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FIELDWORK IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

Research in education using methods called "fieldwork," "participant observation," "case study," and "ethnography" has become increasingly common in the last five decades. This paper provides information about the nature of fieldwork and the types of research it can provide. Fieldwork involves being in a field setting, observing, and reflecting on what is happening. Fieldwork methods are best at answering the following five questions: (1) What's happening in this field setting? (2) What do the happenings mean to the people involved in them? (3) What do people have to know in order to be able to do what they do in the setting? (4) How does what is happening here relate to what is happening in the wider social context of this setting? and (5) How does the organization of what is happening here differ from that found in other places and times? Answers to these questions are needed in the study of educational and other formal organizational settings.

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FIELDWORK IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH^{1, 2}

Frederick Erickson, Susan Florio, and James Buschman³

Systematic fieldwork has been used in the social sciences as a research method for about 70 years. Initially fieldwork was done by a single participant observer for "basic" research purposes. Recently fieldwork is being done as well by teams of researchers for "applied" purposes, especially in educational and other "human services" organizations, but also in business organizations.⁴ Research in education using methods called "fieldwork," "participant observation," "case study," or "ethnography" has become increasingly common in the last five years. Fieldwork research involves (1) intensive and (ideally) long-term participation in a field setting, (2) careful recording of what happens in the setting by writing field notes and collecting other kinds of documentary evidence (memos, records,

¹Paper submitted for publication in the "New and Significant" section of Phi Delta Kappan.

²The College of Education at Michigan State University now offers a three-term sequence of courses designed to train fieldworkers to do research in educational settings. The fall term course provides an introduction to fieldwork theory and methods. Some students use the fall experience simply to gain an increased awareness of the uses of fieldwork, while others use it as a base of understanding for the activities undertaken in the winter and spring courses. The winter course is devoted primarily to concerns surrounding students' in-the-field data collection. Students are supervised in analysis and writeup of the data during the spring course. An introductory fieldwork course is also offered for school administrators. This paper was written to inform students and their faculty advisors about the nature of fieldwork and fieldwork research training.

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⁴For additional discussion see Administrative Science Quarterly, December, 1979, which is entirely devoted to discussions of fieldwork methods.

examples of student work, audiotapes, videotapes), and (3) subsequent analytic reflection on the documentary record obtained in the field. Fieldwork involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing, describing, and interpreting the significance of everyday events in the field setting.

The fieldwork method is heavily inductive in that specific categories for observation are not determined in advance of entering the field setting as a participant observer. The method is not absolutely inductive, however, in that the researcher always identifies conceptual issues of research interest before entering the field setting. As a result, s/he pursues deliberate lines of inquiry while in the field, even though the specific terms of inquiry may change in response to the distinctive character of what is happening in the field setting and in response to changes in the fieldworker's own perceptions and understandings of those happenings during the time spent in the field.

Fieldwork methods are best at answering five closely related research questions: (1) What's happening in this field setting? (2) What do the happenings mean to the people involved in them? (3) What do people have to know in order to be able to do what they do in the setting? (4) How does what is happening here relate to what is happening in the wider social context of this setting? and (5) How does the organization of what is happening here differ from that found in other places and times? Answers to these questions are needed in the study of educational and other formal organizational settings for five reasons.

The first need is a result of the *invisibility of everyday life*. "What's happening here?" seems a trivial question at first glance. But the most obvious, routine things about everyday life in educational settings become invisible because they are so habitual. As the proverb goes, "A

fish would be the last creature to discover water." Fieldwork in educational settings, through its inherent reflectiveness, helps educational researchers and practitioners "make the familiar strange" and interesting again. What's happening can become visible, and it can be documented systematically.

A second need is for *specific understanding in terms of concrete detail*. Answering the question "What's happening?" with a general answer often is not very useful in applied research. "The teacher in this classroom is teaching" doesn't give researchers the details they need in order to understand what is being done. Nor is an answer like the following sufficient: "The teacher is using behavior modification techniques effectively." This does not tell how, specifically, the teacher used which techniques with which children. Similarly, the statement, "The school district implemented a Title VII bilingual education program" does not tell enough about the extent and kind of implementation so that if test scores or other outcome measures did or did not show change, that "result" could reasonably be attributed to the "treatment." "What was the treatment?" is often a useful question in educational research, and fieldwork can answer such questions in adequately specific ways.

Third is the need to consider the *local meanings* that happenings have for the people involved in them. Surface similarities in behavior are sometimes misleading in educational research. In different classrooms, schools, and communities, events that seem ostensibly the same may have distinctly differing local meanings. Direct questioning of students by a teacher may be seen as rude and punitive in one setting, yet perfectly appropriate in another. Whether a principal calls a formal faculty meeting to discuss a particular issue or talks things over informally with individual faculty members may have tremendous significance in one school and no special social meaning in another. When a research issue involves considering

the distinctive, local meanings that actions have for actors in the scene, fieldwork is an appropriate method.

A fourth need is that of *comparative understanding of different social settings*. Considering the relation between a setting and its immediate social context helps to clarify what is happening in the local setting itself. The observation that "Teachers don't ask for extra materials; they just keep using the same old texts and workbooks for each subject," may be factually accurate, but this could be interpreted quite differently depending on contextual circumstances. If systemwide regulations make the ordering of supplementary materials very difficult for a particular school district, then the teachers' actions cannot simply be attributed to the spontaneous generation of local meanings by participants in the local scene--the "teacher culture" at that particular school. What the teachers do at the classroom and building level is affected by what happens in wider spheres of social organization, and these wider spheres of organization and influence must also be taken into account when investigating the narrower circumstances of the local scene. The same may be true for children in a particular school. Behavior which may be considered inappropriate in school may be seen as quite appropriate and reasonable in community and family life. Children may be encouraged in the family to be generous in helping one another; this may be seen in the classroom as attempts at cheating.

Fieldwork can identify specific points of difference between school culture and community culture and can describe these differences in ways that do not stereotype or denigrate either culture, showing how each makes sense in its own terms. This perspective can help to relieve the atmosphere of moralizing and blame which often arises in situations of cultural differences. A comparative view provides a way of thinking about culture

conflict in which accommodation by both "sides" can be seen as desirable and possible. When people's differences are understood as sensible in their own terms, accommodation to those differences is less likely to be experienced as a total surrender to someone else's unreasonable (or inferior) ways of life.

Finally, there is a need for *comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting*. There is a temptation to think of what is happening in everyday life as the way things have to be, always and everywhere. Comparing life in classrooms to life in other institutional contexts such as hospitals and factories broadens one's sense of the range of possibilities for organizing work effectively in human groups. Knowing about other ways of organizing formal and nonformal education, looking back into human history, looking across to other contemporary societies around the world, can shed new light on the local happenings in one's own school.

Good fieldworkers always look beyond the immediate setting at the same time they are looking very closely at what is happening there. The fieldworker says, "How does what is happening here compare to what happens in other places?" This awareness does not necessarily lead to immediate practical solutions in planning local change, although that sometimes happens. A comparative perspective can help to identify the genuine possibilities for change as well as the genuine constraints on it. It can help people distinguish between what is spuriously distinctive and what is truly distinctive about their own circumstances. That can lead people to be at once more realistic and more imaginative than they would otherwise have been in thinking about change.

Discovering answers to the questions fieldworkers ask can be potentially as useful to teachers, teacher educators, and administrators as it is to

educational researchers. After all, the kinds of understanding of school and classroom life that are described in fieldwork research are often precisely those that teacher educators hope to formulate and share with their students, and that experienced teachers and administrators use to guide their planning, instruction, and school management.

Fieldwork research, both as a *body of work* about the processes of teaching and administration and as a *set of inquiry strategies*, can be used by educational practitioners in a variety of ways. First, fieldwork research results in rich case descriptions of actual teachers and children engaged in the real life of classrooms and schools. Other fields, such as medicine, law, and business, have long recognized the pedagogical value of such a case literature. People often learn by example, comparing and contrasting their own experiences with those of the protagonists in the books they read. Furthermore, for the novice, rich and valid description of classroom life can extend experience beyond the few weeks, months, or years of actual practical experience.

Less obvious, however, are the ways the set of inquiry strategies--the research tools and perspectives of fieldwork--can be useful to teachers, teacher educators, and administrators. In one sense, every human being engages in fieldwork every day of his/her life. People are always dealing with the reconciliation of their own interpretations of "what is going on here" with those of their neighbors. They are all trying to behave in ways that will be sensible to others and similarly to make sense of their behavior. To that end, everyone is a fieldworker.

In fieldwork research, however, this sense-making enterprise is undertaken self-consciously and rigorously. Care is taken to make inferences about what is going on and what the local meanings are in ways that can be supported by evidence reflecting the interpretations of the people being

studied. It is not difficult to see how such skills of observation, inference, and evidence-gathering can enhance a teacher's ability to assess student needs, to interpret the behavior of students from diverse backgrounds in fair and meaningful ways, and to take more accurate stock of the classroom community that s/he is engaged in creating every day with his/her students.

Adding rigor and self-consciousness to the process of understanding everyday life requires a considerable amount of time and reflection on the part of the fieldworker. Time is taken after fieldwork each day to write up the day's notes, carefully thinking through what was seen, heard, and done. Interpretations are drawn tentatively and tested in subsequent field observations. The process is not a hasty one. This reflective attitude contrasts sharply with the press of time and task that weighs heavily on administrators, classroom teachers, and supervisors of student teachers. Practitioners are generally not afforded the luxury of time to reflect on student performances they have just seen or heard. Nor are they able to take stock of the part they may have played in those performances. But given a little time in which to reflect on one's own practice as an observant participant, acquiring the observational skills and reflective stance of a fieldworker, can enhance the professional lives of experienced school practitioners by helping make the familiar visible and the taken-for-granted significant once again.