developed a sensitive, intimate relationship with the subject that is observed. In this case students were observing situations in which, as future teachers, they could expect to find themselves in several years time.

Perhaps more than anything else, the ethnographic orientation of part of the first year programme required students to reflect on the meaning of what they observed. It was found that teachers have many "problems" and that many of these could not be remedied easily. It is likely that these students will in future reflect on the place of sociology and ethnography in contributing to an understanding of many of the issues that were studied in their first year course.

The introduction to ethnography provided students with an insight into contemporary educational research in both the sociology and anthropology of education, and, above all, its application. Eighty seven percent of course members stated that the experience of being school ethnographers confirmed an interest in teaching as a career.

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