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Teachers’ Work:
Comparing Ethnographies From Latin America and the United States

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Teachers’ work, *el trabajo docente*, is a timely topic, for in the new global focus on “quality” education for all, reformers worldwide are focusing on the “quality” of teachers, assessment of teachers’ work, and preparation for teaching (Akiba, 2013; Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). It falls to
In this chapter we will compare ethnographic studies of teachers’ work from Latin America—specifically from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil—and from the United States. As we explored the notion of teachers’ work, long a focus of research in Latin America, we began by focusing on themes that reverberated both in Latin America and in the United States. These are the theme of los saberes docentes or knowledge for teaching, the theme of state intervention in teachers’ work, and the theme of becoming a teacher.

We will begin by introducing the topic of el trabajo docente and its study across the hemisphere. Then we will explain our approach to comparing ethnographies and our adaptation of meta-ethnography as a tool to make comparisons more vivid and specific (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Next we will address our three themes in turn, using a meta-ethnographic comparison to explore each theme. Finally, in the discussion we will consider explanations of similarities and differences between Latin American and U.S. studies. We will argue that in spite of some apparent similarities, ethnographers in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and the United States do empirical work and offer theoretical explanations that tell different parts of a larger story.
**EL TRABAJO DOCENTE: THE ACTUAL WORK OF TEACHING**

In several countries of Latin America, teachers’ work has become one of the most recurrent themes in educational research. For ethnographers, the focus began with work on *el trabajo docente*, as discussed by Elsie Rockwell (1985, 1995) and colleagues at Mexico’s Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (DIE, Department of Educational Research, at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies, Cinvestav), including Ruth Mercado (Rockwell & Mercado, 1986), Etelvina Sandoval (1995), and Citlali Aguilar (1995). They expanded talk about “teachers’ practice” to mean the actual work of teaching, encompassing more than *enseñanza* (instruction); for example, Sandoval described union-school interventions in teacher’s work, and Aguilar documented the “nonteaching” work of teachers.

In the concept of *el trabajo docente* they adopted a fresh theoretical approach in order to make sense of what they were seeing in fieldwork. They questioned the idea of a *teaching role* in the singular by documenting heterogeneity, nonuniformity, and nonconformism in various teachers’ ways of teaching. Teachers’ roles, in the plural, had to be understood in terms of their everyday work, as shaped by their particular schools with their specific conflicts and contradictions, and not by prescriptive pedagogical theories that treated what teachers should and should not do as stable realities (Rockwell & Mercado, 1986). Moreover, the school was understood as a social construction,
an institution in a permanent process of transformation (Rockwell & Ezpeleta, 1986). Therefore, ethnographers needed to study the ways teachers performed as individual actors who organized their lives and their work in historical contexts, given the possibilities and conditions afforded by their particular schools, and who appropriated knowledge and practice selectively to do so, as described, for example, by Lucía Petrelli (2012) in Argentina and by Sandoval (2013) in Mexico.

To develop their fresh approach to teachers’ work, DIE ethnographers built on influences from many research traditions, including the new sociolinguistic studies of classrooms (e.g., Frederick Erickson and Courtney Cazden), scholars in the Marxist tradition (e.g., Agnes Heller, Antonio Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, Mikhail Bakhtin), classic U.S. sociology of teaching (Willard Waller, Dan Lortie), and Britain’s “new sociology of education” of the late 1970s and 1980s (Martyn Hammersley, Paul Atkinson, David Hamilton, Sara Delamont, Peter Woods, and others). The latter British theorists, little read in the United States at the time (Atkinson, Delamont, & Hammersley, 1988), strongly inspired the study of el trabajo docente, and the DIE engaged in exchanges about their work with other ethnographers in Latin America.¹ Some of the British work was translated into Spanish, especially Peter Woods’s books (e.g., 1980), and Stubbs and Delamont (1976) was translated into Portuguese. Latin American scholars also drew on research from Canada on teachers’ “personal practical
knowledge” (e.g., Elbaz, 1983) and on ethnography of teachers’ work from Australia (Connell, 1985).

However, not only international research but also political necessity inspired ethnographers in Latin America. The defense of public schools, and of the teachers working in them, was high on the agenda in the face of the policies imposed in several countries under dictatorships at the time (Argentina, Chile, Brazil). In the 1980s in Mexico, as again today in much of the world, it was politically important to emphasize that teachers’ work is complex, not something that anyone can do and not, in the case of elementary teaching, a simple extension of women’s nurturing practices. Influenced by Mexico’s teacher movement of the 1980s, DIE ethnographers defined teachers as “workers”; today this emphasis counters the state’s discourse on the “professionalization” of teaching, a policy used to increase certification requirements but also to reduce the right to equal salaries and eventually tenure.

Two important institutions played a role in stimulating the strong interest in teachers’ work across Latin American countries: the Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales/Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) and Red Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre el Trabajo Docente/Latin American Network for Studies on Teachers’ Work (Red Estrado), organized under the auspices of CLACSO. Created in 1967, CLACSO brings together 394 research centers and graduate
schools in the field of the social sciences and humanities in 26 Latin American countries, North America, and Europe (www.clacso.org). Red Estrado, in operation since 1999, holds conferences and connects several Latin American countries with researchers from other countries, such as the United States, Canada, France, England, Spain, and Portugal (http://redeestrado.org).

As the concept of *el trabajo docente* spread, ethnographers in other Latin American countries imbued it with new meanings, sometimes quite different from its original sense in Mexico. In Mexico, some of Mercado’s students explored teachers’ relation to parents and to in-service training experiences. Marília Carvalho’s (1999) work in Brazil pioneered studies on teachers’ work through the lens of gender. In Argentina, Laura Cerletti (2011) examined it indirectly by observing a teacher’s care for a girl under risk of sexual abuse, while Gabriela Novaro’s (2011) observations of classrooms of indigenous migrant students revealed the teachers’ emphasis on problems beyond the school that made schoolwork difficult. These are only a few examples from a large number of studies on teachers’ work in several Latin American countries.

Even as the conception of teachers’ work has strongly pervaded the Latin American educational field, leading to a political and historical vision of teaching across the region, neoliberal pressures have impacted the theoretical approaches to school and teaching,
including in ethnographic research. In fact, even beyond the realm of ethnographic research, teachers’ work has become one of the most recurrent research themes in several Latin American countries, with most research based in Marxist concepts of work, wage labor, precarious work, and proletarian work. For example, in Brazil, Dalila Oliveira has worked in this vein for several years, studying the management and organization of school work, the process of intensification of teaching, the wear and dissatisfaction felt by these workers, and other related themes. In light of theories of deprofessionalization and proletarianization, she has developed analyses about the ways in which new reforms are involved in the so-called process of “flexibility,” which, like professionalization, might sound like a good thing for teachers but actually increases the precariousness of teaching (e.g., Oliveira, 2004).

Meanwhile, in the United States and Canada, ethnographers had likewise developed an interest in teachers, but generally with a different slant. In the United States, sociologist Louis Smith’s pioneering work used participant-observation to examine decision making by one teacher (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968), and occasionally other sociologists focused their ethnographies on teachers’ knowledge and beliefs for teaching (e.g., Metz, 1978). The cognitive turn in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Shulman, 1986) inspired strong interest in teachers’ thinking. Canadian researchers explored teachers’ “personal
practical knowledge” through narrative analysis based primarily on in-depth interviews (e.g., Elbaz, 1983). As we will show later, some ethnographers participated in this research. U.S. researchers, including ethnographers, likewise have shown a strong and growing interest in teacher education. The American Educational Research Association established Division K, a new interest group on teachers and teacher education, in 1984, and it quickly became the largest division within the association. Its journal, *Teachers and Teacher Education*, publishes many case studies using ethnographic methods.

This chapter will focus on three prominent themes within the study of teachers’ work across the hemisphere. The first is *los saberes docentes*/knowledge for teaching; under this rubric we consider how the term *saberes docentes* (in the plural) in Mexican research aligns in some ways with U.S. interest in teachers’ thinking and knowledge. The second theme is the intervention of the state in teachers’ work, an issue of rising interest across the hemisphere as pressures for teacher “quality” and accountability continue to dominate school reform. The third theme is the process of becoming a teacher, a strong focus of U.S. ethnographies that ask who takes up the work of teaching and how such choices are made.

**OUR APPROACH**
Rather than attempt a survey of the literature on these themes, we aim to tell a more personal story, one that includes our own work. Kathryn Anderson-Levitt came to this project having studied teachers’ knowledge-in-practice in France, with comparison to the United States and the Republic of Guinea, and has recently been studying how U.S. teachers learn to teach. Belmira Bueno has carried out several ethnographic studies on teachers’ work and in recent years has studied models of teacher education, comparing Chilean and Brazilian policies as well as French and Brazilian models. We had met only once and carried out the writing via e-mail exchanges, relying on Bueno’s strong English and Anderson-Levitt’s reading knowledge of Spanish. Our “discussions” over e-mail went fairly smoothly, but there were occasional points of confusion. For example, Anderson-Levitt has found it difficult to imagine exactly how Argentine teachers experienced the “presence of the state” (as discussed below) and exactly what it means for Brazilian teachers of the early elementary grades to experience newly required diploma courses at the university level. The difficulty comes from her unfamiliarity with South America and perhaps also from the Latin American tradition of including fewer vignettes or direct quotations in ethnographic journal articles (although theses and dissertations include more “thick description”). In contrast, since Bueno has studied and traveled in the United States and has read a lot of U.S. ethnography, she raised fewer questions of interpretation.
Our approach was first to search our respective literatures to be sure we were aware of who had been conducting ethnographic work on teachers in our respective regions. This approach helped us identify the themes for the chapter but lured us in the direction of massive literature reviews rather than a focus on comparing. To counter that tendency—which would have been impossible in a short chapter and contrary to this volume’s goals—we reoriented ourselves to compare from our own personal perspectives. Thus, given Anderson-Levitt’s background, when discussing the North, we focus on research conducted by U.S.-based anthropologists, mentioning only briefly certain differences between anthropological and sociological ethnography and giving short shrift to the distinctive research on teachers’ work and teachers unions conducted by Canadian ethnographers. Likewise, when discussing Latin America we focus on only three countries—Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina—given Bueno’s greater familiarity with these countries and with particular research centers within them. Specifically, in Mexico, it was clear that we should work with the production of the DIE. In Argentina and also in Brazil, we decided to focus on the production of groups with strong historical connections to the DIE—anthropologists of education within the Department of Anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires and scholars from the School of Education and the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, respectively. Since the 1990s these
groups have exchanged with the DIE through joint conferences, visits, and courses.

To further focus on comparing rather than on regional reviews, we agreed to experiment with meta-ethnography, which both of us had encountered but neither of us had previously used. As discussed in Chapter 1 and in Sánchez and Noblit’s chapter in this volume, meta-ethnography is an approach to comparing qualitative studies developed by George Noblit and Dwight Hare (1988). It has inspired many efforts at qualitative research synthesis (Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004) and has recently seen renewed interest in the field of education (e.g., Hughes & Noblit, 2016; Huf & Raggl, 2016).

Noblit and Hare (1988) sought an interpretive method that would permit comparing ethnographic studies without losing their contextual richness. They proposed as a first step that the analyst identify key “metaphors” used in each study, the word *metaphors* referring to “what others may call the themes, perspectives, organizers and/or concepts revealed by qualitative studies” (p. 14). Noblit and Hare prefer the word *metaphor* because it emphasizes that ethnographers are making analogies between their own perspective and the perspectives of participants in a study. For example, from the perspective of ethnographer Mary Metz (1978), it was *as if* White students in the college preparatory track of a desegregated school
were “junior partners” to teachers, and it was as if Black students in the general education track were “shut out” (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 44).

The second step in meta-ethnography is to ask whether the metaphors in one study can be “translated” into metaphors used in another study. For example, does it mean basically the same thing to say that the school principal in one U.S. school had the “freedom to make no serious mistakes” (Wolcott, 1973) as it is to say that the principal in another school operated in a “fishbowl” (Collins & Noblit, 1978; both studies analyzed in Noblit & Hare, 1988, p. 40)? Thinking of comparison as translation appealed to us because we are comparing not only across studies, as Noblit and Hare did, but also across languages, countries, and regions.

Noblit and Hare (1988) described three possible experiences with translation. In some cases, they argued, the metaphors in different ethnographic studies are similar, and “reciprocal translation” is possible (p. 38). For example, we will argue below that saberes docentes (teaching knowledges) can be interpreted as a phenomenon similar to “cultural knowledge for teaching,” even if one must offer caveats about the precise meaning of “culture” and the precise meaning of “knowledge.” The second possibility is that the studies being compared offer opposing concepts or interpretations, as if one ethnographer were refuting the other; in that case, instead of
translating one study into the other, the analyst must make a “refutational synthesis” (p. 48). For example, we will argue under the theme of state intervention that the metaphor of *las presencias estatales* (state presences) inside schools used by one ethnographer refutes the metaphor of the state as part of the external “environment” used by another ethnographer, offering contradictory answers to the question “Where is the state?” Finally, Noblit and Hare have argued that sometimes metaphors from different studies may be interpreted as complementary, each offering a different part of a larger story. When pieced together, such studies offer a more complex line of argument, in what Noblit and Hare called a “lines-of-argument synthesis” (p. 64). They illustrated by arguing that Margaret Mead’s and Derek Freeman’s seemingly contradictory portraits of Samoa actually complement each other, with Mead emphasizing the experiences of young women and Freeman emphasizing the experiences of senior men, so that together they offer a more comprehensive and complex picture of Samoa (p. 61). We will argue that comparing a pair of studies of becoming a teacher in Brazil and in the United States requires developing a lines-of-argument synthesis that reveals the larger social context encompassing each individual study.

To keep the task of comparison manageable and to avoid losing touch with the context of each study, Noblit and Hare applied meta-
ethnography with very small numbers of studies, comparing from two to six studies in any given example. We will likewise work on a small scale, offering three comparisons, each of a pair of studies: one from Latin America (from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, respectively) paired with one from the United States in each case.

LOS SABERES DOCENTES AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE FOR TEACHING

In Mexico, study of *el trabajo docente* theorized teachers as “subjects,” that is, as agents of their own lives. (In Latin America, the word *subjects, sujetos*, connotes active agents, as in the subject of a verb, whereas in the United States, *subjects* sometimes connotes passive recipients of the researchers’ gaze.) In this theoretical context, some ethnographers explored the bodies of knowledge, *los saberes docentes*, on which teachers drew as they did their work. These researchers began from the premise that “knowing how to be a teacher implies the appropriation not only of content knowledge and of pedagogical theories but also of many more subtle and implicit elements at those points where affective and social work intersect with the intellectual” (Rockwell & Mercado, 1986, p. 70; our translation). For example, for one first-grade teacher *los saberes docentes* included knowing how to organize the whole group, how to involve children in activities, how to take the children’s comments and actions into
account, how to support and encourage individual children’s seatwork, and even how to coach colleagues just beginning to teach (Mercado, 1991). At the secondary level, los saberes docentes included, among other things, knowing how to ensure that students with heterogeneous characteristics made homogeneous progress and knowing how to resolve the tension between paying attention to individual students and, at the same time, paying attention to the whole class (Candela, 1991; Naranjo & Candela, 2006). Such saberes have been accumulated from different historical moments and social spaces and are (re)constructed through the everyday relationship between teachers and students. In this process, teachers build and rebuild knowledge about students and their pedagogical beliefs about content, ways of teaching, and assessments, among others (Mercado, 2002).

This theme of saberes docentes spread to other countries in Latin America. In recent years, Latin America studies on saberes docentes have emphasized responses to the pressures of new education reforms. For example, in Brazil, ethnographers have studied how a literacy teacher appropriated and mobilized knowledge for teaching in complex ways that defy simplistic reform (Zibetti & Souza, 2007) and how first- to fifth-grade teachers modified (or not) their practices for teaching literacy and their ways of reading after taking a continuing education course mandated by the state (Arnoldi, 2014; Sarti & Bueno, 2007).
We mentioned that in the United States and Canada qualitative researchers had been studying related issues—teachers’ thinking, teachers’ decision making, and teachers’ planning—since the “cognitive turn” in the social sciences. They used a wide variety of methods, including interviews, narrative analysis, stimulated recall, journals kept by teachers, and more. Some ethnographers participated in this effort; what is interesting is that quite a few of the U.S.-based ethnographers who focused on teachers’ knowledge for teaching conducted ethnographic work outside the United States. Some made films or videos of classroom activities in different countries and then invited educators to comment on the images—for example, George and Louise Spindler in Germany and the United States (Spindler & Spindler, 1987) and Joseph Tobin and his colleagues in Japan, China, and the United States (e.g., Hayashi & Tobin, 2015; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009) and in European countries (Adair, Tobin, & Arzubiaga, 2012). Other U.S.-based anthropologists conducted fieldwork to understand teachers’ knowledge in Japan (e.g., Lewis, 1995; Shimahara & Sakai, 1995) and in China (Paine, 1989). Most of those carrying out this comparative research had been trained in anthropology, which is significant because in the United States, anthropology departments encourage students to do research outside the United States, whereas sociology and education departments, like anthropology as well as education faculties in Latin America, usually
assume that research will take place in the ethnographer’s home country.

Like Mercado in Mexico, these U.S.-based ethnographers were observing everyday practices of teaching and elicited teachers’ talk about those practices. However, whereas Mercado identified knowledge that was often made explicit in practice (such as tips learned from fellow teachers), the ethnographers who conducted comparative film- or video-viewing studies tended to identify implicit, tacit knowledge—as evidenced by their participants’ surprise at discovering how teachers handled children in another country. The comparative studies also vividly illustrated that teachers’ practical knowledge varied with national context.

**Comparing Two Studies of Knowledge for Teaching**

We illustrate the affordances of Mercado’s approach, on the one hand, and the cross-national approach, on the other, by offering the first of our extended examples inspired by Noblit and Hare’s meta-ethnographic approach. Here we compare Mercado’s (2002) book-length study of *saberes docentes* in Mexico with Anderson-Levitt’s (2002) book on “cultural knowledge for teaching” in France. The two studies had similar aims. Mercado sought to describe *saberes docentes*, to demonstrate that *saberes docentes* are socially constructed, and to show that children in the classroom play an
important role in their construction. Meanwhile, I (Kathryn Anderson-Levitt) aimed to demonstrate “that there are many ‘knowledges for teaching’” (2002, p. 1) and that “each has its source in particular historical and cultural contexts” (2002, p. 2). Both scholars relied primarily on ethnography, supplemented by the use of video. Mercado observed and videotaped four elementary teachers in Mexico, three of them in the same rural school and one in an urban school. She engaged them in multiple conversations about their teaching, often inspired by watching videos she had made. Similarly, I carried out an ethnographic study of elementary teachers, focusing on three first-grade teachers and how they taught reading. Like the U.S. ethnographers cited above, I conducted the ethnographic research abroad rather than at home in the United States. I also used videos to elicit talk about teaching, but in this case with groups of teachers and also nonteachers in the United States and France, thus emphasizing cross-national comparisons.

Again, using a meta-ethnographic approach, we first identified metaphors that were central to analysis of the findings in each study. In Mercado’s study these were los saberes docentes, construcción social, and voces (voices), and in mine they were cultural knowledge for teaching, the paradox of culture, and sources of knowledge for teaching (Table 5.1).
The second step was to ask whether the metaphors could be translated into one another. We think that they can be; we see our analysis of this pair of studies as a case of “reciprocal translation.” To begin, we would translate the object of Mercado’s study, saberes docentes, into my concept of “cultural knowledge for teaching,” for both describe teachers as using or drawing on knowledge. However, we recognize that Mercado (1994) deliberately chose not to translate saberes docentes into English. One reason was that the word saberes is in the plural, suggesting a multiplicity of “knowledges,” whereas the English language typically has not permitted pluralizing the term knowledge. However, I was interested in “knowledges” in the plural as well (Anderson-Levitt, 2002, p. 1) and tried to make that clear despite the limitations placed by the English language. As a second reason, the word saber, like the French word savoir (as in savoir-faire), can refer both to knowing that (knowing a fact or a principle) and to knowing how to do something. I spent pages explaining that I was interested not only in what teachers know but also in what they know how to do (and in what they believe and value and take for granted), although the ordinary meaning of the word knowledge in English does not connote such a wide scope.
There is also an important difference between the two studies in the use of the word *culture* because it carried different connotations for each author. I added the adjective *cultural* to “knowledge for teaching” and put the word *culture* in the book title, whereas Mercado made little reference to “the sociocultural” at all except in alluding to Vygotsky. She and her colleagues in Mexico avoided the word *culture* to avoid essentializing teachers’ practices, for at that time in Mexico teachers’ “culture” was being studied by Mexican sociologists as if it were an unchanging phenomenon and somehow a cause of other phenomena (such as, in this case, the teachers’ “resistance to change”; Rockwell, personal communication, January 2, 2017). For me, on the other hand, culture referred to any knowledge, defined very broadly, that people use to interpret experience and generate behavior (Spradley, 1979), and I did not presume any link between the groups that individuals belonged to and the bodies of knowledge they used. As I interpreted it, my phrase “cultural knowledge” means the same thing as Mercado’s *saberes*. Admittedly, however, the prominence of the word *cultural* in my text might signal to readers my focus on the implicit or tacit knowledge that becomes more visible through comparative research.

As her theoretical framework, Mercado drew on the idea of *construcción social* (social construction) as developed by Berger and Luckmann and particularly by philosopher Agnes Heller in her writing.
about everyday life. I rarely used the term *social construction*, but I drew on the same idea, particularly when, citing Berger and Luckmann, I referred to the “paradox of culture,” that “we are busy creating and recreating ways of seeing things and doing thing that then influence us as if they came from outside of ourselves” (Anderson-Levitt, 2002, p. 137). I assumed that culture is about people making and remaking meaning, not about something static and immutable. I saw culture as about the social construction of reality, even though the root metaphor of cultivating, as in “horticulture,” differs from the root metaphor of construction or building.

Mercado’s key metaphor when analyzing classroom episodes was that a teacher might speak with several different “voices,” at one moment with the voice of something learned in normal school, at another moment with the voice of a particular reform dating to the 19th century, and at another moment with the voice of a colleague. She meant that teachers did not make up all the knowledge for teaching themselves but, rather, were in dialogue, in Bakhtin’s sense, with historical practices and other sources. Teachers could also transform the other voices and thus pass on something new. As did Candela (1991), Mercado emphasized the role of the children in the dialogues, meaning that the teachers she studied always took into account their knowledge of individual students and of the group when planning and when carrying out lessons and also that students
“negotiated” with the teacher during class in ways that affected the flow of a lesson.

In contrast, I said little about the children’s role, but I did capture in detail the idea that teachers’ ideas sprang from multiple historical and social contexts. Instead of the metaphor of voice I used the metaphor of “sources” of teachers’ knowledge, source originally referring to the spring that gives rise to a river. I identified specific historical sources of certain ideas such as the belief that children must “pay attention” or that they should “participate.” I tentatively named different pools or sources of knowledge as national and transnational classroom cultures (shared with nonteachers) and as national and transnational professional cultures. I also agreed with Mercado that teachers “improvise” with the stocks of knowledge at hand (Anderson-Levitt, 2002, p. 179; Mercado, 2002, p. 154).

In sum, we interpret this synthesis as a reciprocal translation in Noblit and Hare’s terms; these two studies paralleled each other in many ways. Notably, both pointed to multiple historical and social sources of teachers’ knowledge. However, Mercado’s book, enriched with the perspectives of Heller on everyday life and of Bakhtin on dialogues, took a much closer look at how teachers made decisions from moment-to-moment in the classroom, in interaction with the students. My book, meanwhile, used comparison to make visible more taken-for-granted aspects of teachers’ knowledge. Thus, although we
see these as reciprocal translations, we have had to detail the differences in the nuances of words such as *saberes* and *culture*, thus demonstrating that it is never possible to translate metaphors perfectly and that different languages afford different ways of thinking about teaching and teachers’ work.

**EL TRABAJO DOCENTE AND THE STATE**

As mentioned, for many ethnographers, the concept of teachers’ work implies a political vision of teaching. At all levels, the political character of teachers’ work is marked by the presence of the state. Political reforms under the broad designation of neoliberalism stormed the educational arena after the 1990s in all countries and turned attention without exception toward teachers—as documented, for example, by Souza (2006). Teachers were seen as the “touchstone” for solving the problems affecting Latin American education, mainly the problem of school exclusion. In a state-of-the-art review, Sandoval (2013) called attention to several federal reforms that impacted teachers’ work in just one decade (2003–2012) in Mexico. She noted that even though the changes did not go into effect immediately, the reforms affected teachers’ careers and labor because of the new rules and the requirements they imposed, for example, to get better salaries.
Meanwhile, in the North, we find attention to teaching as labor intensified by reforms imposed by the state among Canadian ethnographers (as among British and Australian ethnographers) and, particularly in response to the accountability movement, increasingly among U.S. ethnographers. For example, Canadian studies of teachers’ work under the umbrella of “institutional ethnography” examine such issues as how new accountability policies implicitly shape teachers’ curriculum work (Parkinson & Stooke, 2012). U.S. ethnographers also produce accounts of teachers’ everyday work lives in the United States (e.g., Downey, 2015; Mawhinney, 2012)—and in one case, of teachers’ lives in Argentina (Robert, 2015).

**Comparing Two Studies of Teachers’ Work and the State**

To compare studies of teachers’ work and the state more closely, we identified a study by Argentine ethnographer Lucía Petrelli, one of the anthropologists at the University of Buenos Aires who looks most closely at teachers, and a study by U.S.-based Cynthia Coburn, a sociologist and ethnographer who has published extensively on teachers’ work beyond the classroom. Both Petrelli (2012) and Coburn (2001a) described teachers coping with state intervention in education. However, the larger contexts differed sharply.

In a series of studies Petrelli has described how, in order to save their jobs during the Argentine economic crisis, teachers took over
running their own schools. Argentina underwent a severe economic depression from 1998 to 2002, leading to riots and the fall of the government. With the economic collapse, many small and medium enterprises closed, but their former workers sometimes reopened the closed organizations as worker-managed cooperatives. Petrelli studied teachers in one public elementary school and in one public secondary institute who had faced the closure of their schools. The teachers in each case had taken over running the schools as state-recognized cooperatives and thus experienced the state as the source of national, provincial, and municipal statutes governing cooperatives. In this Argentine context, Petrelli, following DIE theorists, argued that “teachers’ work in a given school requires that we take into account a specific conjuncture of practices shaped by the historical trajectory of the school” (2012, p. 929-930, our translation), even as we also take into account the biographies of the particular teachers. However, whereas other scholars tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of teachers’ work, Petrelli (2010) tried to show how the teachers she studied became proletarians (and thus like other workers rather than distinctive).

Coburn, meanwhile, has examined in a series of publications how U.S. teachers worked together to make sense of a major reform imposed by the state. In this case, the “state” was the state of California, and the change was a shift in the late 1990s from
comprehension-based reading instruction to teaching standards that placed more emphasis on teaching letter-sound correspondences. This was a major reform, although it did not impact teachers with the same force as the later rounds of accountability reforms that directly threatened teachers’ jobs.

In the articles we focus on, both Coburn (2001a) and Petrelli (2012) used ethnographic methods, although Coburn reported her methods in great detail, while Petrelli referred only indirectly to her several years of fieldwork. Both examined teachers’ work beyond the classroom—as U.S. teachers redesigned curricula or as Argentine teachers managed their schools.

Coburn’s aim was to examine how teachers experienced the state mandate. She concluded that the teachers interacted collectively to make sense of it and that different informal networks of teachers within the school interpreted and incorporated change in very different ways. Petrelli, on the other hand, aimed to show in her article how “state presences” (plural) affected the structuring of teachers’ work in the new cooperatives. She concluded that teachers experienced the state in a variety of ways; in particular, the elementary teachers focused on the loss of the rights and duties of the official status of teacher, while the secondary teachers debated whether it was right that the state subsidize them as a private school.
Again following Noblit and Hare (1988), we first identified each ethnographer’s metaphors for the object of their study, their theoretical perspective, and their key findings (Table 5.2). Then we asked whether each metaphor from one study could be translated into a metaphor from the other study. In the first two cases, we think that they can. As Table 5.2 suggests, the object of both studies seems similar. Coburn (2001a) focused on teachers’ work—specifically, how the “environment” affected “teachers’ work in classrooms” (p. 146) and how teachers “worked together over time” outside the classroom (p. 152), through formal meetings and informal conversations, to make sense of the proposed reforms. Petrelli, too, extended the notion of *el trabajo docente*, which she named explicitly, beyond teachers’ work inside classrooms. However, in her case she used the concept to evoke the teachers’ status as workers and their working conditions.

Likewise, at the theoretical level, both studies built on the central metaphor of the social construction of reality. Coburn (2001a) described the teachers as doing “collective sensemaking” of the incoming reform (p. 145), elsewhere linking this concept to Berger and Luckmann’s notion of the “social construction of reality” (Coburn, 2001b, p. 17). Petrelli (2012) likewise used the notion of *la*
construcción social (p. 933). Coburn’s preference for the term collective sensemaking fits well with her focus on the face-to-face work done by particular groups of teachers as they tried to fit the reform into their existing practices. Petrelli’s use of “social construction” has a broader focus, particularly because she argued that the state itself is a social construction, “a confluence of practices, processes, and their effects, lacking any institutional fixedness” (2012, p. 935; our translation).

However, the key metaphors for the findings do not translate; in fact, the two scholars located the state differently, using two opposing metaphors in what Noblit and Hare (1988) would call a “refutational synthesis.” Coburn framed the state as outside the school, referring to it as the “policy environment,” which for her included “district, state [that is, California], and the larger debate about reading instruction” (p. 149); she described policy as “messages about reading in the environment” (2001a, p. 150). It is also interesting that for Coburn the “state” seems to be about mere talk (“debate,” “messages”), which, as we note below, she said some groups of teachers managed to ignore. In contrast, Petrelli’s central point was that teachers experienced “las presencias estatales en las escuelas” (2012, p. 928) [state presences inside the school], as they shaped the content of textbooks, enforced the statutes that governed teachers’ rights and those that governed cooperatives, and sometimes offered subsidies.
In two related metaphors, Coburn and Petrelli likewise expressed different perspectives on questions of power. Coburn described the teachers as “gatekeeping,” that is, maintaining autonomy vis-à-vis the reform the state expected them to implement. When teachers clustered with “like-minded” colleagues, the different clusters of teachers “made different sense of the reading [textbook] series and ended up using it in entirely different ways,” and one pair of teachers, in a clear example of gatekeeping, rejected the reading series entirely” (Coburn, 2001a, p. 157). In other words, seeing the state as outside the school, she described this group of teachers as closing the gate to keep it out. She did not point out that the state had exercised power by initiating the discussions of reform in the first place. In contrast, Petrelli drew on Marxist social theorists, notably Althusser’s vision of education as an apparatus of state control. Citing Ezpeleta and Rockwell (1983), Petrelli wrote, “State normativity and control are always present,” even though “they do not totally determine the web of interactions among actors or the meaning of observable practices” (2012, p. 933; our translation).

On the one hand, then, this U.S. study and this Argentine study drew parallel pictures of teachers’ work extending beyond the classroom and specifically shaped by the state. Both also described policy and the state itself as social constructions and therefore as dependent to some extent on the collective work of the teachers who
interpreted them. However, describing a situation of much heavier consequence for the teachers, Petrelli acknowledged the power of the state, whereas Coburn implied a much greater sense of autonomy for the U.S. teachers in her study. Coburn avoided any theorizing about power. As a result, she may have underplayed the impressive power of California’s Board of Education to dictate the official curriculum, however teachers might be able to subvert that mandate. What we need to wonder is, Why the difference in analysis? Is it because the situations were really different? Did the California teachers really enjoy more autonomy than the teachers of Buenos Aires? Or does the difference lie in the observers’ lenses, that is, in their theoretical perspectives? Did Petrelli see state presence when it was not really there, because of her reading of Althusser, or did Coburn not notice that the state was very much present inside the California schools, because her theories did not take power into account? This “refutational synthesis” invites us to look more closely for the operation of the state inside U.S. schools, although we might also ask whether Argentine teachers practice any gatekeeping to try to manage the state’s control.

**BECOMING A TEACHER**

The third theme we examine is the experience of becoming a teacher: What leads someone to take up teachers’ work, and what is
involved in that process? As mentioned, we found the preservice education of teachers to be a prominent and growing theme among U.S. ethnographers. The study of teacher education could be a good way to examine the development of *saberes docentes*, as has been done by the Brazilian ethnographers cited earlier (Arnoldi, 2014; Sarti & Bueno, 2007; Zibetti & Souza, 2007). However, U.S. studies tend to focus not on the learning of theories and pedagogical strategies but, rather, on the development of identity as a teacher. A number of U.S. ethnographies also address the challenges of preparing prospective teachers, who are usually White, middle-class women, to teach for social justice, that is, to teach public school students equitably and rigorously (e.g., Cornbleth, 2010; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2001) when those students, particularly in cities, are often impoverished and may be English language learners (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Meanwhile, in some Latin American countries, as part of the policy focus on teachers, states have required continuing education for all teachers, and these teachers have returned to being students, to get a diploma and/or to improve their skills. For example, in Brazil, the national law of education approved in 1996 (Law 9394/96) determined by 2007 all teachers working in basic education (that is, from early child education through middle and high school) should be trained at the tertiary level. When this law began to be applied (around 2000),
preschool and first- to fifth-grade teachers, who had been previously trained in secondary-level schools (equivalent to the old normal schools), had to return to school to earn new certification at the university level. As a result of these requirements for continuing in-service education in Brazil, and similar requirements in Argentina and other countries, teachers’ work has been expanded significantly. Ethnographers have responded in Brazil with ethnographic studies of teacher education, usually focused on the continuing education of practicing teachers rather than the induction of new teachers. Indeed, in a survey of 236 studies on teacher education in Brazil, only 14 concerned beginning teachers (Papi & Martins, 2010).

**Comparing Two Studies of Becoming a Teacher**

Although I (Belmira Bueno) have studied continuing education for teachers like my Brazilian colleagues, I have also examined the preservice training of teachers and, like many U.S. ethnographers, the choice to become a teacher. Here we compare Sally Galman’s (2009) U.S. case study with my study of becoming a teacher in Brazil (Bueno, 1996, 2005). We chose Galman’s work because it is part of a thorough, multicase ethnography of prospective teachers in three teacher education programs in the United States (see Galman, 2012).

Both studies focus on the process by which students chose to become teachers, asking how and why students made that choice. As
part of a larger study (2012), Galman (2009) examined the experiences of 34 preservice teachers enrolled from 2002 to 2004 in the school of education at a large public university she called “Mountain University,” or MU, in the western United States. The example from Brazil comes from two studies. In my first study, I combined ethnography and school life stories to examine the experiences of a class of 40 preservice teachers in a course called Habilitação Específica para o Magistério (Specific Qualification for Teaching), which replaced the old, secondary-level normal school. The study was conducted in 1993-1994 (Bueno, 1996), when Brazilian first-to fifth-grade teachers were still being trained at the secondary level. In the second study, conducted 10 years later, I used interviews to revisit 19 of the original 40 preservice teachers (Bueno, 2005).

Our research methods were very similar, except that I added the longitudinal dimension. Another difference is that Galman focused on experiences in the early stage of teacher education, when the students had taken no more than three teacher education courses, whereas I studied the student teachers in the last year of their four-year course of study. However, we both used ethnographic methods, and we both also collected “stories” the preservice teachers told about themselves from their past education and as future teachers.

Importantly, the U.S. and Brazilian participants differed in age, marital status, socioeconomic status, and even gender. The U.S.
participants at this particular university tended to be relatively affluent, whereas in Brazil there were no elites in the group of preservice teachers studied; most were relatively poor. The U.S. participants were all young, whereas half of the Brazilian participants were older, up to age 50, moreover, 13 of the Brazilian participants were married, widowed, or divorced--statuses that could create quite different perspectives about the future. Half of the U.S. participants were preparing for elementary-level teaching, and half, for secondary teaching; and five of the 34 U.S. participants were men. All of the Brazilian participants were preparing to teach the initial grades at the elementary level (first to fifth grade), and all were women.

Although similar in methods, the studies differed in their theoretical concepts. Both drew on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, but I found it necessary to add Sartre’s concept of “project” to make sense of my participants’ choices. In my study, class and gender were central, whereas in the U.S. study, these categories were used but were not central. I worked with social and ideological forces, through analysis of the students’ representations or images of teaching and the ways they selected and gained entry into the program, while Galman focused on conflicts or dissonances between the preservice teachers’ original ideas and ideas promoted by the teacher education program. In my study, there seemed to be no great conflicts over the choice to teach, but this was probably because most of the Brazilian students
were driven by the need to work, which left little room for such conflicts. Although teaching likewise offers an entry to a profession for working-class students in the United States, this was not the case for the particular students at MU studied by Galman. Finally, Galman described changes in the students’ stories over time, but I did not describe changes in the stories, interpreting them from the perspective of habitus (Bourdieu), project (Sartre), and socioeconomic forces.

In spite of these differences, each study identified key metaphors that seem at first sight easily translatable one into the other (Table 5.3). First, both studies reported that the preservice teachers saw education as a supposedly “easy” course of study. For example, in the U.S. case, “like many other MU participants, Lisa . . . did not seek out what she would describe as extremely challenging courses, but was instead satisfied to perform well in courses of more manageable levels of difficulty” (Galman, 2009, p. 475). In the Brazilian case, this perspective was more striking in the case of students who had remained on the margins of education for many years or who, although still young, belonged to families in lower economic strata and therefore urgently needed to start working. Several confessed to having pursued teaching as a course of education to escape more demanding courses such as science courses, pointing out the deficiencies of their schooling because their families could not afford the best schools (private ones) or because of the strikes affecting public schools where they were
enrolled. Some said that they had attempted to enter other professional courses but had failed and ended up “falling” into the teaching course.

Second, both studies describe at least some of the participants as seeing teaching as an inevitable choice. For example, in the U.S. case, “Peggy never particularly wanted to be a teacher, though her retelling of the events presents becoming a teacher with a kind of inevitability, as if she was predestined to follow in family footsteps” (Galman, 2009, p. 476). My Brazilian study emphasized the sense of inevitability even more strongly, working with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. In Brazil, teaching was “inevitable” for the poorest, and the oldest, participants because teaching jobs were available and being a teacher was the highest aspiration an ambitious woman of their status could have. In spite of the recurring theme of inevitability, in the U.S. study it was clear that their socioeconomic status gave some freedom to the students to make choices. Likewise, in the Brazilian study, the younger students had more freedom than the older students because they could try other jobs before deciding to work as teachers. Nonetheless, in both cases the students tended to see teaching as an inevitable choice, suggesting the force of representations of women
and their social role.

Finally, both studies recognized the role of the teacher education program as a place where students brought “stories” about teaching (Galman) or “representations” of teaching (Bueno) that they had developed in their earlier lives in their families, neighborhoods, and early schooling, and also as a place where students developed new stories or representations. In the U.S. case, Galman suggested that, as preservice teachers develop a new identity and prepare for an uncertain future, “the work of teacher educators is to help pre-service teachers challenge the stories that make up their own formative lay theories and help them create new and transform existing stories” (2009, p. 470). My Brazilian study pointed out that a teacher education program is a place of intersection between past and future representations of teaching practice. The metaphors are different, but the image of “transformation” is easily translated into the image of “intersection between past and future representations.”

In spite of these seeming similarities, however, our references to the differences in the social and economic status of the U.S. and Brazilian prospective teachers suggest that this comparison is not a simple case of “reciprocal translation.” What did it mean in the U.S. case to say that teacher education was “easy,” and what did it mean in the Brazilian case, since our own observations suggest that the experience of learning to teach requires intensive and continued
training? In the U.S. case, many of the affluent students had drifted into (or drifted “down” to) teaching after considering careers in fields such as business or science, careers in which they might have succeeded if they had been willing to work very hard and to compete with unwelcoming male students. In contrast, many of the Brazilian students had reached “up” to enter elementary teaching, which was indeed easier than other courses in, for example, the sciences but was the most ambitious course open to them due to their inadequate secondary preparation.

Comparing the U.S. case to the Brazilian case made visible a larger picture of who becomes a teacher, how, and why. The two studies are not equivalent, but they can be combined into a single “line of argument,” to use Noblit and Hare’s (1988, p. 64) term; that is, we can see how the ideas of one study build, at least implicitly, on the ideas of the other, so that when combined they tell a larger story. The larger argument is that for women from more impoverished socioeconomic backgrounds and for those who were out of school for a long time, the profession of teaching as a supposedly “easy” course of study may offer one of the few opportunities, or perhaps the only opportunity, to study and enter a profession. For people who are less pressed by the need to earn a living, teaching can represent one option among others and may be easily given up. However, there is also a gender dimension here, which Galman has explored in other
work. The young women she studied often decided to become teachers only after trying and then failing to persist in some other, less traditionally feminine, line of study, such as business administration. Galman (2012) suggested that “if you aren’t allowed or are discouraged from playing and winning at the status and money game, an alternative economy of love, care, justice, and meaning is both a very attractive and quite pragmatic option” (p. 178). Also built into the story is the relative status of secondary teaching and elementary teaching, with a wider status gap in Brazil. Finally, implicitly, there is the difference between the positions of the United States and Brazil in the world economic system, which explains why the working poor, the source of most primary teachers, make up a much larger proportion of the population in Brazil.

**DISCUSSION**

**A Larger Line of Argument**

We have observed different emphases in ethnographies on teachers from the Mexican, Argentine, and Brazilian centers focused on in this chapter and the United States. Through the influence of the DIE, several Latin American ethnographers have given a great deal of attention to *el trabajo docente*, the work of teaching, while U.S. ethnographers have shown considerable interest in becoming a
teacher. There has been interest in *los saberes docentes* or cultural knowledge for teaching in both parts of the hemisphere.

These differences do not represent oppositions. Rather, one could say that different parts of this comparative essay present different pieces of a larger picture, a larger line of argument. The larger argument might take the following form: To understand teachers’ work, it is important, first, to recognize who takes up the work of teaching and why. It often feels like an “inevitable” job for women or the highest professional position to which poor people can aspire. This feminized profession, particularly elementary teaching, has often been devalued. Ethnographers have opposed devaluation by documenting *el trabajo docente*, the work of teaching, to show that it is in fact complex and challenging work. On the one hand, as research in Mexico has emphasized, the work is distinctive and draws on particular skills; on the other hand, teachers are like other workers, as recently emphasized in research from Argentina, where they have seen their wages cut, their jobs eliminated, and their status decline in the wake of economic crisis and neoliberal reforms. To do the work of teaching, teachers draw on *saberes docentes* learned in part during formal teacher education but also gained on the job. Teachers appropriate knowledge, and reshape it, from their own experiences as students, from each of the waves of reform that have touched teaching in the past century or two, and from interaction with colleagues,
students, and parents—all the while reflecting and reshaping in
dialogue with these voices. They also cope with reforms regularly
imposed by the state, which have increasingly targeted teachers
themselves as the key to solving challenges throughout the
educational system.

Piecing the studies together in this way raises our awareness of
the larger contexts affording and constraining teachers’ work: the layer
upon layer of educational reforms, the current global movement
pinning all hopes for improving students’ learning on the “quality” (or
at least the “qualification”) of teachers, and the long-term feminization
of the teaching profession and its implications for the recruitment and
status of teachers.

Although the pieces of the larger argument from these four
countries complement one another to tell a larger story, they
sometimes differ. In the following sections, we look for explanations of
both similarities and differences in the particular problems that
ethnographers study, in their theoretical frameworks, and in their
approaches to research.

**Research Topics Shaped by Social and Academic Contexts**

It is not surprising that ethnographers across the hemisphere
address broadly similar issues when studying teachers’ work, for
certain worldwide processes glossed as “globalization” create
somewhat similar situations in diverse countries, thereby encouraging researchers to take up common themes. Thus schooling is organized in roughly similar ways everywhere across the hemisphere (although the gap between secondary and elementary teachers is much wider in parts of Latin America where compulsory schooling ended, until very recently, at grade 9). Similarly, everywhere schooling has become a mechanism for either challenging or reproducing social inequalities. There is also, as mentioned, a worldwide movement to “improve teacher quality.”

Nonetheless, the ethnographic studies considered in this chapter have revealed that the national context speaks louder than the global context in choices made by researchers. Most of the themes and issues privileged by Latin American ethnographers have a close relationship with the context of poverty and the precarious working conditions of teachers in their respective countries and with the difficulties in teaching poor students, who make up the vast majority of the school population. In Latin America, poverty affects masses of the population across all ethnic groups—White, indigenous, Afro-descendants; in Mexico, more than half the population falls below the official poverty line. U.S. ethnographers have focused on new teachers’ preparation to teach children from presumed “minorities”—racial/ethnic minorities, linguistic minorities, the poor. In contrast, ethnographers of teachers’
work in Latin America take for granted that virtually all pupils are poor or of the working classes.

The teaching profession itself is not immune to poverty. As we saw, most Brazilian teachers who work in public systems are recruited from humble backgrounds; moreover, in Argentina and in Brazil, dictatorial regimes of the 1970s and more recent neoliberal policies have penalized and impoverished teachers (as well as the poor and the larger population), giving rise to themes and issues that Latin American ethnographers have embraced. Perhaps it is no wonder that Latin American ethnographers pay more attention than U.S. ethnographers to teachers’ lives as workers. While teachers in the United States may feel the pinch of accountability and state pressure on curriculum more strongly, teachers in Latin America face much more difficult working conditions. We also wonder how historical and political contexts play a role in theoretical preferences. Although many U.S. ethnographers, particularly sociologists, engage in critical theory, we noticed a reticence to talk about state power in one U.S. study that may have reflected theoretical assumptions more than reality on the ground.

Not only the larger social context but also the academic context in which ethnographers work can affect their choice of research problems. As we suggested earlier, U.S. ethnographers trained in anthropology departments probably found themselves encouraged to
study unfamiliar settings, which may explain why a number of them produced cross-national comparisons highlighting teachers’ implicit knowledge for teaching. We also speculated that the fact that many ethnographers in the United States teach in schools of education and face increasing pressure to publish may partially explain the focus of many U.S. studies on preservice teacher education.

**Theoretical Frameworks and Asymmetrical Global Flows**

As our attempts at meta-ethnography illustrated, ethnographers in Latin America and the United States embrace the same general theoretical framework—that reality is socially constructed—and many refer to some of the same theorists, such as Bourdieu, Bakhtin, and Althusser. This similarity is another aspect of “globalization,” the increased flow of information and scholars across borders—as we saw in the exchanges among Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and other countries described early in this chapter. Information and communication technologies are additional vehicles for the dissemination of knowledge and also for the imposition of issues and topics that are on the international agenda.

Yet, at the same time, the flow of ideas has been asymmetrical; Latin American ethnographers read more widely than U.S. ethnographers. We mentioned the translation of British work into Spanish and Portuguese, but translation from Spanish or Portuguese
into English is much less common. Latin American ethnographers read other Latin American scholars, many U.S.-based scholars, and also European and Canadian scholars, including Agnes Heller, Roger Chartier, Anne-Marie Chartier, Bernard Lahire, Philippe Perrenoud, and Maurice Tardif, some of whose names may be unfamiliar to U.S. readers. The asymmetry reflects, we think, U.S. and English-language dominance in academic publishing, which seems to insulate U.S.-based scholars from the need to read work published outside the United States.

**Concluding Reflections**

The differences highlighted here have stimulated us to ask some new questions as we reflect on the goal of addressing new directions for ethnographic research. For Latin American, we inquire, for example, Why don’t ethnographers use social justice as a category for describing and interpreting the social and educational inequalities in this region, and why do they write less than U.S. ethnographers about racial/ethnic and cultural differences? What might they learn from U.S. ethnographers’ experience? Latin American scholars could also learn more about beginning teachers.

For the United States, we ask, Why aren’t ethnographers paying more explicit attention to poverty and the economic precariousness of students’ families? We also wonder whether public schools in the
United States are not being rapidly relegated to the position of schools for the poor, as in Latin America. If so, what are the implications for teachers’ work? We finally ask, What might be gained by closer study of U.S. teachers’ saberes docentes, practical knowledge for teaching?

The exercise of writing in partnership provided us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in both the context of research and the education policies of several countries, which meant getting a closely focused but also broad vision simultaneously. Our experience calls to mind what Elsie Rockwell said about the use of ethnography by educators and its potential to change teachers’ practice: “The most important transformation that ethnography produces is the transformation that takes place in those who practice it” (2009, p. 30; our translation). As in ethnography, so in this comparative exercise, its most important contribution may be the transformation it effects in those who do the comparing. In our case, writing this chapter has been a chance to raise our consciousness about our own and other countries. Despite occasional difficulties of interpreting studies written in less familiar languages, embedded in unfamiliar contexts, and citing sometimes unfamiliar theorists, this comparative study was a pleasant and thought-provoking exercise, albeit one that required an open-minded commitment to understanding one another’s point of view.

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Notes

1. These were two-way exchanges. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, many Latin American exiles came to Mexico, especially from Argentina (such as Justa Ezpeleta) and Chile (Grecia Gálvez, who carried out with Rockwell the first ethnographic study at the DIE) and some from Brazil. There was also a series of comparative research projects, including Avalos (1986). At the time, the DIE was one of two centers for educational research in Mexico and the only center for qualitative work, so it became a hub for exchanging this work. In addition, younger scholars studying in England or Canada (e.g., Denise Trento of Brazil) were conduits to Anglophone literature. Susan Street introduced Connell’s (1985) book to the DIE during her Fulbright stay in Mexico. DIE scholars were also invited to give talks and courses in Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina during the 1980s, and several students
from those countries participated in the DIE graduate program (Elsie Rockwell, personal communication, January 2, 2017).

2. This was mainly the movement of the Trabajadores National Coordination de la Educación, a dissident movement within the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación.

3. After 1996, basic education in Brazil was structured by stages and modalities of teaching, including *educação infantil*/early childhood education (up to 5 years old), *ensino fundamental*/compulsory elementary education of nine years (6–14 years old), and *ensino médio*/secondary education (15–17 years old). Compulsory elementary education comprises two levels: initial grades (first to fifth) and final grades (sixth to ninth).

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