Children, youths and ethnography: education and de-centering

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Resumen

This text aims to show how ethnographic research, when it includes the participation of children and youths, delve into and renew current debates on how to address, question and understand educational contexts. I view ethnography in collaboration with children and youths as part of a collaborative trend in Latin American educational ethnography and I focus on the actuality of the distinction between research about and with this sector of the population. Moreover, through the analysis of a situation taken from ethnographic work in conducted in collaboration with children, I point to opportunities opened by this shared way to do research to access more thorough and unexplored understandings that incorporate knowledge and theories overshadowed or unknown among experts and scholars.

Palabras clave: ethnography – collaboration – children and youths – de-centering.

Introduction

This text aims to show how ethnographic research, when it includes the participation of children and youths, delve into and renew current debates on how to address, question and understand educational contexts. My starting point is a brief review of ethnography as a research approach in Latin American educational contexts. Situating the context, as we will see, has to do not only with the particularities of ethnography but also with the ways in which the children and youths participate in the studies. In turn, the ways in which the researchers install the concern about children and youths' presences in the educational phenomena and processes studied generates approaches that encompass studies of this population. The latter distinction opens up discussions in the fields of educational ethnography, childhood and youth studies, and education itself. What distinguishes ethnography *about* from ethnography *with* children

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and youths? Do the two approaches exclude each other? How can children and youths be incorporated into research studies? Does the participation and collaboration of children and youths in ethnographic research seek to understand the meanings and senses children and youths attach to their ways of saying, narrating and doing things? Does it seek to widen perspectives and interpretations about the social worlds being studied? What do they contribute vis-à-vis life in schools Do they aim to have an impact on the ways of teaching and learning?

Oriented by this way of problematizing, the argument I make points towards considering the possibilities opened to explore how the participation of children and youths in ethnography enriches the ways of questioning, contributes to producing original knowledge and expands the interpretive horizon of the field of educational research.

Ethnography, education and participation in Latin American contexts

The ethnographic studies of educational processes gained momentum in Latin America in the 1980s as an alternative clearly framed within the so-called qualitative-style research (Anderson & Montero-Sieburth, 1998; Gomes & Gomes, 2012; Levinson, Sandoval & Bertely, 2007; Rockwell, 2001), which optimized the qualitative approach by proving to be able to identify educational problems associated to social and cultural reproduction, school failure, schools and everyday life, teacher's work, class and school knowledge (Nolla Cao, 1997). Furthermore, most of ethnographic research was conducted in regards to and/or articulated with popular education approaches and political, social and cultural movements seeking to demand rights, recover public education, oppose all kinds of authoritarianism and defend democracy. The latter oriented a great number of researchers towards studying regional and national educational contexts – especially schools – and, in many cases, establish close links with actors in educational-school communities. Some of these links materialized in the collaboration of teachers, professors and researchers in

> experiences of co-research as a group work modality that combines *processes of research and collective processes of co-participation in actions* with individuals who are involved in a given social problem with which one is working (Achilli, 2017: 11).

Experiences like these, conducted by groups in different countries in Latin America, left a deep mark on the development of educational ethnography in Latin America – although it is seldom mentioned in historical surveys of this approach to research into education. Since the mid-1990s, experiences of ethnographic research in collaboration in our region have continued to expand and deepen as a way to produce knowledge on educational realities and have in-

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corporated children as collaborators and co-researchers as well (Milstein, Clemente & Guerrero, 2019). As is well known, this impulse that led to children and youths being incorporated is also associated with a political, cultural and social context that had intense repercussions in the academic fields of social and human sciences. These included the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, which made the phrase "listen to the voices of the children" a sort of omnipresent mantra for activists and political and political consultants and a symbol of the commitment of the modern welfare state (James, 2007: 261), as well as the prominent role assumed by children and youths in different kinds of political struggle in several Latin American countries in recent decades. This coincided with the emergence of the fields of study of childhood and youth in sociology and anthropology, which fostered research in which children and youths participate as interlocutors with agency. This is the context in which I propose to think about ethnography, studying educational processes and phenomena with their participation.

Ethnographic educational research consists of a process of exploration, study and comprehensive description of educational phenomena and processes conducted by one or more researchers with *native* subjects to produce new knowledge, a way of apprehending otherness and produce Others in order to be able to construct questions on educational aspects of the society being studied. For the ethnographer, this always includes paying attention and continuously examining the places and positions occupied by interlocutors and ethnographers while conducting their research (from the drafting of the project to the presentation/communication of the results), since the places and positions that frame, generate and – many times – define the relationships and contexts of those relationships of our interlocutors with each other, with other individuals and groups and with us are an essential part of what is being documented, of the construction of the data, of the analyses and of the theoretical development.

Actuality of a relevant distinction: *about* or *with* children and youths?

Conducting research *about or with* children and youths is on the one hand a way of synthesizing a questioning of the relationships we establish with those we build links with when we do field work, a way to assert that the *natives* are subjects and not objects of study. On the other hand, it condenses a questioning of approaches to generic or imprecise objects – the child or the youth – that essentialize, homogenize and neutralize the concrete and tangible presences of children and youths whose traits, behavior, ways of communicating and interacting, etc., often bear little relation to the abstractions that seek to encompass them. It also refers to arguments around the positions taken by researchers about their interlocutors, both during fieldwork and when researchers represent them in their texts. Unlike the first questioning mentioned, in this one researchers regard their interlocutors as subjects, but define their study of childhood, youth, children, etc., usually incorporating some form of participation for children and youths.

However, the distinction between *about or with* children and youths, with the debates it implies, is not always made explicit in educational research, although most of it is crisscrossed – in one way or another – with such discussions. How children and youths are and how this affects particularly what they do, say, feel, think, and know when we study in educational contexts is unavoidable. When it is not made explicit, the probabilities of understanding the processes being researched in a biased and distorted manner grow and increase. Making their presences explicit brings with it the possibility of incorporating versions of facts and opinions shared only among them, of making them visible in discourses in which they are essentialized, of understanding how the children and youths' personal and group experiences gravitate over the larger human dramas and the ways in which they wonder about their meanings in the circulation of school knowledge (Arroyo, 2004: 115), among other varied contributions.

After this brief description of these distinctions, I will elaborate on collaborative ethnography with children and youths: "an invitation to make the construction of knowledge produced by ethnographers in and with the field in a manner that is explicit and agreed upon with our interlocutors-collaborators" (Milstein, 2015a: 196).

Ethnographic research in which researchers refer explicitly to the participation of children and youths in a part of or the whole research process implies incorporating them into our teams in order to share tasks linked to the formulation of research questions, field work, or co-authorship. One way or the other, this ethnographic practice mode involves an expressed and intentional shared generation/production of knowledge among academic and non-academic – in this case, children and youths – researchers, and is presented as part of the process results, keeping always in mind that this sharing is in no way limited to a methodological feature, nor does it restrict research topics to those associated to childhood or youth: quite the opposite, it leads us to delve more deeply into issues and comprehensions of wide and varied topics of social life.[1]

Ethnography, collaboration, and de-centerings

Researchers who conduct ethnographic research as a constant part of our activity practice different modes of de-centerings. We seek to move away from the lines of thought that center our vision and organize our emotions, perceptions and knowledge. We work on ourselves to achieve cognitive displacements that enable us to distinguish among incorporated "centrisms" – stemming from the identities that constitute us as part of a markedly unequal society – according to social classes, race, gender, nationality, age, generation, religion, and academic tradition. To do this, one of the strategies we have learned to use is the relationships of otherness, which are basic and indispensable in our empirical-theoretical ways of questioning. Thus, the question of otherness vertebrates and organizes the course of our research, taking into account that

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1 To learn more about this number of studies conducted in Latin America, see J. Jaramillo & S. Fernández (2018).

the other is not defined as fundamentally separate; the other is together with "us" the perplexity of sharing a time, a space and the same *coevalness* (Fabian 1983) […] encompassing the anthropologist himself in his relationship with otherness (Peirano, 1995: 109).

Conducting ethnographic research in education with the collaboration of children and youths potentiates the possibilities of that necessary de-centering and, in doing so, also opens opportunities to de-center themes, that is, taking some distance from themes that constitute themselves as central and predefine what is researched and how it is researched in the field of education. An example[2] will show more thoroughly the latter de-centering I have alluded to.

In 2005 I did some field work in Villa La Florida, Quilmes, a town located 25 kilometers to the south of the city of Buenos Aires, as part of research conducted to "acknowledge the presence of political practices within schools as expressions of an extra-school political field" (Milstein, 2009: 17). From September to December of that year, five girls and a boy aged 11 to 14 who attended one of the town's elementary schools did some field work with me. The aim of our team work was to learn about and record versions of life in the town and the school, starting from the perception the children had of a social world dominated by what the adults felt, said and did.[3] This shared work with the girls turned out to be crucial to understand that the presence of political practices that astounded me were an evidence of the political shift that has taken place in public school in Argentina in recent decades.

Some of our field work activities were done in groups and others individually. Then we shared photographs and audio recordings[4] in team meetings – the children seldom wrote anything down, while I always shared my written field notes. To document in writing our experiences and conversations, I transcribed the recordings of our field activities and our meetings, after which we read these documents thoroughly and I also took notes. The girls read part of these documents driven by the interest of the moment, made comments on some phrases, generated associations with other stories, and added details to one of the anecdotes already written, among many other modes that emerged and that, in some cases, turned out to be the beginning of a shared path of reflection that was interesting for the study we did together and for my own field work. That was what happened one day that we listened to the audio of an interview one of the girls had with her aunt Ana. At the end of it there was the following exchange:

"She's lucky. She works in politics," said Patricia.
"Why?" I asked.

2 The situation presented here as ethnographic evidence was published with some changes in a chapter I coauthored (Milstein, Clemente & Guerrero, 2018).
3 About this experience of ethnography in collaboration with children see Milstein (2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2015a, 2015b).
4 We used analogical photographic camera with basic lenses and cassette recorders.

"And she's always in the office," said Camila with a smile.

"With papers, she speaks on the phone, she receives people," added Leonor.

"Who does she receive?" I asked.

"She gives the milk to people in line and other things and they go and chat. Sometimes she has to take them out because the office fills and she cannot attend so many. They say the other day Cristina[5] was there," said Leonor.

This conversation led me to think about the importance attached to this activity. For the girls, this was one of the jobs in which the people in the town were employed. I knew that Villa La Florida was one of the places where the effects of the economic and social policies implemented in the 1990s could be observed more clearly. A large number of men and women worked in big and important factories that closed or reduced their activity considerably, leaving around 40% of the population unemployed. This situation, together with a visible process of destructuration and disorganization of the national and provincial States, led to social protest in the streets that culminated in 2001 with a *pueblada*[6] that took place locally and had an effect on the everyday life of unemployed workers in Villa La Florida. Many public schools were the places where family groups carried out communal activities: soup kitchens, exchange of clothes, spaces where people who had been evicted from their homes could sleep, etc. At the same time, in many towns such as the one where I was conducting my research patronage networks were expanding led by bosses and *punteros* of the two larger political parties consolidated in the early 21st century, in spite of the widespread mistrust and rejection of the world of "politics" and "politicians", expressed in the *pueblada* of 2001.

When I listened to Anna's interview with her aunt, who told her that she worked in politics, and participated in the girls' conversation that followed, I noticed the dimensions that this novel form of employment in politics had in the families of a community whose main economic activity was linked to glass and textile factories, paper mills, candy shops and small retailers.

Patronage networks have been understood by the most recent anthropological and sociological studies as part of the response organized by the State to generate social containment and exert control when faced by unemployment and social protest, and also to feed an "intermediary" (Auyero, 2001; Svampa & Pereyra, 2003) political structure. However, I did not believe that I could consider Ana's aunt case in this light.

A few days after this conversation, I met again with the group in a park. Our activity was to tell stories. In the middle of it, a car in which someone called on people to vote for his candidate rolled down the nearest avenue.

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5 Cristina Kirchner, candidate to the Argentinian Senate in the elections of October 2005.

6 In Argentina, the word *pueblada* refers to popular uprisings and revolts in which thousands of people demonstrate in the streets.

One of the kids began to imitate the voice he heard. We laughed a lot and one of the girls said "It must be Ana, your aunt".

I looked at the niece and she said:

See, my aunt, the one who gave her the things was Cristina, and she told her that she gave her so that they voted for her. Because my aunt is in that situation, because she needs a home, because she has nine kids, and she can't cope with all that. She is in a situation, and the one who gave her the stuff told her that she had to vote for Cristina, my aunt said. After that they gave her the office, which is a better job.

The conversation continued with comments about their parents and one of the girls said

For me politics doesn't matter because I'm a foreigner and we can't vote and my mom is never going to get a job like that from Paraguay and she works cleaning, she doesn't come home because she sleeps at work.

I went back to my notes, trying to incorporate this way of seeing politics as a job, but not linked to watching changes in the political structure. For these children and their families, politics was an opportunity for social mobility compared to Jobs cleaning houses or *cartoneo*. It was the salary that they saw, it was their family lives and the lives of children like them. It was politics as part of everyday life in this social world where factories were no longer there. I wrote then that with these girls I had attained a more accurate comprehension that broke from the idea that politics was reduced to spheres of social life. Rather, it had to be studied in the behavior of those who are not supposed to have the conditions or attributes to do it. Thus, I was able to fully understand to what extent also places like a school could be studied incorporating politics as a dimension that revealed relationships, disputes and tensions that belied the neutrality of schools. Schools had to be understood as places run through by politics and the political.

By way of closing

In this work I paid attention to some of the effects that result from shared work between researchers and children and youths, when the latter intervene actively and in a purposeful way in the processes of production of knowledge required by educational ethnography.

I began by reviewing how to incorporate children and youths into educational ethnography in Latin America. It enriched a collaborative mode that had been experimented with good results. The aim was to integrate non-academic thinkers, such as teachers, into the ethnographic process of production of knowledge on education. The collaboration of children and

youths – who are not intellectual workers – with ethnographers ran along these lines and led to experiences that, altogether, have been going on for over two decades.

I tried to show what these experiences have yielded with regard to two issues being discussed that have an impact on the fields of educational research and childhood and youth studies, as well as others I have not mentioned in this paper.

One of these issues has to do with the participation in research and is often presented as a conundrum: *with* or *about* children and youths. It is a relevant debate insofar as it requires stating views about childhood and youth that have a affect directly the possibilities of incorporating or not children and youths as interlocutors and/or co-researchers, reduces or broadens the issues and problems that may be addressed jointly by researchers and children and youths, and changes the positions and roles of children, youths, and adults – not only researchers – in social relationships.

The other issue has to do with de-centerings. Within this very broad debate I considered the researcher and the research issues/problems such as they are constituted in the field of education. I pointed out that one aspect is linked to the fact that a necessary condition for ethnographers is to displace ourselves from ways of perceiving, feeling, acting and thinking in order to produce othernesses. I related the other aspect to a rethinking of the research problem. Through a description of a situation experienced with the girls with whom I conducted field work, I showed how an aspect of the approach to politics and the political in a school context was irreversibly modified.

Thus, conducting ethnographic research in collaboration with children and youths opens up opportunities in the field of educational research to transform subjects – both adults and children and youths – who, after being part of a process of ethnographic study, experience transformations that modify their ways of being in their social worlds. It also increases the chances of the ethnographic approach to move away from educational problems and issues framed in normative-prescriptive terms, and thus access more exhaustive and unexplored understandings that incorporate knowledge and theories overshadowed or unknown among experts and scholars.

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