

## ETHNOGRAPHY RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that gathers observations, interviews, and documentary data to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomena. Ethnographic study helps in developing the theoretical base for problems in education of a particular group. Ethnographic research does not often start with a strong theoretical base, not it is much concerned with theory testing. There may be theory development, but formal theory enters research only after its relevance has been established. In ethnographic research, theory emerges from the data as grounded theory- not as preconceived theory. Ethnographic study helps in the development of a theory as it does not simply tabulate that a certain behavior has occurred, but it attempts to understand what the behavior means the persons under study.*

*Keywords: Students Ethnography, Education, Research*

### INTRODUCTION

Every individual has their own beliefs about the best way to teach. How do they know that their beliefs are correct, though? Is it possible to support your beliefs with more valid evidence than just that you believe it to be true, it is true from your personal experiences, or that an expert said that it is true? Sometimes two people have two opposite beliefs, so is it possible to determine which person is right? For example, some individuals think that pupils should be given constant positive encouragement to improve academic achievement. On the other hand, other individuals think that positive encouragement will decrease academic achievement because a pupil will think that they do not need to keep putting forth effort. These are two opposite beliefs, so which is true?

Educational research is the answer to all of the above questions. Educational research uses the scientific method to study best practices in teaching. An educational research study can be conducted to answer the question: Will students learn better or worse when they are given positive encouragement? To do this, the scientific method will be employed to compare a group of students who are given positive encouragement with a group of students given negative

criticism and a control group of students given no encouragement. After receiving positive encouragement, negative criticism, or no encouragement, individuals in these groups will then be compared on important dependent learning variables such as their performance, effort, and motivation. Once this has been done, the data will provide a definitive answer about whether positive encouragement, negative criticism, or no encouragement results in the best academic performance. Educational research that uses the scientific method to collect scientific data can provide a definite answer about best practices in teaching.

The basis for educational research is the scientific method. The scientific method uses directed questions and manipulation of variables to systematically find information about the teaching and learning process.<sup>[1]</sup> In this scenario questions are answered by the analysis of data that is collected specifically for the purpose of answering these questions. Hypotheses are written and subsequently proved or disproved by data which leads to the creation of new hypotheses. The two main types of data that are used under this method are qualitative and quantitative.

Qualitative research is a broad methodological approach that encompasses many research methods. The aim of qualitative research may vary with the disciplinary background, such as a psychologist seeking to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior. Qualitative methods examine the *why* and *how* of decision making, not just *what*, *where*, *when*, or *who*, and have a strong basis in the field of sociology to understand government and social programs. Qualitative research is popular among political science, social work, and special education and education researchers.

Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that gathers observations, interviews and documentary data to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomena. Ethnography offers a way forward here, to help overcome these limitations of relying solely on interview data. Through the collection of observations, interviews and documentary data, which are triangulated (i.e. compared and contrasted with one another) ethnographic research offers a qualitative approach with the potential to yield detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomenon (actions, behaviour, interactions, beliefs). Through its use of *in situ* observations ethnographers can 'immerse' themselves in a social setting, thereby generating a rich understanding of social action. Participant observation also provides ethnographers an opportunity to gather empirical insights into social practices which are normally 'hidden' from the public gaze. Additionally, since it aims to generate holistic social accounts, ethnographic research can identify, explore and link social phenomena which, on the surface, have little connection with each other. As such, ethnographic research differs from other forms of qualitative research such as phenomenology (the analysis of interviews to understand individual's lived experiences) or discourse analysis (the analysis of talk and/or documents to understand the influence of embedded discourses).

## DEFINITION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Ethnography is the study of social interaction and culture groups, whether these groups are defined as societies, communities, organizations or teams. The term ethnography comes from the Greek words *ethnos* (people) and *graphei* (to write). The central aim of ethnography is to provide rich, holistic insights into peoples' world views and actions, as well as the nature of the location they inhabit (Hughes 1992 Hughes CC. "Ethnography": What's in a word—Process? Product? Promise?. Qual Res 1992; 2(4): 439–450 [Google Scholar]). As Hammersley (1985 Hammersley M. Ethnography: What it is and what it does. Research and evaluation methods in special education: Quantitative and qualitative techniques in case study work, S Hegarty, P Evans. Nefar-Nelson, Windsor 1985; 152–163 [Google Scholar]) stated, "the task [of ethnographers] is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices of the people in these settings. The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world" (p152).

Since its conception in the early twentieth century, ethnography has evolved into a diverse set of methodological practices used across many academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and education. The diversity of ethnographic approaches across multiple disciplines has contributed to the growing challenge in defining ethnography without reducing its complexity or bounding its multitude of conceptualisations. However, as outlined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007 Hammersley M, Atkinson P. Ethnography: Principles in practice3rd. Taylor & Francis, London 2007 [Google Scholar]), there are several key features that set ethnographic research apart from other qualitative research methodologies

## ETHNOGRAPHY AS A METHODOLOGY

Ethnography is a research methodology and as such it has a strong foundation in empiricism and naturalism (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007 Hammersley M, Atkinson P. Ethnography: Principles in practice3rd. Taylor & Francis, London 2007 ) – collectively these approaches emphasize the collection of data in naturalistic social settings. Like other forms of qualitative research, ethnography differs from positivistic inquiry, as ethnographers neither hypothesize about their research, nor does the ethnographic method set out to test hypotheses. Instead, ethnographic research is exploratory in nature. This approach means that the ethnographer goes into the field to explore a cultural group and/or explore certain social interactions. The research questions are therefore not necessarily specified at the beginning of this endeavour, instead this approach facilitates an inductive and iterative approach whereby thick description leads to the development of research questions as the social phenomenon is being studied.

Moreover, ethnography is defined by fieldwork or the active and prolonged involvement of the ethnographer with the local context being studied. Traditionally, this context was a discrete and distant location. However, with the proliferation of ethnography across academic disciplines, fieldwork is now done on a variety of settings with different boundaries, and different proximities to the researcher (Atkinson 1994 Atkinson P, Hammersley M. Ethnography and

participant observation. Handbook of qualitative research, NK Denzin, YS Lincoln. Sage, London 1994; 248–261). An example of this is provided who discusses the use of online communication and how ethnography can be applied to the study of online relationships which overcome the usual time-space restrictions associated with traditional ethnographic work (i.e. the need for the ethnographer to be in the same location at the same time as the study participants).

## A ‘PRODUCT’ OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Ethnography also refers to the written product of the research process. A key focus of ethnography is upon the writing and reporting of experiences from the field (e.g. Flick 2009 Flick U. An introduction to qualitative research. Sage Publications Limited, London 2009 ). Two main products are the fieldnotes (Section “Actioning ethnography: planning, undertaking and writing”) and the final product(s) (e.g. reports, papers, photographs, videos) that disseminate findings.

Ethnography, through the written word, provides richly described accounts of the social phenomenon being studied. As well as recounting of the methods used, these accounts also offer detailed ‘thick’ descriptions of the people, places, actions and reactions being studied, which are presented in the form of study findings. The production of these textual reports often entails a theoretical component that helps frame, illuminate and explain phenomenon under study. See the Section “Ethnography in medical education” for more details about the use of theory in ethnographic work.

Increasingly ethnographers are also producing work that uses different types of audio-visual media such as photography and film. The products generated by these methods include the use of images and audiovisual media in the socio-cultural practices as well as the visual dimension of objects, bodies, places and environments (e.g. Pink 2006).

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Ethnographic research has broad implications for many fields, including education. Ethnography in education is *the process of providing holistic and scientific descriptions of educational systems, processes, and phenomena within their specific contexts*. Ethnographic study in education helps in addressing the problems of education of a particular group (e.g. students, teachers, principals, professors, administrators, planners, etc) with respect to their culture. Ethnography is a research linked with culture and education is also a study that has culture involve in it. In the educational research, problems like the following have been dealt with observational studies of educational institutions and phenomena: school and community; schools; personnel; curriculums; and educational processes.

Ethnography has found a growing use in educational research. The main technique is *participant observation*. The researcher becomes the part of the cultural group, like of students, teachers, etc. and observes and takes extensive

notes on some aspects of their life. The participation continues for a fairly long period.

To best understand the problem of education of a particular group, a researcher spends considerable time with the group. Researcher starts learning the cultural ways the group behaves or thinks. The researcher gathers data in the setting where the participants are located and where their shared patterns can be studied for example, classroom can be a setting for learning the shared patterns of behavior of students.

**Example:** An Ethnographic Researcher carries out a study on- *How the students in a particular class respond to substitute teacher.*

## Data Collection

Ethnographer can first collect the data through any of the source:

1. Participant-Observation
2. Semi-structured interviews
3. Structured interviews
4. Key informant interview
5. Focus group interview
6. Content analysis of secondary text or visual material
7. Tests
8. Projective techniques

Ethnographic researcher will start observing how the students behave with a substitute teacher, what make them behave in that particular manner, what problems or interest they have with the teaching by a substitute teacher, etc. Ethnographer will make field notes of his/ her observations. Teachers or any other person from school administration can play the role of *key informants* that will inform the researcher about the students. Key informants can provide guidance to the researcher on where to find information and resources on topics study interest, how to access and gain participation of the study participants, and how to interpret the study findings.

## Analyses of Data:

After the data collection, ethnographer will analyze the data in order to provide a description of both the students and their classroom; analyzing patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language; and reaching some conclusions about the meaning learned from studying students, their reaction with the substitute teachers, and their behaviour in the class in following context. The analysis process involves considerations of words, tone, context, non-verbal, internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and big ideas. Data reduction strategies are essential in the analysis.

## Qualitative Description of Data and Theory Building:

After the collection and analyses of data researcher will draw some instances through observation or reflection and this will help in building

theoretical base of the study. Ethnographic research is Inductive i.e. theory comes from the culture before the data is expressed. In ethnographic research theory develops from the data as rounded theory-not as preconceived theory.

Once researcher will gain and analyze the data, he/she will provide description of the theme. He will give a detail rendering of the students and describe the scenes in the classroom in order to depict what is going on in the cultural sharing group of the students. This description needs to be detailed and thick, and needs to identify specifics. This description provided by the researcher will help the readers to understand the response of the particular group of students to the substitute teachers. In the Description part researcher will describe the following:

- a. How students behave with a substitute teacher?
- b. Do they face any problems when a substitute teacher comes for teaching?
- c. Do they become more interested in learning when a substitute teacher comes to teach?
- d. Does the teaching by substitute teacher effects students' learning or achievement level?
- e. How the students cope with the problem of discontinuation of teaching by a regular teacher?

This description by the ethnographer will help in understanding the theme of the study. This description will help in the development of a theoretical base for a particular problem in education of a particular group. Description will give the detail of the entire activity and this will help in the development of a theory for a particular educational problem.

### **Interpretation of Theme and Conclusions:**

After description and analyses comes interpretation. In interpretation, the ethnographer draws inferences and conclusions about what has learned. This phase of the analyses is the most subjective. In this section researcher will make a personal assessment, returning to the cultural theme being explored, and raising further questions based on the data. It might also include addressing problems raised in a particular selected field. In the above example of the ethnographic research in education, researcher will now interpret the already described and analyzed data. He/she will now attach a meaning and significance to the analyses, explaining descriptive patterns and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions. Here the researcher can interpret the theme in the following manner:

- a. By raising the problem of discontinuation of regular teachers in schools.
- b. By telling the advantages or disadvantages of teaching by substitute teachers.
- c. By suggesting how the students can be made to behave well with a substitute teacher.



- d. By suggesting the needs of students in order to get familiar with a substitute teacher.

Interpretation of the theme will help in developing conclusion of the study.

Other **Example** of Ethnographic Research:

A Study on ***'Poverty affects on schooling of children'***

Here researcher will collect data either through participant observation or through interview (including interview of key informants also). He /she will collect data and make field notes i.e. drawing instances from observation or other source of information. For example, researcher can draw the following instances:

*Poor students face socio-economic problems that affect their learning capacity. They also lack resources such as books, copies, pencils, schoolbag, dirty and ragged uniform etc. All these factors make teacher furious and they show indifferent attitude towards economically disadvantaged students. Other students in class room also keep indifferent attitude towards them. These students were also sometimes bullied by other affluent students. Moreover, they face various problems in their homes also, such as lack of proper nutrition, double burden of household chores, lack of attention paid by parents in their education etc. this mental and physical disturbance affects their willingness to attend school. In this way the poverty comes in the way of their education.*

After drawing such instances researcher will analyze and interpret the data and also provide a holistic qualitative description of the whole problem. After description he/she will draw conclusion in which suggestions to deal with the problem will be given by the researcher.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnographic study helps in developing the theoretical base for problems in education of a particular group. Ethnographic research does not often start with a strong theoretical base, not it is much concerned with theory testing. There may be theory development, but formal theory enters research only after its relevance has been established. In ethnographic research, theory emerges from the data as grounded theory- not as preconceived theory. Ethnographic study helps in the development of a theory as it does not simply tabulate that a certain behavior has occurred, but it attempts to understand what the behavior means the persons under study.

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