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*Introduction***Chapter 1****Comparing Ethnographies across the Americas:  
Queries and Lessons**

Elsie Rockwell and Kathryn Anderson-Levitt

Comparing ethnographies from across the Americas seemed at first to be a fairly simple task. We wanted to help stave off the parochial visions that often seep into generalizations and policy imperatives in the field of education. We asked senior scholars from several countries, all of whom had first-hand knowledge of ethnographic research in their own and other countries through their training or fieldwork, to co-author chapters comparing selected ethnographies on migrant and minority children and on teachers. All had read widely in the field, were conversant in each other's languages, and were eager to meet the challenge. We learned many lessons from the two-year journey to produce these chapters and from the commentaries we received. We offer in this volume the result of this experience to further discussions on the need for and value of constructing a comparative perspective based on ethnographic and qualitative studies of education in and beyond schoolrooms.

This is a moment in the history of educational research when scholars are beginning to recognize that research conducted in only one country cannot fairly represent the meanings and trajectories of education in the world as a whole. There are new efforts—often spurred by researchers from the global South—to take all voices into account (e.g. Bagchi et al., 2014; Connell, 2007; Manzon, 2011). For example, the founding of the World Education Research Association in 2009 represents new openness by scholars in national and regional associations to discover and understand research from the rest of the world. In the spirit of that wider movement, we focused on ethnographies of education conducted in several countries of the Americas—Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and México and the United States—to show what can be learned by comparing research across national and linguistic boundaries. We share the conviction that ethnographic studies ground our understanding of education in the local context, which matters because learning and teaching processes must be understood in context. However, our understanding of each context grows significantly when we compare and contrast across studies.

In fact, we carry out in this volume *a double comparison*. The challenge was not only to compare studies conducted in two places, but also to compare work done by scholars based in two or more different regions. Each kind of difference makes a difference. Differences among the singular and contextualized educational

processes studied by ethnographers lead to different kinds of studies and distinctive results that tend to defy the search for commonalities. However, we were also aware that some of the differences in ethnographies are responses not to different social contexts but rather to the particular research traditions and conceptual lenses used by scholars in each location. Knowledge, including our knowledge as researchers, as Geertz (1983) insisted years ago, is always “local,” historically and geographically situated. We attempted to advance our understanding of ways in which these two sources of difference might be disentangled, translated, and rearticulated in order to expand “the repertoire of the possible” (Tobin, 1999, p. 129) in our understanding of educational processes and options for improvement of teaching and learning.

The volume includes four co-authored comparative chapters, focused on ethnographic research on indigenous children in and out of school, indigenous education policies, education of transnational migrant populations and teachers’ work; in each case the chapters examine studies carried out in at least two countries. In addition, we invited Marta Sánchez and George Noblit, noted for their methodological concerns, to contribute further reflections on the problems of comparing ethnographies sparked by reading the drafts of these four chapters. We requested a final commentary from Inés Dussel, whose experience in various fields of educational research

across the Americas offered an exceptional comparative perspective. In this introduction we address central issues motivating the project as well as lessons learned along the way.

### **Why Ethnography?**

Here we focus on an approach to research, ethnography, used by scholars from a family of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and others. We understand ethnography to mean “extended fieldwork in one locale, engagement with local knowledge and meaning, and theoretically grounded descriptions of sociocultural processes” (Rockwell & González, 2011, p. 73; cf. Editors of *Ethnography and Education*, 2016; Wolcott, 2008). We will also at times make reference to allied approaches such as sociolinguistic analysis and narrative analysis which, like ethnography, attend to the way people make sense of their everyday lives and local settings. In spite of ethnography’s focus on specific locales, however, we have found that comparing ethnographies requires dealing with multiple spatial and temporal scales, as many scholars have situated studies in larger contexts of transnational educational policy trends and dealt with diverse and unequal national realities.

A methodological focus gives coherence to the discussion. It is easier for us to write about similarities and differences across a field that ostensibly shares the same core assumptions and tools, although we found that these cannot be taken for granted. Moreover,

ethnography's focus on local context, as least as a starting point, aligns with what we propose to do here as we compare. In addition, anthropology, a foundational discipline of ethnography, has always strived to take a global, comparative theoretical perspective even while conducting empirical research in particular localities. The ongoing dilemmas of articulating global and local dynamics have been drawn out by many scholars (e.g., Schriewer, 2012), and are of course present in any effort to compare ethnographic studies.

### **Why the Americas?**

We focus our comparison on the Western Hemisphere for several reasons. First, although it is possible to explore an academic field across the entire globe (e.g., Anderson-Levitt, 2011), the Americas, both North and South, already manifest great diversity and are worth a more detailed and focused look. (In this volume we refer to Canada and the United States collectively as the "North" while the "South" and "Latin America" refer to lands from the Río Bravo/Rio Grande to Patagonia; the term "North America" is inappropriate since Mexico and Central America are considered part of that "continent.") Second, there is a symbiosis of educational systems across borders within the Americas (the U.S.-Mexican border, Bolivia-Argentina, and others). For example, migrants participate in national systems in their new homes or return to earlier homes after sojourns in another country's classrooms (e.g., Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2009; Zúñiga, Hamann &

Sánchez, 2008). These journeys across borders produce shifting perceptions of who are considered “minorities” or “majorities” in each region or locality: are Latinos in Los Angeles or Quechuas in Cuzco a minority or a majority? How do the indigenous majorities of Bolivia become “Bolivian minorities” in Buenos Aires? Educational theories and policies also travel across borders, although they are often translated and appropriated in different terms, with different consequences. This shared transnational experience suggests that we are comparing overlapping parts of a larger whole, not separate educational systems. It increases mutual interest in one another’s bodies of research, and defines the themes of some chapters in this book. Third, we build our discussion here on the 13th Inter-American Symposium on Ethnography and Education and on the prior twelve Symposia that took place over the course of 25 years; these meetings, held sometimes in the United States and sometimes in Latin America, offer a particular foundation for examining what scholars can learn from exchanging across national and linguistic boundaries.

The Americas have been subdivided in many ways historically, leading to notions that falsely homogenize a diverse region of the world. Reference to “Hispanic” America (as in U.S. census categories) has shifted to “Latin” America to avoid excluding Portuguese-speaking Brazil, as well as the Guianas (former French, Dutch and English colonies) and Belize. The Caribbean is now often seen as a separate

“region,” although it could be seen to include coastal Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Central America, and even U.S. states on the Gulf of Mexico, all of which share historical similarities and a strong Afro-descendent socio-cultural configuration. Thus no one classification is justifiable and comparison cannot be made through a simple double entry, Anglo versus non-Anglo, table. Although the comparative chapters in this volume tend to focus on cross-national comparisons, the formation of nation-states in the Americas as elsewhere was a complex mix of processes of colonization, territorial conquest and genocide, purchases, independence struggles, border conflicts and massive migrations, all of which produced heterogeneous and multilingual entities. Moreover, sovereign states have articulated and regulated the schooling of national populations in diverse and contrasting manners, producing specific educational realities. The configurations of educational and ethnographic research in each country have responded to both local realities and changing national regimes and policies, and thus have developed different perspectives on similar processes, as is patent in the comparative chapters here. In short, the borders referred to in this volume are fluid and questionable, yet we find the exercise of comparing across them worthwhile.

### **Comparing Education Across Regions**

In the double comparison we attempt in this volume, the first focus is on comparing studies conducted in different settings.



Schooling is such a taken-for-granted institution around the world today that nothing can make its familiar forms strange—that is, noticeable and hence available for analysis—except dramatic comparison across national or regional borders, or across long historical periods (e.g., Rockwell, 2009 and 2011; Tobin et al., 2009). “Without comparison,” as anthropologist Laura Nader put it, “we ... become victims of the bounds of thinkable thought” (Nader, 1994, p. 86). Without comparison, it is easy for scholars and educators in some parts of the world to think it is natural for girls to do better than boys in school. Without comparison it is easy for some scholars to assume that children are naturally monolingual. Without comparison it is easy to assume that “learner-centered instruction” or “multiculturalism” means the same thing everywhere.

Prominent English-language academic journals sometimes take the United States as the normative case in social science research (Das et al., 2009; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Yet, the United States is far from a typical country and its practices cannot be taken as a template for the rest of the world. In fact, the view of the world from the global North as a whole is narrow, incomplete, and in that sense not truthful (Connell, 2007).

Comparing across regions, and across countries within those regions, and even across internal geographical and social borders, particularly highlights how distinct local historical contexts, policy and

political contexts, and social and economic contexts have shaped the actual experiences of schooling. There is in fact a long tradition of comparison in the field of education (Manzon, 2011) and in early sociology (Connell, 2007). In anthropology, grand comparisons of findings reported in the literature evolved by the 1950s into the approach used by Yale's Human Relations Area Files, the extraction of descriptions of "cultural traits" from the ethnographic literature and their systematic comparison as if they were variables (Human Relations Area Files, 2015). That approach continues, although it has lost legitimacy among many anthropologists because it removes the descriptions from contextual information (Gingrich & Fox, 2002; Tobin, 1999). Scholars have also used more focused comparison of published ethnographies to understand particular phenomena such as gender patterns and ethnicity (Gingrich & Fox, 2002). Over 50 years ago, Jules Henry (1960) sketched such a comparison focused on the phenomenon of education, developing a long outline that mapped variation—and, implicitly, the limits to variation—in what *Homo sapiens* have expected children and novices to learn and in how those skills, knowledge and attitudes are taught and learned. Significantly, Henry's essay was one of the few guides to educational ethnography translated into Spanish (in 1975), yet it was also seen by Latin American ethnographers as strongly biased towards a U.S.-centered list of values and behaviors, whereas his ethnographic descriptions in *Culture*

*against Man* (Henry, 1965) did inspire analogous perspectives in Latin America. This is one example of how difficult it is to isolate a list of independent variables for comparison, and yet how “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of education in other places can lead to significant comparison.

Grand comparisons require reviewing the literature, but other approaches to comparison require carrying out new ethnographic studies. Teams of ethnographers or even ambitious solo ethnographers conduct parallel ethnographies, as in the set of studies on child-rearing in 12 societies overseen by John and Beatrice Whiting (e.g., Whiting & Edwards 1988). The comparative study of teacher education in Japan and the United States by Nobuo Shimahara and Akira Sakai (1995), or R. J. Alexander’s five-country comparison of primary education (2000) are more recent examples. Another approach to comparative ethnography is to use interviews about film or video sequences to elicit local meanings and implicit understandings (e.g., Anderson-Levitt 2002; Spindler & Spindler 1987; Tobin et al., 1989 and 2009). In Latin America, Beatriz Avalos (1986, 1989) coordinated separate ethnographies on school failure and social inequality in five countries, and produced a book reporting the studies with a comparative synthesis, while Justa Ezpeleta directed three ethnographic studies of teachers and schools, carried out in Argentina, Peru and Brazil (Ezpeleta, 1991) along comparative lines.

Dell Hymes, a prominent anthropologist and linguist in the United States, proposed a comparative ethnography of education that would rely on the literature but would also require a new studies (1980). He argued that we should examine existing studies of schools in the literature, asking, “What kinds of schools are there?” However, he also proposed that we conduct longitudinal studies in order to build cumulative knowledge about particular schools over time. His idea of cumulative was not simply additive or progressive; in reference to language, he felt that “in any synchronic state of affairs ... the relation between a central movement and a range of traditions ... might be complexly dialectic” (Hymes & Fought, 1981: 229). The challenge of comparing ethnographies, as we see it, is to capture the dynamic relation among a “central movement” of schooling and “a range of traditions.”

Hymes called the approach he proposed an “ethnology of education.” For Hymes, the word “ethnology” meant “comparative generalization,” in an older U.S. and European tradition meaning a systematic study of a phenomenon based on comparison. We will avoid the word “ethnology” because of its multiple, conflicting meanings—and because of negative connotations it carries in some countries. (In Argentina, German-inspired phenomenological ethnology was associated with an essentialist view of culture that supported a deficit view of indigenous populations, Luykx and Padawer explain in their

chapter.) Moreover, whereas Hymes proposed comparative work within the United States, we subscribe to the tradition of cross-national and indeed cross-regional comparisons. Whereas Hymes focused on schools in his essay, we include educational processes outside of schools.

However, we find it generative to consider and rethink three principles that Hymes proposed. We accept his basic argument as sound: a deeper understanding of schooling, as of any object of anthropological inquiry, requires **comparative** analyses that build on the understandings developed from individual studies of particular settings. It also requires as well a **cumulative** perspective, which implies recognizing the importance of historical context, and of both continuity and change. Hymes also argued that the study of education should be **cooperative**, by which he suggested that educators at local schools should be equal partners with researchers in inquiry. In the same spirit, we believe that building a cross-national comparative ethnography of education requires collaboration among scholars from different regions who contribute as equals.

### **Comparing Studies by Scholars across the Americas**

In the double comparison we attempt in this volume, the second focus is on comparing studies conducted by scholars who are based in different countries. It is not enough to compare studies conducted elsewhere by colleagues based in one's own country, for the social

sciences are not the same everywhere (Heilbron et al., 2008). What is published in other countries and other languages may begin from different assumptions or take a different perspective from what is published by colleagues “at home”; it does not simply translate or mirror the research published elsewhere. (Of course, many scholars have migrated across national borders, but authors contributing to this volume work in their own countries and respond to their own institution’s academic traditions and norms, even if trained abroad.)

To truly break “the bounds of thinkable thought” we need not only to compare education as it happens elsewhere, but also to compare the different ways in which ethnographers elsewhere study education. For example, we have learned from colleagues across the Americas that there are particular traditions of ethnographic research, situated in certain institutions, which may contrast with orientations even of neighboring researchers. We have found variation in the timing and length of extended fieldwork, in the tools used to observe and register discourse and practice in localities, as well as in the rhetorical traditions used in reporting ethnographic research. Comparison across scholarly work conducted in different regions thus makes available a fuller range of theoretical and methodological and personal perspectives on education.

U.S. ethnographers in particular have been criticized for their lack of awareness of research published in other countries (Anderson-

Levitt, 2014); Delamont and Atkinson demonstrated that they do not even cite British literature, although it is published in English and easy for them to obtain (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). In contrast, Latin American ethnographers draw on the large body of research produced in Latin America, and many of them also cite research and theory originating in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. In a study limited to the 200 most cited social science journals in Web of Science (and hence biased toward English-language publications), 34 percent of citations made by Latin American scholars referred to European authors and 6 percent to Latin American authors, whereas only 22 percent of citations made by U.S. and Canadian scholars referred to Europeans and 0 percent referred to Latin Americans (Mosbah & Gingras, 2013). Not surprisingly, then, in papers presented at the 13th Inter-American Symposium, while there were multiple citations to European authors (Foucault, Bourdieu, Jan Blommaert) by both U.S. and Latin American scholars, Latin American participants made multiple citations to additional European scholars (François Dubet, Bernard Lahire, Michel de Certeau) as well as to U.S. and Latin American scholars. In addition, Latin American participants cited many works that had been translated into Spanish (including Dubet, Lahire and de Certeau) and some in the original English or French, whereas relatively few of the authors most cited by U.S. and Canadian participants were being read in translation.

On the other hand, citation in the global South and the peripheries of the North sometimes suffers from the opposite problem: students may fail to cite local research pertinent to their topics, even of close colleagues whose work they know—or they may not discover their close neighbors' work unless it has been indexed in a center-dominated citation index (Larsson, 2006). Meanwhile—perhaps like colleagues in the center—they may feel pressed to cite international “stars”, including Bourdieu, Foucault or Freire, while giving little credit to the work of close and contemporary scholars who have influenced their work. This can be a consequence of their countries' having adopted the evaluation schemes that privilege measures of “impact” by citation in English-language journals, within an asymmetric transnational system.

Someone might argue that “stars” have international reputations because of the quality of their work (and not, for example, because of opportunities they had to travel or to publish in English). Indeed, Bourdieu's work, for example, has inspired research programs in many countries; educational scholars in many parts of the world have taken up ideas of Vygotsky and neo-Vygotskian theory (Souza Lima 1995); Freire's vision of pedagogy has inspired both theory and practice in many countries. Even so, do readers who cite the work of a famous international author understand the local theoretical and social contexts in which those scholars developed their insights (Larsson



2006)? The ideas often transform as they leave their local context and travel to new countries (Lima, 1995; Santoro, 2008-2009; Dussel & Caruso, 1997). Would it not be valuable to understand the broader scholarly conversations that inspired the international stars' work, not to mention its situatedness (making Bourdieu's analyses, for example, valid in reference to French academies and politics of his time, yet difficult to translate to social realities in the Americas)? And what inspiring insights or challenging new visions fail to reach a global audience only because their authors never traveled or because they published in less-cited languages?

In seeking to compare work by ethnographers from different parts of the hemisphere, we were inspired by more than a quarter century of cross-border conversations taking place at all the Inter-American Symposia on Ethnography and Education. These occasional meetings, organized by volunteers with no overarching organization or network, began in 1989, when Gary Anderson, Margaret LeCompte and Mario Rueda Beltrán brought together a group of scholars from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the University of New Mexico, and other institutions to share their work. The Symposia, held sometimes in the United States and sometimes in Latin America, aim for a truly multilingual exchange, and resulting books and articles have been published in Spanish, English and Portuguese (Rueda Beltrán, Delgado & Campos, 1991; Rueda Beltrán & Campos, 1992;

Rueda Beltrán, Ballesteros, & Jacobo, 1994; Calvo, Delgado & Rueda, 1998; Anderson & Montero-Sieburth, 1998; Levinson, Cade, Padawer, & Elvir, 2002; Batallán & Neufeld, 2012; Ames & Padawer, 2015; Rockwell & Anderson-Levitt, 2015).

We were particularly inspired by the cross-border work being done by some of the participants at the 13th Inter-American Symposium on Ethnography and Education, the conference that gave rise to this volume. U.S. ethnographer Ted Hamann has been carrying on a long collaboration with colleagues in Mexico, Victor Zúñiga and Juan Sánchez García, to study students who move back and forth across the U.S.-Mexican border (e.g., Hamann, Zuniga, & Sánchez García, 2006; Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez García, 2008). Etelvina Sandoval of Mexico, Rebecca Blum of the United States, and Ian Andrews of Canada have organized a three-way comparison of teacher education in the three countries and have published it in a dual-language volume (Sandoval Flores, Blum-Martinez, & Andrews, I. H., 2009). It was also significant that the 13<sup>th</sup> Simposio took place in Los Angeles, arguable one of the most diverse and multilingual localities in the Americas, requiring constant work on translation in many senses (Orellana, 2009). The 14<sup>th</sup> Simposio will take place in the border city of El Paso, Texas.

### **Principles Guiding Our Comparisons**

How to compare across case studies at all, let alone across national borders or different scholarly traditions, is not obvious. We draw inspiration not only from Hymes but also from George Noblit and Dwight Hare's notion of meta-ethnography (1988). Like Hymes, they limited their focus to studies conducted within the United States. However, two principles of their approach apply to the cross-national comparisons of ethnographic research—as Noblit and Marta Sánchez acknowledge in an essay in this volume. Most importantly, they believe that “social life varies dramatically by **context**,” context itself referring to multiple scales and dimensions (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Nesper, 2004). For us this is a crucial point because we recognize how much contextual knowledge a reader needs—about how a particular school system is organized, about the actors' economic situations, about the political history of the country and the city, and so on—in order to make sense of an ethnographic study from an unfamiliar country. Therefore, the chapters include ample descriptions of the situated histories of localities and research traditions.

Secondly, in order to remain faithful to the contextual information, Noblit and Hare offer another principle, that “meta-ethnography should be **interpretive** rather than aggregative” (1988, p. 11). They propose comparison of only a small number of cases (their examples use from two to six cases), and their method is to “translate”

these studies into one another. Although they seek understanding rather than accumulation of knowledge imagined as a set of “laws,” and they avoid generalizations beyond the cases at hand, they do generalize in the sense that they look for similarities and contrasts across the particular studies they compare. In fact, by interpreting the interpretations of the ethnographers who authored the studies, they could be said to construct higher or more abstract formulations. What they compare are the “metaphors” or key concepts and themes used by the ethnographers of each study; they ask whether the metaphors of one study can be expressed as the metaphors of the other in “reciprocal translation.” They also allow for studies that offer opposing metaphors or visions of the world (“refutational synthesis”), and for studies that describe different but complementary parts of some larger whole (“lines of argument synthesis”). (See further discussion of these approaches in Chapters 5 and 6.)

We expand on Noblit and Hare’s notion of “translation” to apply it to comparison of ethnographies written in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, facing subtle semantic issues along the way, even establishing the appropriate words to with which to label the main concepts highlighted in this volume. (Even the word “subjects,” *sujetos*, carries different connotations in Latin America and in the United States, Bueno and Anderson-Levitt note.) We anticipate both “reciprocal synthesis” and “refutational synthesis,” as possible

outcomes, but are most intrigued by “line of argument” synthesis. That is, do studies from different regions, when pieced together, give us a more complete understanding of “the repertoire of the possible” in the ways people do education? And do studies by scholars from different regions offer a broader “repertoire of the possible” in the realm of theory, that is, alternative explanations, whether competing or complementary, of what is going on here? This requires maintaining the interpretive requirement of contextual ethnographic research at the level of comparative analysis, as it is practiced in each local study.

Returning to Dell Hymes’ principles, we recognize the critical importance of social history, that is, of understanding context as cumulative. However, the term cumulative often implies that research is a progressive accumulation of certainties, whereas in the ethnographic tradition there are no permanent conclusions on which to build but rather “a discussion to be maintained” (Geertz, 1973, p. 29)—that is, a series of continuous conversations positing reinterpretations, at times in conflict, and always strongly influenced by changing social and political contexts and discursive matrices. We thus assume that historical analysis is important to the ethnographic understanding of the everyday at any given moment as well as to the mutual understanding of ethnographic studies done in other traditions. What is observed in the present contains overlapping temporalities (Hartog, 2015), which make comparison even more difficult. Like Noblit, we do

not expect comparison to be aggregative in any simple sense.

In fact, our understanding of comparison might seem to undermine any possibility of Hymes' **comparative** generalizations, even when rooted in particular contexts. However, although we certainly are alert to the possibility of questioning unwarranted generalizations by revealing contextual diversity, our attempts to compare ethnographies have also led to a new understanding of generalization across cases. As the efforts to compare progressed, chapter co-authors found interesting possibilities of convergence in the knowledge produced within distinct lines of research on similar topics. Despite very different historical configurations in each country, both contrasts and similarities sometimes emerged in both the ethnographers' underlying assumptions and in the processes being described. Some co-authors articulated parallel "metaphors" in different studies; some shed light on different facets of a common trend and over time came to see both reciprocal and refutational aspects in the various studies being compared. Although further efforts are needed, these insights lead, we believe, to the possibility of constructing, through further efforts, the sort of "line of argument" syntheses suggested by Noblit and Hare.

Most importantly, we take up the challenge to make comparative work **collaborative**, meaning for this volume that ethnographers from different countries, native speakers of different languages, worked

reciprocally on a specific theme together in an effort to comprehend a different reality, but also a different perspective. The task was not easy, particularly as different structures and styles of academic writing interwove with linguistic and contextual differences in producing a common text. Yet it was fruitful and illuminating as well.

### **Co-authoring across National and Linguistic Borders**

We had proposed that co-authors from two different countries write chapters addressing a common theme through the analysis of the social and academic contexts as well as the results of relatively long-term programs of ethnographic research in their respective countries. Although we initially imagined that general national differences would be foregrounded, we soon found that the exercise required focusing on particular ethnographic studies or series of studies. When chapter co-authors tried to account for the entire range of ethnographies within one nation, they produced drafts that were closer to “state of the art” reviews than to a close reciprocal reading. Furthermore, co-authors soon became aware that the exercise involved the comparison not of separate units, but rather of parts within a single complex system, where scholars and ideas have flowed back and forth, albeit not symmetrically.

A second difficulty that we encountered was maintaining a distinction between comparison of the social contexts in which ethnographic studies were conducted—necessary for mutual

understanding of the research—and comparison of the ethnographic studies in themselves, that is of the conceptual tools, the methods of fieldwork and the discursive traditions that influence research traditions in each case. This led to a central issue, probably important to all comparative research: do the differences between studies reside in the educational processes themselves, or in the lenses of the scholars studying them? However, that distinction proved hazy as well, as the commonalities we eventually found also blurred the boundaries between research traditions and between contexts. Recognition of a shared field of research made comparison possible, yet also complicated the discussion of just where the differences might be found. For example, although anthropology has a long, albeit contested, history of defining “ethnicity” or “indigeneity,” the political and academic categories constructed in each country reflected or refracted very different demographic and social realities, as can be seen in the chapters of this volume. Another example of blurred boundaries is the history of the flow of ideas to and from the English-speaking nations of the North and the Latin American nations, as mentioned above regarding citation patterns. Although the flow has been two-way, there is also a history of asymmetry.

The thematic range of educational ethnography in both regions is enormous, yet has particular trajectories and contextual constraints. For example, where U.S. ethnographies focused for decades on people



of “minority” or “minoritized” ethnic/racial identities, Latin American ethnographies have turned generally to the majority “popular” classes, but more specifically to rural and indigenous communities. Teachers’ work has been another longstanding theme in Latin American ethnography, whereas ethnographers, sociolinguists and other qualitative researchers in the North focused more specifically on teachers’ thinking and in recent years on the education of pre-service . For the comparisons in this volume, we decided to focus on these three themes (indigenous peoples, migrants and teachers), as there seemed to be sufficient work done on all three topics to compare and contrast specific studies.

As in other studies, we soon found that these themes did not designate discrete or homogenous entities, but rather opened windows onto blurred boundaries and mixed “populations.” Striking examples include the large migration of Bolivian indigenous peoples to Buenos Aires, as compared to the large Mexican migration to the United States: each population faces similar situations related to the problems and policies of schooling. However, even within the professional category of teachers, contrasts in the ways teachers are recruited and trained as well as in their proximity or distance to the student population they serve added complexity to possible comparison.

A central question that emerges—perhaps in all current ethnographies—is “where are the borders” between populations,

between regions and nations, in this age of strong transnational flows and dominion? Anthropologists constantly face the dilemma, noted by Althabe (1996), of reifying differences as we attempt to understand them. How does this constant questioning of basic categories of inclusion and exclusion, of similarity and difference, challenge the very possibility of comparing ethnographies of education?

Yet we did take up the challenge. The four comparative chapters resulting from a difficult exercise of co-authorship testify to the value, as well as to the limits, of comparing ethnographies.

### **Guide to the Chapters**

This volume offers four thematic comparative chapters followed by two reflective overviews and some practical advice in an Appendix. Each thematic chapter illustrates in a different way what can be learned by comparing.

In Chapter 2, Patricia Ames and Ana Maria R. Gomes compare “Contrasting Approaches to Indigenous Peoples’ Education in Peru and Brazil.” Although as editors we had initially considered contrasts between Latin American and Anglo-American ethnographies, Ames and Gomes amply demonstrate that “the South has its own diversity and is far from being homogeneous.” They demonstrate the difference that social context makes to the construction of policy, with indigenous peoples identified as a majority within some regions in Peru but as small and fragmented minorities in Brazil. While recognizing the

broader historical pressure for assimilation across the continent and indeed across the hemisphere, they illustrate how historical and political forces have led to educational policies that impact indigenous families differently: Peru's response to its indigenous population "is modeled on mainstream schooling," whereas Brazil has opened the door to a "radical departure from mainstream schooling" for its indigenous minority. Ames and Gomes also play with the concepts of "majority" and "minority," which have been central to many discussions within anthropology and education, pointing out that members of the regional indigenous majority in Peru find it easier nowadays to claim their educational (and other) rights if acting as minorities. This case clearly brings out the political and ideological dimensions of the use of "minority" or "majority" categories, overshadowing the strict demographic perspective.

In Chapter 3, Aurolyn Luykx and Ana Padawer offer a different angle on studies of indigenous education by comparing studies conducted by Argentine and U.S. ethnographers. Like Ames and Gomes' chapter, this essay has implications for ethnographic research on minoritized populations in general, including but extending beyond indigenous populations. The chapter is particularly rich in description of how the discipline of anthropology developed in the different historical and political contexts of Argentina and the United States and affected the approaches of anthropologists of education. The authors show that

anthropologists who challenged assimilationist discourse and deficit thinking in the United States sought for a long time to replace deficit thinking with the idea of cultural contrasts between (minority) homes and school classrooms. Only since the 1990s, they argue, have U.S. ethnographers shifted the emphasis toward a critique of power differences. In contrast, progressive Argentine anthropologists, when they finally gained the freedom to argue against assimilationist discourse in the 1980s, expressed a critical perspective, pointing out the continuing subordination of indigenous students and their families even as the government moved from assimilationist policies to what was officially termed intercultural bilingual education (EIB in Spanish). This comparison begins to make visible how distinct political contexts as well as distinct habits of reading in Argentina versus the United States shaped ethnographers' theoretical interests and thus their research foci.

In Chapter 4, Gabriela Novaro and Lesley Bartlett raise different questions about the ethnography of education in Argentina and the United States by shifting the focus to international migration. They describe differences in national policies in Argentina and the United States but find—in contrast with the argument in Chapter 2—similarities in the responses of ethnographers. In both countries, ethnography shares the common role of problematizing key terms and assumptions, showing “the limitations of the notions of assimilation

and inclusion as they circulate in public discourse, while demonstrating the diverse ways in which inclusion and exclusion are produced.” In both countries, they argue, ethnographic studies “show the need to overcome the false promises of assimilation and inclusion and to build a perspective that accounts for significant material inequalities and includes a wider conception of cultural dynamics in contexts of diversity.” Emphasizing as they do the similarities of ethnographers’ approaches in the two countries in spite of different theoretical concepts (“segmented assimilation” and its critique, “subordinate inclusion”), Novaro and Bartlett raise a question about the value of post-hoc comparison as attempted in this volume. If the ethnographers and the theory are similar across countries, as Novaro and Bartlett seem to find, then we might ask why scholars are not incorporating/using empirical studies across borders.

In the last thematic chapter, Chapter 5, Belmira Bueno and Kathryn Anderson-Levitt compare ethnographic research on teachers’ work as carried out in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil and in the United States. Their approach to comparison is to adapt Noblit and Hare’s meta-ethnography, examining three pairs of studies closely, identifying common themes and points of divergence. They explain divergences sometimes with reference to sharp differences in the economic and social contexts in which teachers work in these different countries, but also with reference to different theoretical traditions in the different

nations. Paralleling a point made by Padawer and Luykx, they note that U.S. ethnographers have been less likely to foreground the power of the state than their Argentine, and generally Latin American, colleagues in the field of Anthropology and Education. They also point out that in this domain of research, Latin American scholars have developed their own theoretical perspectives, building on European, U.S. and Latin American studies, whereas U.S. scholars have been more parochial in their reading and theory development.

Chapter 6 takes us back to broader questions entailed when we attempt to compare ethnographic studies. Marta Sánchez and George Noblit revisit Noblit and Hare's approach to comparison, meta-ethnography, expanding it for the first time to consider cross-border comparisons like those offered in this volume. Reviewing lessons learned about comparing from the four thematic chapters, they argue for a radical revision of qualitative research synthesis approaches like meta-ethnography to take borders into account. They push us to acknowledge directly that comparative ethnographic projects, especially comparisons between U.S.-led and Latin American-led studies "cannot escape the colonial origins of ethnography" and they make a powerful argument for expanding the context within which we compare to include a broader history of national and international politics.

Inés Dussel offers a final commentary on this project from the perspective of a Latin American historian who had long crossed national and regional borders within the Americas. We agree with her assessment that it this book is above all about the journey, not the endpoint—that is, about what is learned in the struggle to understand in comparative perspective.

We add as an Appendix a practical guide for readers who are inspired by these comparisons to cross borders themselves and to discover the rich bodies of research being carried out in parts of the Americas that have been less familiar to them. Access to the literature can be a challenge when search engines and journals are reserved for only for readers whose institutions pay for subscriptions. Another challenge is that readers in the North may be unaware Latin American search engines. The Appendix offers partial solutions to these practical challenges of finding and downloading unfamiliar literatures.

### **The Value of Comparing**

Noblit wrote of meta-ethnography, “For us, synthesis did not result in a ‘better truth’ than those offered in the ethnographies that were synthesized.” It could, however, “offer the benefits of making the familiar strange—of seeing things in a new perspective” (in Thorne et al., 2004, p. 1348). This experiment in comparing ethnographic studies of seemingly similar issues across national borders certainly helped us notice what we had not noticed before. Seeing with new eyes thus

permits us to grow our understanding in the sense that future studies, now “better informed and better conceptualized,” can “plunge more deeply” (Geertz, 1973, p. 25).

For example, ethnographers from the “North” have long written about “minorities” or “minority students,” but ethnographers from Latin American countries have been less likely to describe the populations they studied, even in the case of indigenous groups, as “minorities.” Rather, they have traditionally stressed the need to study problems of equity for the *majorities* in their countries, often referred to as the “popular classes” or the “working classes.” Populations generally seen as “minorities” in the United States, such as the working poor, are a majority in many Latin American countries and indeed across the hemisphere as a whole (Rockwell, 2002); for example, over 50 percent of the Mexican population is presently defined as falling below its locally defined poverty line (Index Mundi, 2014). Moreover, as Ames and Gomes point out in this volume, a population may be a minority in the national context but a majority within a particular region of the nation. As they note, it makes more sense to use a verb, the term “minoritize”; the verb highlights processes of exclusion and marginalization and recognizes that the word “minorities” might seem to diminish a group's importance while referring, as emphasized here, to a group that is a majority elsewhere or in the world as a whole (Burguière & Grew, 2001). Locating white



middle-class actors as the true numerical minority forces analysts to acknowledge how critical inequities in income, wealth and schooling really are everywhere.

Similarly, ethnographers in the North often write of “immigrants,” but as Novaro and Bartlett show us, ethnographers in the South prefer the term “migrants,” which puts the focus on complex cycles of leaving and returning, both across and within national boundaries. The broader theme of “migrations” allows for discussion of students and families who return to Latin American schools after years in the North. It likewise includes consideration of South-South migration across borders, as from Bolivia to Argentina or from Guatemala to Mexico, and importantly, from rural to urban areas inside a nation like Mexico. It invites more attention to the reasons people move and requires us to see migration as a dynamic world process.

Another term which has traveled with some difficulty across linguistic boundaries and which demanded attention in this volume is the term “difference” and the closely related term “diversity.” In the United States, anthropologists and sociolinguists in the 1970s and 1980s fought against a deficit model of minoritized students and the notion of a “culture of poverty,” arguing instead that the students drew on different but equally valid cultural knowledge (e.g., Erickson, 1987). However, a generation later, some anthropologists had become alarmed that a reified notion of culture and cultural difference was

being used by some educators to excuse low school achievement that should have been attributed to structural inequalities and low expectations (González, 1999). We see what seems to be a parallel among Argentine anthropologists who have been troubled by misuses of the concept of “diversity” in their country (Neufeld & Thisted, 1999), as discussed by Ames and Gomes in this volume.

In the United States, many reform efforts continue to encourage “multiculturalism,” emphasizing differences, although many critical ethnographers have shifted to a discourse of “teaching for social justice” with explicit attention to “race” and “racism”; thus, for example, Ladson-Billings incorporated attention to “current social inequities” as a central tenet of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (1995, p. 476) and has shifted her attention to critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In Latin America, anthropologists rarely write about social justice, but they take the existence of social *injustice* as evident and problematic, arguing for equal access to “democratic, public, free and good quality schooling for all.” In that context, whereas U.S. “multiculturalism” in the United States has emphasized differences, the concept of “interculturalism” in Latin America, as Padawer and Luykx demonstrate, emphasizes asymmetries of power and a more dynamic notion of culture and the agency of minoritized groups in negotiating with the state.

Discovering the alternative meanings and uses of the term “cultural difference” and “diversity” force us to confront several questions: Is it ethnic difference or social class that should draw our attention? Are these two dimensions as strongly intertwined in all parts of the hemisphere, particularly given the strong colonial heritage, but also the recent rise of indigenous movements in the Americas? Do we locate sources of school failure in the children and their home lives or in the organization of schooling? Have we really left the concept of the “culture of poverty” behind us (McCarty, 2016)? Are there ways of synthesizing these various lines of argument, to comprehend the dynamics of schooling more fully, as some authors are arguing (e.g. de Haan & Elbers, 2005; Novaro, Padawer & Hecht, 2016)?

These concepts are further complicated by their appropriation and diverse uses in the discourse of educational legislation and reform in each country. The tension between the right to education and the attention to diversity is reinterpreted under different regimes and through the influence of international agencies. How do local actors, practitioners and teachers, interpret the processes being studied? What do references to neoliberal educational policies signify in each context or country? What consequences do these policies generate for the local processes of education and for the discourse and critiques assumed by researchers in these contexts? Although policies were not

the focus of these chapters, they did become a salient and inevitable dimension of the contexts being compared.

We are learning the difficulty—and fruitfulness—of translating concepts. We find that we are not using exactly the same terms, or exactly translatable terms, for some key concepts—and that when we do use the “same” terms, their meanings differ in important ways. This means that the work of reading one another’s research requires constant effort to understand both the social and theoretical contexts.

In their commentary, Sánchez and Noblit highlight diversity of meanings as well as of contexts. We adhere, as they do, to a “process theory” focused on context (Maxwell, 2004, p. 5). Each aspect of a particular situation means something particular in this particular setting, making it difficult to isolate equivalent “variables,” as used in other research logics. What counts as a “minority” depends on the particular context. Where a supposed “cultural difference” matters or not in a particular setting depends on the experience and perspective of particular actors. In this second view, Sánchez and Noblit hold, there is no hope of making sweeping generalizations; human social life is far too complex, and because people make meanings of what is going on in the moment, meanings of the “same” phenomenon vary considerably (Erickson, 2011).

What then is the value of comparing? We return to the idea of thinking beyond narrowly defined bounds of the thinkable, to the value

of being surprised, of adding new dimensions that had not been considered in research in our own “contexts.” Comparing across contexts makes contexts—including very large political and historical contexts, as Sánchez and Noblit argue in this volume—noticeable. And that helps us understand more deeply the particular situations we are studying—which is, in fact, the ultimate goal of social science, at least for many of us. The “mirror” effect of comparison may be its greatest value. However, these insights into other ways of seeing common processes may also contribute to the continuing conversations, becoming the starting points for constructing more comprehensive theories, which in turn can impel further ethnographic research in other contexts, informing descriptions that might integrate, for example, cultural dynamics and class differences, or the transformations of international policies as they are implemented locally. Indeed, some of the paradoxes uncovered in research prevent generalizations and rather suggest lines of further inquiry.

The mirror effect also operates in the other kind of comparison we engage in here to compare research by scholars operating in different countries and often in different languages. We learn in this volume that we do not always ask the same questions in the same ways. True, we are interested in the same broad themes—learning as a social and cultural activity, the organization of schooling and its effects, social inequity as played out in and around schools—but we do

not always frame the same particular topics. For example, one longstanding tradition in U.S. ethnographic work, from Leacock (1973) to Cornbleth (2010) begins from the premise that, although “hard-working and, on the whole, well-meaning,” many teachers play an “active role” in the “miseducation” of students of color and students who are impoverished; studies that document teachers who actively work in all students’ interests (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2009) tend to present them as the exceptions. In contrast, Mexican ethnographies of teachers’ work tend to align with rather than critique teachers’ perspectives and to imply that their work generally serves students’ interests (e.g. Mercado, 1994).

In part, it is differences in the economic, social and political context that explain why Latin Americans ethnographers would emphasize the positive in teachers’ work. The hardships of teaching in some rural schools across the region, or the hardship provoked by a volatile economy, direct attention to the most basic tasks of carrying out schooling. However, there are also different theoretical predispositions. As noted above, many Latin American scholars doing educational research tend to read from a wider range of the social sciences. There are different theoretical concepts in play in different parts of the hemisphere, as Connell (2007) and Lander (2000), make clear, and trying on different theoretical lenses through comparison gives us fresh perspectives on long-standing research problems.

The work we commissioned in this volume, co-authoring a chapter with a colleague across national and linguistic borders, was taxing work, although chapter authors ultimately found it rewarding. It was not always easy for co-authors to understand the nuances of one another's arguments, especially since they were not always familiar with the full body of literature behind some claims.

This was not an exercise that any of the pairs of co-authors was likely to try on their own. If scholars come to understand one another's work without outside prompting, they may more likely do it by conducting a study together, or to design deliberately comparative work, as Novaro and Bartlett suggest in this volume. Yet collaborative cross-national work is expensive and difficult to mount, and may need to be driven by the theoretical preferences of the project leaders or grant funders. In any case the kind of exercise our co-authors conducted here would be good preparation for a joint research project—preparation rarely taken, perhaps, because of pressure to meet grant deadlines and the hierarchical structure of some such ventures. It would help fledgling partners recognize and respect the foundations on which each works and the theoretical sources from which each draws. Meanwhile, we have at our fingertips a wealth of previously conducted research, most of it shaped by the ethnographer's own theoretical lenses and knowledge of the local context. Comparing such studies ad hoc, as the chapter authors do here, can be puzzling at times, but can

also break, at least once in a while, the bounds of “thinkable” thoughts.

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## Introduction