

# **Democratic Education: Ethnographic Challenges**

Edited by

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## **Introduction**

### **Marketisation of democratic education: ethnographic challenges**

**Tuula Gordon, Elina Lahelma and Dennis Beach**

Liberal democratic politics have emphasised the importance of education in the development of a just society with equal opportunities for all. Researchers have often shared the hope that society can be improved through schooling, whether their explicit or underlying assumptions about equality have been about social class, gender, 'race'/ethnicity, sexuality or other dimensions through which inequalities are constructed, or a combination of any or all of these. Studies have demonstrated that equality has not been realised even when it was an explicit aim. Whilst equality has not completely disappeared as an expectation directed at schools, new politics and policies of education have emphasised accountability, standards and individual choice. Concerns for efficiency have been expressed, and through such concerns major changes in schooling systems have been justified.

Today new policies of restructuring, with tendencies like striving towards accountability and closer links between school and industry are prevalent in many countries and continents. There have been tensions between state control and market forces for some time (Whitty 1989). The writers of this book take issue with marketisation of education through an examination of the impact of changes that have been imposed on education.

The idea of democratic education emphasises equality, and a structural way of realising it has been through the comprehensive system without selection. Nordic countries have been a particular example of strong commitment to comprehensive education inspired by social democratic politics. However, these achievements too are now being undermined through educational restructuring. In this book the new education policies and practices of restructuring are discussed and challenged. We trace what happens in schooling when democratic education goes to market, or when, as members of the British Hillcole Group suggest, New Labour's rallying cry 'education, education, education' becomes 'business, business, business' (Allen *et al.* 1999). Nevertheless, as Dave Hill (1999) argues, it is also important to pay attention to discontinuities between New Labour and Neo-Liberal and Neo-Conservative education policies, as well as to the continuities.

This book uses ethnographic stories of action within theories of context to explore and analyse the impact of educational politics and policies on teaching and learning and on the perceptions of people involved in educational and schooling processes. These stories have been specifically crafted by a group of ethnographic writers in order to try to reveal, interpret and analyse particular elements of every day encounters in various educational settings, ranging from

preschool to primary and secondary schools and teacher education. Each ethnography is guided by its own specifically identified theory. The theories used are manifold, ranging from poststructuralist, to Marxist, interactionist and feminist perspectives.

Several themes appear in chapters of the book. These are linked in various ways with each other, although most specifically through the particular context that is made articulate and to which each of the chapters speaks in some way. This context is that of educational restructuring. It is focused in the chapters in relation to developments in several OECD countries, the Nordic welfare states and the UK in particular. The chapters are empirically grounded in rich ethnographic data.

We suggest that ethnographic research can challenge inequity by contributing to critical analyses of social and cultural processes, practices and meanings in educational sites. The book addresses the concept of education restructuring in a number of concrete examples. Our argument is that ethnographic studies where the researchers participate in the cultures that they study provide a powerful critique of the effects of New Right policies on everyday life at school. Inequality is manifested in a range of practices despite efforts of those teachers who include equity in their aims.

We focus on how restructuring affects the supply of a high quality of education to all citizens as a democratic right, and on how spaces for democratic agency are currently being reconstituted and constricted. Ethnographic studies demonstrate New Right politics and policies in action and thus challenge New Right politics and policies in a particularly powerful way.

### **Marketisation of education in welfare states**

New Right politics and policies have spread from the US for example to Australia, New Zealand, Europe and Nordic countries. They have circulated widely for many internal and external reasons. Internal reasons consist largely of the alliance between Neo-Conservatism and Neo-Liberalism that provides a promise to many political interest groups, whether, in the context of education, they have been interested in maintaining standards and promoting the competitive edge of the nation state, or whether they are more concerned to marketise education (c.f. Ainley 2000; Hillcole Group 1997). The aim is to promote the cutting edge of the new increasingly hierarchical work force, capable of crossing borders in a globalising world.

Schools and students are becoming targets of more exact evaluation and competition. Competition and increasing opportunities for differentiation are meant to enable suitably inclined school students to increase their potential. Others are expected to provide the labour force that maintains the infrastructure of society and necessary services. The reasons for the spread of marketisation in education that are external to the New Right politics include the failure of social democratic

education to deliver the just, equitable education it promised (Arnot and Gordon 1996; Kenway and Epstein 1996). The New Right has criticised social democratic politics for inflexibility, inefficiency and falling standards. Increasing choice and individualisation have been argued to offer advantages to children, and particularly middle class families have taken advantage of these. The increasing costs and inefficiency of the welfare state were argued to cause insurmountable problems. Individual liberty was emphasised in the US, the problems of the 'nanny state' were discussed in the UK, and the control exerted in the context of the welfare state was thought to thwart self-reliance and initiative of citizens in the Nordic countries.

The supply and availability of education, as a welfare service, is being politically, economically and legally restructured through the creation of quasi-markets and networks for controlling flows of services that extend capitalisation processes into and within the public sector. These dimensions of change can easily be seen as aspects of the complex processes of transfer and patterned interaction between agents, nodes of activity and sites of power in the movement of physical artefacts (such as commodity products), people, symbols, tokens and information across global time and space (Castells 1998, 1999; McMurtry 1998; Lindblad and Popkewitz in this volume). They speak loudly now even in the former 'shop-window democracies' of the Nordic countries, in and to just about every domain of social life. Market rationality – particularly the concept of market competition – is important and markets are still seen as rational tools for controlling the provision of services. Competition between suppliers is emphasised.

Although many people stopped believing this idea long ago, education systems have previously been expected to promote social justice and liberation, with increasing social and personal advantages (c.f. Davies, Holland and Minhas 1992). These expectations are expressed in different forms, and means to realise them vary between countries and between historical periods. Capable, active citizens were to ensure welfare and progress in their own societies. On the other hand, education has also been expected to maintain the status quo, to ensure stability of societies and to integrate children and young people into the prevailing social system of distribution of goods and services. These aims are contradictory and tensions between them have been played out in various ways in different countries at different times (Donald 1992; Brosio 1994; Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2000).

In the Nordic countries the development of welfare states and the establishment of comprehensive education were central projects aimed to ensure social citizenship. Social-democratic education policies in the 1960s and 1970s addressed social class and (particularly in Norway, Sweden and Finland) regional equality of opportunity. There were many silences in such policies, such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Such silences in their part contributed to the New Right challenge of failing standards. Standards, efficiency and accountability became catchwords that spread from one education system to another. Better standards, more efficiency

and increasing accountability of course are not problematic in themselves, but if the policies allow for increasing inequality and polarisation, claims for general improvement can hardly be made (c.f. The Hillcole Group 1997).

The Nordic countries provide a particularly interesting location for exploring the advent and onward march of the New Right in education. These countries have had a far stronger commitment to social justice and to policies for ensuring equality than for example the US and the UK. Educational rhetoric still emphasises equality – although at times there are slippages and the rhetoric is forgotten. But a new rhetoric of accountability, standards and efficiency has begun to occupy the centre stage in politics and policies.

### **Ethnographic insights**

We argue that ethnographic research can provide new insights for challenging the triumphant New Right hegemony. Such studies move beyond the rhetoric to examine what is taking place in the daily life of educational institutions. Through ethnography we can discern both how promises have been fulfilled and how they have been broken. We can explore processes of differentiation and practices of new modes of control at the school level by listening to voices in the field, from teachers, school students and other staff working in schools. Ethnographers are able to explore what is changing and how, and what stays the same. In the words of Angela McRobbie (1996), ethnography can provide insights into the material matters despised in research that has been influenced by the most strident post-modern textual turns (c.f. Roman 1993; Hey 1996).

Ethnographic traditions, as editors of the *Handbook of Ethnography* suggest, ‘are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social and cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation’ (Atkinson *et al.* 2001: 4). Increasing emphasis has been paid to writing of ethnographies after discussions on representation initiated by James Clifford and George Marcus (1996) and Clifford Geertz (1966). Indeed Stephanie Taylor (2002: 1–2) suggests that nuanced and non-reductive writing is an important distinguishing feature of ethnographic research. At the heart of ethnographers’ writing today is strong reflexivity and a recognition of the responsibility of the researcher (Spencer 2001). Questions of power are often raised in ethnographic research, hence critical traditions such as feminism have incorporated ethnographic approaches (Skeggs 2001). Ethnographic research in educational settings has been practised across the whole of the previous century, but intensified greatly during the last four decades. Most of the research has been taking place in compulsory schooling, but other educational institutions have been explored too, such as pre-school and teacher education. Educational ethnographies first started in the US, but became increasingly popular in European countries too (e.g. Delamont and Atkinson 1995).

Although established as early as the 1970s, there has been a growing interest in ethnographic research in education in the Nordic countries since the mid 1990s. A Nordic network on ethnographic studies was founded within the Nordic Educational Research Association in the early 1990s and, with support from the Nordic Research Academy, it has organised successful symposia and postgraduate courses. The current book is initiated within this network and most of the authors are members of it.

For us, ethnographic educational research takes place in or on educational institutions through observation and participant observation (e.g. Delamont and Atkinson 1995; Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2001). Researchers themselves are important tools in the research process, as they acquaint themselves with educational settings through immersion in the daily lives of the participants. In that sense ethnographers' selves are implicated in the process, as they observe, learn and understand local cultures through their own experiences in the field (e.g. Coffey 1999). The process of making sense of organisational aspects, practices, cultures, conflicts and commonalities challenges the ethnographer to understand cultures through learning them and remaining detached as well as being participants.

The methods used by ethnographers in their immersion in the daily life as well as their efforts to see beyond the intricacies of micro-processes include observation and participant observation recorded as field notes, collection of documents, informal discussions, interviews, photography and video recordings. The data is often qualitative, but quantitative data is collected in ethnographies too. In recent years the array of techniques has become increasingly widespread (Atkinson *et al.* 2001). Ethical issues are important in all research, but the ethnographic approach in particular demands sensitivity and reflexivity, as ethnographers, with their everyday experiences in the field, can harm individuals, groups or institutions (c.f. Murphy and Dingwall 2001).

It is the immersion in the daily life of institutions and their participants that gives ethnography a particular edge in obtaining insights into what changes and what stays the same in the context of educational politics and the politics of restructuring. The chapters in this book provide a looking glass into the tensions and contradictions New Right policies have introduced in educational institutions. Actors in the field experience frustrations about introducing changes and about controlling the direction of those changes. It is their voices that ethnographers try to hear and disseminate. However, most ethnographers do not simply tell a (more or less) gripping story about the field, with researchers themselves at the centre—they aim to analyse the practices they encounter, and endeavour to render them into analytical narratives that tell different stories than policy research or questionnaires and interviews. The aim here is to produce theoretically informed methodology (Willis and Trondman 2000). Although these are not necessarily better stories, we suggest that they are particularly poignant in demonstrating the organisation and practice of differentiation.



Ethnographic research has always included critical voices, including theorisation of tensions between structural constraints and human agency. Increasingly critical ethnographers have been interested in cultural critiques of dimensions of difference that are infused with relations of power. They have addressed traditional practices in schooling, gender differentiation, inequalities based on social class, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, sexuality and age. Whilst a great many ethnographies are conducted in the liberal humanist framework, many ethnographers adopt a more critical approach (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2001), hoping that their research can contribute to social change. In the tradition of this genre our aim is to challenge the forward march of New Right politics and politics by examining their claims through an exploration of practices and processes in educational institutions.

### **Contextualised practices**

This book aims at suggesting the usefulness of ethnographic research in analysing the impact of educational politics and policies into practices and processes of teaching and learning, as well as into perceptions of the people involved. We describe, analyse and interpret everyday encounters in various educational settings, such as preschool, primary and secondary schools and teacher education. We are concerned with the intentions, practices and reflections of teachers and students, and we are also concerned with texts.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of the chapters in the book draw on diverse theories; for example, poststructuralist, postcolonial, Marxist and feminist perspectives are common, and we are also inspired by critical, textual or material ethnography. Ethnographic data is used to introduce theoretical issues, for example discussions of temporality, as in the chapter by Daniel Sundberg, or spatiality, which is a theme of Tuula Gordon and Janet Holland, or the infiltration of education by market thinking and neo-liberal values, as in the chapter by Dennis Beach. The context for our analyses is primarily the marketisation of welfare and educational restructuring in the Nordic welfare states. The focus is, however, widened to England in the crosscultural perspective provided in the chapter by Tuula Gordon and Janet Holland, and to several countries in the comparative perspective adopted in the chapter by Sverker Lindblad and Thomas S. Popkewitz. The latter authors suggest for ethnographers the importance of seeing the global in the local, historicity of context.

The impact of the politics and policies of restructuring in constructing and addressing *difference* in school is one of the foci in several chapters. Sverker Lindblad and Thomas S. Popkewitz write about categories and distinctions that

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order and differentiate individuals and groups, normalising particular types of people. These categories are provided not only in the sites of the school, they are also *globalised*, for example through international uses of statistics in educational reporting and expertise. This discussion provides a background for understanding the similarities in patterns that emerge in in-site ethnographies demonstrated in other chapters. Teachers and students construct the border between what is normal and ordinary, but these constructions are not only made locally. Anne-Lise Arnesen analyses how a grade-9 girl with special needs is defined and described by her teachers and constructed as an outsider in the school-for-all. Thomas Gitz-Johansen suggests that non-Danish ethnic background is represented within a general discourse of social problems when students are talked about. In both cases, families are brought into teachers' talk about children, and the idea of a normal Danish or Norwegian family is constructed through explicating what is not normal (messiness, lacking support for daughter's career, mother having several partners). As Elina Lahelma and Elisabet Öhrn argue, it is clear that what is regarded as normal school achievement for girls and boys differs.

Ethnicity, gender and social class act as categories of difference in school that can be *emphasised, negotiated or challenged* in every day lives, but they cannot be avoided. In her chapter, Sirpa Lappalainen demonstrates the flexibility that pre-school children have in making differences in relation to nationalities and ethnicities, and suggests that this is enforced rather than challenged in the official preschool. Policy analysis and case studies in secondary schools in Finland and in Sweden, discussed in the chapter by Elina Lahelma and Elisabet Öhrn, suggest that gendered and class patterns in informal relationships prevail; gender difference is also maintained through sex-based harassment. Daniel Sundberg argues that the possibility and capacity to act as self-regulated learners is easier for middle class students. The overall view that these chapters suggest is that, in the era of restructuring, inequalities are not necessary challenged in Nordic schools, but differences in relation to ethnicity, class, gender and special needs are maintained and repeated in teachers' talk and classroom interaction, as well as in the informal relations of young people.

Another theme that circulates in several chapters is the question of student *agency*. Whilst the rhetoric of restructuring emphasises individuality and possibilities for choice, the limits of agency are suggested in several chapters. Ulla-Maija Salo's chapter demonstrates how children in a Finnish primary school are positioned and position themselves as 'pupils' during the first weeks in the school. This position is acted and practised by students, and a border between 'school-like' and 'play-like' is made clear by repetition. School knowledge proves to be stronger, more serious and more certain than the children's knowledge. Tuula Gordon and Janet Holland bring the concept of physical space in schools and suggest its impact on students' possibilities of autonomous agency in schools' time-space paths. This analysis also provides a background to Daniel Sundberg's discussion of temporality in his chapter on the reform of the school timetable in

Sweden. The reform of the school timetable is one example of restructuring, and the author suggests the ambivalences of freedom and control that practices based on it demonstrate.

Sundberg's chapter suggests that the idea of the self-regulating learner, one of the *motif major* of the new wave of education reforms in recent years, is not easy to achieve. This issue is also considered in Dennis Beach's chapter on the teaching and learning of mathematics within the reformed Swedish upper-secondary education. He presents aims and ideas of individualised, free and flexible learning that teachers emphasise in their speech, and demonstrates that these ideals are far from the actual outcomes. Inger Anne Kvalbein, in her longitudinal study of teacher education in Norway, shows how the current trend of control has led towards a form of student freedom from the demands of strictly regulated education, but not necessarily to the development of processes of reflective knowledge in the teachers-to-come. These case studies demonstrate from different angles that the impact of education reform is rarely as anticipated. The expressed aims of policies of restructuring on individuality are not seen in the everyday practices and processes at schools.

*Nationality* as a silent backdrop of the rhetoric of multiculturalism is the third theme that is evoked in several chapters. Classroom observations and teachers' interviews suggest the prevalent strength of ethnocentricity in the Nordic classrooms. This theme is opened up by the analysis by Tuula Gordon and Janet Holland of the construction of citizenship in schools. They use the concept 'nation space' to explore how nation and nationality are culturally constructed and repeated as taken for granted, for example through the constant presence of flags and maps. The actual efforts to bring the ideas of multiculturalism into school practices may turn out to be, as in the case described in the chapter by Sirpa Lappalainen, celebrations of Finnish nationality because differences between different ethnicities are manifested more than similarities. Gender is used in the constructions of nationality (see e.g. Yuval-Davies 1997), and this also happens in schools, for example by emphasising the good position of women and thus suggesting the inferiority of some immigrant cultures, as in the chapter by Thomas Gitz-Johansen. In their chapter Elina Lahelma and Elisabet Öhrn dismantle the myth of 'strong Nordic women'.

Taken together the chapters in the present book demonstrate the *ambivalences and controversies* that seem to be prevalent in contemporary Nordic schools. Anne-Lise Arnesen suggests ambivalence in the ideology of school-for-all which 'locks in' children, because the school is compulsory, but simultaneously 'shuts out' some of them from meaningful learning. Controversies between the ideas of individual, self regulated students, explicated as an aim in the new educational policies, and the actual practices and routines in schools are demonstrated from different angles; in starting primary schools (Salo), as well as in restructuring schools' time-tables (Sundberg), teaching of upper-secondary Maths (Beach) or teacher education (Kvalbein). Ambivalence between the ideas of multiculturalism

and nationality also exist in the schools (Gordon and Holland, Lappalainen). Although these chapters reveal some examples of successful intrusions of New Right ideology into schools, there also is evidence of patterns that do not change.

### **From local back to global**

Dave Hill (2001) argues that it is necessary to note the consistency in globalisation and restructuring in terms of the accumulation of resources and power. This is important in a book built around ethnographies, because there is a possibility that the ethnographic focus on small-scale everyday interaction misses the historical specificity of the lived moment and the embedded patterns of complex social phenomena. An ethnography that only attends to micro details will not adequately address the changing nature of work globally, nor the effects of restructuring on the quality of life, on learning or training. The ethnographic cases in the present book pay attention to micro detail. However, they do this in a way that does not suspend consideration of the broader contextual interests of the restructuring of service organisations.

Globalisation and restructuring are important means by which global forces and ideologies impinge directly (via for example the media, advertising, text books and so on) on the lives of national, regional and local populations where learning is formally (as in schools) or informally (as at the shopping centre) significant. They also represent processes by which global forces and ideologies influence the formation of education policy at national and local State levels. Teachers deliver a curriculum, select students and test for standards in line with local and national policies and are complicit in the neo-liberal education projects of globalisation. But there is always some room for creativity and resistant agency, as well as for sidestepping, negotiating and withdrawal (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma 2000). These dimensions for resisting the pull of the forces of globalisation and restructuring are focused on in the chapters of the present book. Though the spaces for oppositional activity may be squeezed quite tight, they can never be fully closed off (cf. Willis, 1999, 2000).

The present book addresses the concept of education restructuring in a number of concrete examples from the Nordic countries. It focuses in particular on how restructuring affects the supply of a high quality of education to all citizens as a democratic right, and on how the spaces for democratic agency are currently constituted and constricted within education.