

Key Themes in the  
Ethnography of Education  
Achievements and Agendas

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## two

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# one page of notes and no hypotheses: the spyglass of anthropology

I sat next to Heather at a girls' basketball game one evening. She was sitting in the bleachers with the rest of her prep friends front and center, cheering on the team, many of whom were part of their peer group. She kept glancing at the corner of the gym where several adults were standing... I asked her if she was expecting someone, and she whispered 'My dad said he might stop by and check the score. I hope he doesn't'. (Bettie, 2003: 149)

Before I went to Marswick Comprehensive in 1996 I was told by my teacher that they did not say prayers and I would go to Hell. (I went to an RC primary School.)

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### INTRODUCTION

In the quote from Bettie (2003) an American high school girl from a working-class family, whose school friends are all much richer, expresses the 'problems' she has with managing her life: balancing the norms and values of both her working-class home and her middle-class school-friends. Such tensions have been reported from many US high schools for 60 years. A different kind of culture clash is captured in the school transfer story: Roman Catholic primary school teachers, focusing on the ungodly atmosphere in the secular secondary school, who threaten eternal damnation.

The first part of the chapter title is a quote from Blanche Geer's famous paper 'First days in the field' (1964) in which she demonstrated the intellectual importance of the early encounters between the fieldworker, the setting and the actors in it, and outlined the 'familiarity problem'. In the subtitle, Zora Neale Hurston (in *Mules and Men*, 1935: xvii) described how she was much too familiar with the African-American folklore of Eatonville, Florida until she had acquired as a student of Boas 'the spy-glass of Anthropology' to look through. This chapter outlines one of two

key concerns about good ethnography that run through the whole book: Good ethnography needs to fight familiarity.

Geer formulated the familiarity problem, highlighting the difficulties faced by beginner ethnographers who often find the research processes hard. These ‘untrained observers... can spend a day in a hospital and come back with one page of notes and no hypotheses’. The hospital was too familiar: ‘everyone knows what hospitals are like’ (1964: 384). Geer’s paper was a demonstration of how she ‘fought’ the familiarity of American college life at the start of the research project that eventually became Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968). It was simultaneously an account of how the researcher’s initial encounters with a field setting can be disproportionately valuable, as long as the researcher works hard to construct and then to abandon working hypotheses (or foreshadowed problems as they are often termed), and a plea for treating the familiar (be it hospital, college or classroom) as anthropologically strange.

Geer’s second point was subsequently taken up and reiterated by her collaborator, Howard Becker (1971) in a now famous statement, originally tucked away as a footnote added to a paper by the educational anthropologists Murray and Rosalie Wax (1971):

We may have understated a little the difficulty of observing contemporary classrooms. It is not just the survey method of educational testing or any of those things that keeps people from seeing what is going on. I think, instead, that it is first and foremost a matter of it all being so familiar that it becomes impossible to single out events that occur in the classroom as things that have occurred, even when they happen right in front of you. I have not had the experience of observing in elementary and high school classrooms myself, but I have in college classrooms and it takes a tremendous effort of will and imagination to stop seeing only the things that are conventionally ‘there’ to be seen. I have talked to a couple of teams of research people who have sat around in classrooms trying to observe and it is like pulling teeth to get them to see or write anything beyond what ‘everyone’ knows. (Becker, 1971: 10)

11

In other words, these researchers are not working hard enough to develop good working hypotheses or foreshadowed problems, but are focusing on the familiar aspects of the setting. In the paper to which Becker added the footnote, Wax and Wax called for ‘a solid body of data on the ethnography of schools’ (1971: 4). We now have that solid body of data, but Becker’s diagnosis still holds true. Becker and Geer followed up their own manifesto by studying learning in a range of non-educational settings such as hairdressing (Geer, 1972) but did not do any research that made schooling ethnographically ‘strange’. They did, however, make medical education in the USA, and the liberal arts

undergraduate experience ‘unfamiliar’. Geer and Becker’s insightful comments have not received the attention they deserve. Over the subsequent four decades, other scholars have made parallel statements, but the problems Geer set out have persisted. The next section outlines the history of the familiarity diagnosis.

## RECURRENT DIAGNOSES

A parallel statement to Becker’s was being made in the same year in the UK by Michael F.D. Young (1971), who argued that educational researchers were not, in practice, defining their own research-based research problems (i.e. making education ‘strange’) but were accepting the problems defined by practitioners. His specific concerns about knowledge, curricula and power are central to Chapter 11. Young’s impassioned call for a shift from *taking* problems to *making* them launched a short-lived, but highly controversial, flourishing of sociological research on the curriculum, called the ‘new’ sociology of education in the UK (Bernbaum, 1977). The wider issues implicit in Young’s (1971) manifesto were not, however, taken up by Anglophone ethnographers.

12

A parallel disquiet to Becker’s was voiced in the USA when there was renewed enthusiasm for educational ethnography (see, for example, Spindler, 1982). Wolcott published his ‘Confessions of a “trained” observer’ stating that: ‘Central features of education are so taken for granted that they are invisible’ (1981: 253). He wrote that it took a colleague from outside educational research

to jolt me into realizing that the kinds of data teachers gather ‘on’ and ‘for’ each other so admiringly reflects the dominant society and its educator subculture. (Ibid.)

This colleague was ‘particularly intrigued’ by the research, very fashionable in the USA in the late 1970s, about ‘time on task’ and commented:

How incredible... that teachers would measure classroom effectiveness by whether pupils appear to be busy. How like teachers to confuse ‘busy-ness’ and learning. (Ibid.)

The fashion for studies of pupils’ ‘time on task’ (Denham and Lieberman, 1980) has waned, but the problem is still prevalent. Wolcott then pointed out that he and his educational research colleagues

[h]ave not systematically encouraged our students... to go and look at something else for a while. We keep sending them back to the classroom. The only doctoral

student I have sent off to do fieldwork in a hospital was a nurse-educator who returned to her faculty position in a school of nursing! (Ibid.)

Wolcott too is implicitly calling for robustly formulated working hypotheses about educational settings and explicitly calling for scholars to treat schools and schooling as anthropologically strange.

During the 1970s, ethnographic methods began to be more widely accepted in educational research than they had been when Geer, Becker, and Wax and Wax were writing (Jacob, 1987; Atkinson, Delamont and Hammersley, 1988). While that growth took different forms in the USA and the UK, in both countries the problems outlined by Geer and Becker were not tackled. In 1980 Paul Atkinson and I drew attention to the gulf between the two predominant types of ethnographic research being done in education: by anthropologists of education in the USA, and sociologists of education in the UK. Despite the differences between these two ethnographic traditions, they shared a failure to make their own education systems problematic. That gap had not been previously documented, nor its implications explored, as Metz (1984) was later to point out. The pattern of isolated voices raising the familiarity problem was perpetuated when George and Louise Spindler (1982) rehearsed similar ideas reflecting on their 30 years of fieldwork, in a paper subtitled 'From familiar to strange and back again'. As summarised by Parman (1998), the Spindlers compared 'the experience of doing ethnography in familiar and "exotic" settings'.

Each setting imposes its own anthropological dilemma: first how to observe situations so familiar that it is almost impossible to extract oneself from one's own cultural assumptions and be objective; the second, how to observe situations so different from what one is used to that one responds only to differentness. (1998: 305)

Parman continues that 'making the familiar strange' is 'the ultimate goal of every anthropologist' (1998: 395). What is striking about the Spindlers' formulation is that they, unlike Becker or Young, *do* mention some strategies to fight it, such as the use of film.

Ethnographic research on schools and classrooms continued to flourish during the 1980s, conducted by anthropologists and sociologists. Most repeated the pattern of failure: they did not start with robust foreshadowed problems designed to make schooling anthropologically strange; nor did they achieve strangeness in their eventual portraits of teachers and pupils. During the 1980s the textual conventions and rhetorical genres used to publish qualitative research came under increased scrutiny (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Atkinson, 1990, 1992, 1996, 2012; Spencer,

2001; Atkinson and Delamont, 2008). Educational ethnographies were one suitable set of texts for genre analysis (Delamont and Atkinson, 1990) but educational ethnographers did not reanalyse classic texts to scrutinise their assumptions, such as familiarity.

Anthropologists of education did not address the familiarity problem, nor the need for well-formulated foreshadowed problems, for nearly two decades after Wolcott (1981), which may be why Lave and Wenger (1991), and their three key concepts of legitimate peripheral participation, situated learning and communities of practice, received a lot of attention when they called for researchers to study education *outside* schools. Lave and Wenger wrote as if they were completely unaware of the anthropology of education, and the sociological calls to ‘fight familiarity’. Their manifesto claims an originality for their diagnosis that it did not, in fact, have.

When, in 1999, *Anthropology of Education Quarterly* celebrated its 30th birthday, key figures returned to the topic. Hess (1999: 401) recapitulated the ideas of Wax and Wax (1971), and raised the issue of whether anthropologists of education ‘are still asking good rather than trivial questions, whether we are asking the right questions’ (1999: 400). John Singleton (1999) argued that after 30 years the anthropology of education still needed to be better connected to anthropological work outside schools. He wrote: ‘The critical confusion of education with schooling continues to bedevil us’ (1999: 457). He cited Lave and Wenger, and drew his readers’ attention to his own research on apprentices learning Japanese folk pottery and ethnographies of occupational training and socialisation in Japan across a range of other, non-school, settings (Singleton, 1998b). That collection demonstrates all the points made about learning by Lave and Wenger; reinforces the importance of the Geer (1972) collection; and lives up to the calls for treating education as *not* coterminous with schools. It has, however, been resolutely ignored by educational ethnographers (Eisner and Peshkin, 1990).

I returned to the theme of fighting familiarity after an absence of several years, contrasting four types of educational research, and arguing for what I called ‘Lebanon Gate’ research that took researchers out of their ‘comfort zone’ into unchartered territories characterised by fighting familiarity and, at some intellectual risk, trying to find genuinely new insights (Delamont, 2005a). Frederick Erickson (2006: 236–7) made a parallel point when he argued, drawing on Nader (1975) that anthropologists should study ‘up’ rather than ‘down’: ‘to visit and document the lives of the privileged and powerful’. He points out that ‘Nader’s injunction would seem especially apt for us’ (anthropologists

of education). Yet, with the exception of Alan Peshkin (2001), Erickson continues, this is rarely done. He could have included Proweller (1998) and Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1983).

In 2007, Herve Varenne edited a special issue of *Teachers' College Record* on educational anthropology. In his editorial essay he remarks:

The great paradox of work on education by social scientists is that it is mostly about schools... work on education is, paradoxically, rarely about education. (2007a: 1539)

Varenne approvingly quotes Bourgois's dictum that 'the streets are almost always more powerful than the schools' (1996: 1562).

These examples, of repeated largely ineffectual attempts to highlight a perennial problem, make depressing reading. The popularity of Lave and Wenger (1991) did not have any greater effect on ethnographers, not driving them to fight familiarity, stop focusing on schools, or devise more robust foreshadowed problems, than Geer (1964) or Becker (1971) had had. Gamradt (1998) in an intriguingly titled paper 'Romancing the gallstone' (p. 71) reports that she met some 'outright hostility' (p. 76) from colleagues when she decided to focus on the advanced continuing professional development of surgeons rather than on schools. As she explains:

Educational research in general remains heavily invested in the study of K-12 practitioners and students. Working on the problem of how highly successful, high-status professionals learn takes one well outside mainstream educational anthropology. Studying up represents a serious and perhaps threatening violation of convention. We are experts at the careful compassionate study of the deviant, the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised, the other. (Gamradt, 1998: 76)

In part that may be due to the general lack of clearly specified strategies for achieving the goal of fighting familiarity: the focus of the next section.

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## STRATEGIES TO FIGHT FAMILIARITY

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This section sets out six strategies which will help ethnographers fight familiarity, particularly by providing the raw materials from which to construct robust working hypotheses or foreshadowed problems. Self-conscious strategies to create such hypotheses which enable, even require the researcher to fight familiarity are essential. The six strategies to fight familiarity proposed here are as follows:

1. Revisiting 'insightful' educational ethnographies of the past.
2. Studying learning and teaching in formal education in other cultures.

3. Taking the standpoint of the *researcher* who is ‘other’ to view the educational process, for example, by doing ethnography from the standpoint of participants from a different social class, a different race or ethnicity, a different gender, or a different sexual orientation.
4. Taking the viewpoint of actors other than the commonest types of ‘teachers’ and ‘students’ in ordinary state schools. This can mean focusing on unusual settings in the school system, such as schools for learning disabled pupils, or the deaf or blind, or in the UK Welsh or Gaelic medium schools, or ‘other’ actors in ordinary schools such as secretaries, laboratory technicians, campus police, cooks.
5. Studying learning and teaching outside formal education settings.
6. Using intermediate theoretical concepts from other areas of the discipline to re-energise educational ethnography (for example, the concept of the *flâneur*).

In other publications, ethnomethodology has been proposed as a seventh strategy (Delamont, 1981; Delamont and Atkinson 1995; Varenne, 2007a and 2007b). That approach, originating with Garfinkel (1967), is not explored here because it requires a radical rethinking of social science far beyond the scope of this book. I now offer powerful examples of how each of the six strategies can serve to strengthen educational ethnography addressing two agendas; firstly fighting familiarity in general, and secondly fighting *fashion*. The educational sciences ‘forget’ research very quickly and consistently reinvent the same wheels. Educational research urgently needs to cultivate the *longue durée*.

16

### **1. revisit the insightful educational ethnographies of the past**

Educational researchers in general, and educational ethnographers are no exception, operate with a very short timescapes or time horizons. Fashions come and go, terminology changes so that previous research seems obsolete, and work is quickly forgotten. It is salutary to revisit apparently obsolete, neglected, out of print ethnographies, using them as a lens through which contemporary educational settings can be re-envisioned. Here I offer three specific examples of currently neglected work that, if reread, offer ways to fight familiarity, and develop powerful foreshadowed problems for contemporary research. My three themes are: urban schooling; age as a factor in teacher–pupil relations; and uneasy relations between teachers and educational ‘innovators’. An equivalent example about the hidden injuries of class in the US High



School is central to Chapter 8. Many others could be substituted, as, for example, Foley's (1996) critical reflections on the 'silent' Indian.

The first example of a research area where greater attention to the findings of earlier researchers would, at a stroke, improve the current studies, is urban schooling in the USA. A leading journal, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, carried many papers during the years 2000–2010 focused on how ill-prepared newly qualified teachers were for the multi-racial, multi-lingual, poor students they were required to face in urban schools. These papers showed no historical understanding of the problem they addressed, which has certainly existed since the 1950s, and been studied by excellent researchers. Apparently forgotten is a series of papers by Becker and Geer on Chicago public school teachers published in the 1950s and 1960s, (Becker 1952a, 1952b; Geer 1966a, 1966b). In those articles, all the issues about the difficulties of teaching poor children in American city-centre schools were vividly described. The papers by Merryfield (2000), Sconzert et al. (2000), Mueller and O'Connor (2007) and Siwatu (2007), for example, all lack any recognition that similar problems arose in the USA 50 years ago. If scholars today recognised the deep-seated and longstanding gulf in America between the recruits to inner city teaching and the lives of the pupils they are required to teach, in terms of class, race, language, experiences of poverty, violence, bad housing, poor health and diet, and a highly developed set of skills and knowledges we can gloss as 'street-smarts' their teachers lack, the diagnoses and the solutions proposed would be better. Lois, one of the African-American college students studied by Winkle-Wagner (2009), left her teacher preparation course at a mainly white midwestern university because she decided it was not trying to bridge that gap. She remarked that all the lecturers skipped the chapters in the text books on 'diversity'.

The second example is grounded in the research on age as a factor in teacher–pupil relations in the American high school, with a consequent 'anti-pupil' rhetoric of 'decline' souring education. Warren Peterson (1964) published research on how three cohorts of women teachers in US high schools related to students and to the curriculum. The women interviewed were then in their 20s, 40s and 60s. The careful attention to gender and age is exemplary, and was years ahead of its time. Issues of the interaction effects of age and sex on teacher beliefs and practices were clearly fundamental to teaching *then* and are equally important in recent decades. Peterson's teachers who were in their 60s were entirely convinced that the students they had taught 40 years before were infinitely superior, and tackled a much more demanding curriculum, than their pupils in the 1960s. It appeared to the paper's readers, however,

that the change was as much in the teachers' shared life experiences with their early pupils, and their 'distance' from those they were facing when they were in their 60s. The older women were lamenting the loss of their own youth and energy, as much as any decline in American schooling, exactly the way Herzfeld (1983) found older Cretans bemoaning 'semantic slippage and moral fall'. The research on memories and memorials is explored in Chapter 5, but the importance of age differences and associated beliefs can be seen as perennial. For example, Datnow's (1997, 1998) careful study of how one powerful group of older white men destroyed a school reform reveals the complex interactions between age, sex, and power in the school hierarchy five decades after Peterson's work.

A third area is where attention to important research from earlier eras concerns attempts to 'reform' schools and curricula. In 1977 Wolcott published an insightful research study on the uneasy relationship(s) between classroom teachers and the educational technocrats introducing waves of 'reforms'. Wolcott's careful, painstaking investigation revealed that the two groups worked in different occupational sectors, with contrasting occupational cultures and little or no appreciation of each other's goals or practices. Any scholar setting out to research attempts to drive through any type of school reform would learn a good deal from that relatively unknown work recently reprinted (Wolcott, 1997 [2005]).

These three examples are sufficient to show how close inspection of any classic ethnography from 30 or 40 years ago will inevitably lead to the formation of several working hypotheses about continuity and change. If these working hypotheses, when pursued, seem to produce findings of continuities, then the reasons for the persistences can be explored. If there seem to have been social changes, then documenting them will, in itself, improve the modern ethnography.

## 2. formal education in other cultures

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It may seem paradoxical that educational ethnographers are frequently parochial, and fail to read, cite and *use* ethnographies of schooling and higher education in other cultures. Exemplary scholarship that would be sovereign in the fight against familiarity and the formulation of foreshadowed problems is ghettoised and neglected. Such research done by fellow countrymen and countrywomen is ghettoised into 'the anthropology of education' or 'comparative education', equivalent research done by scholars from other countries is not registered at all.

There are many examples of neglected studies that, if studied and utilised, would enrich American and British school ethnography. There

are three ethnographies of schooling in France (Anderson-Levitt, 1987, 1989; McDonald, 1989; Reed-Danahay, 1996) which illustrate this point. McDonald's fieldwork in Brittany includes data on the Breton language school movement (called *diwan*, or seed) rarely cited by Anglophone ethnographers yet packed with contrastive and comparative material, which should be read by those focused on bilingual or mother tongue schooling. Reed-Danahay and Anderson Levitt's (1991) comparative article about French teachers' conceptions of how difficult it is to teach in the 'backward countryside' and in the 'troubled city' has resonance for the USA. Spindler and Spindler (1982) published an account of German schooling in the 1950s that is rarely cited but would generate good foreshadowed problems.

Singleton's *Nichu* (1967), about a Japanese secondary school, is a salutary contrast for Americans: those adolescents did *no* paid work, *no* household chores and had *no* social life at all. In contrast is the one study that highlighted the paradox of the American high school as a basis for parties, sport and hanging out, rather than academic work. Gibson's (1988) ethnography about Punjabi immigrant high school pupils in California who did not have paid jobs or 'party' (though they did do many chores for their families) showed that the teachers regarded them as maladjusted because they did not attend the class picnic or the prom. How intriguing that *teachers* would demand that adolescents 'party' and do paid work, rather than do homework, in order to be 'good Americans'.

An Australian analysis of how a whole school of clever boys lived out a principled rejection of the school curriculum is also a salutary read. Bullivant's (1978) ethnography of Chassidic Orthodox Lubavitcher Jewish boys in an Australian high school, who 'knew' that the Australian state curriculum contained 'nonsense' (because it contradicted the bible) but scored high marks in it anyway, has lots to teach us all. How did a school produce such high exam marks from a pupil group entirely resistant to the curriculum?

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### 3. take the standpoint of the 'other'

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Taking the standpoint of the 'other' is a valuable research strategy. All educational researchers should try to understand how the setting is perceived by, and experienced by, people who come to it, and live in it, from standpoints other than their own. This is partly an ethical and political point, drawing upon Becker's (1967, 1970) classic question 'Whose side are we on?'. His core concerns are relevant in 2014, although a contemporary scholar may find its unproblematic treatment of the researcher a

little perplexing. Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003) explore how that paper should be read in a new century. For my purposes here, the word to be emphasised is 'we'. Too often the ethnographer has been a straight, highly educated, middle-class white or Jewish man from the USA. With only a few exceptions the research has been done from that standpoint (but see Foley, Levinson and Hurtig, 2001 for a gradual change in this). Work by gay and lesbian authors, by women, and by non-whites has been less common, and, once done, less widely known. The work from other countries that does get known in the USA also tends to be by straight white men. For example, the only two British ethnographers regularly cited in the American literature are Lacey (1970) and Willis (1977), when, for example, Cecile Wright's (1996) work, from the standpoint of an African-Caribbean woman, provides a far more useful comparator for American writers. The *Handbook* edited by Denzin, Lincoln and Smith (2008), focusing on critical and indigenous methods, could provide fresh approaches for future ethnographers as long as the caveats expressed by Foley et al. (2001: 48–49) are recognised.

#### 4. study unusual schools, or other actors in the usual schools

20

The vast majority of educational ethnographies focus on pupils between the ages of 6 and 18 in state schools. Researchers rarely focus on schools for those with physical or mental disabilities, on the expensive schools that educate the children of the elite; on rural schools rather than urban and suburban ones. The few studies of religious schools, for Jews, Catholics, Evangelicals, Protestants or Muslims are not used for contrastive purposes as they should be. In the UK there are Welsh and Gaelic medium schools yet the very existence of these is not known by most ethnographers and there are no ethnographic monographs on them, nor are there scholarly evidenced-based comparisons of everyday life inside them and in English-medium schools. Educational ethnography would be far better if the research on the unusual, exceptional settings were systematically drawn upon to provide contrasts that force the researchers in the 'normal' school to think about it in novel ways.

An alternative way to achieve that critical distance in mainstream schools is to focus on non-teacher and non-pupil actors in the 'normal' setting. Ursula Casanova's (1991) ethnography focusing on secretaries in Arizona elementary schools is a (rare) example of such a study. Finding a view of an educational institution from the school office, or the nurses' room, or the cupboard where the cleaners are based, is unusual in educational research. Yet in the sociology of health and illness it has been done regularly since Roth (1963) studied a TB sanatorium working as an orderly.

## 5. education outside 'education'

Many settings outside formal schooling and universities are the location for teaching and learning. When there is research on that teaching and learning it rarely crosses into the mainstream of educational research, and many such settings have hardly been studied at all. That is why this book focuses on higher education and non-formal settings as well as schools. The explanatory power of ethnographic research on learning and teaching away from formal institutions was one reason for the popularity of Lave and Wenger, and their concepts of communities of practice (COP) and Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). In 1988 at a conference in San Diego they presented their first formulation of the ideas published in 1991 as *Situated Learning*, stating:

'schooling is usually assumed to be a more effective and advanced institution for educational transmissions than (supposedly) previous forms such as apprenticeship'. (1991: 61)

Lave and Wenger argued that this generally unexamined belief should be made problematic in two ways. Firstly, apprenticeships and other learning models should *not* be assumed to be less effective and advanced than schooling. Secondly, research on learning and teaching in non-school settings was badly needed. They had decided to 'take a fresh look at learning' (1991: 39) because 'issues of learning and schooling' have 'become too deeply interrelated in our culture in general' (pp. 39–40). Their longer-term goal was to rethink 'schooling from the perspective afforded by legitimate peripheral participation' (p. 41). Lave and Wenger therefore focused on five case studies of apprenticeships not in the education system of the USA at all: American newcomers to Alcoholics Anonymous; American apprentice butchers; American naval quartermasters; Gola and Vai tailors in Liberia; and midwives among the Yucatec.

Spindler (1967) had argued for exactly the same strategy for many years: cultural transmissions in Palau, Ulithi, Hano, Tiwi, Gopalpur, Inuit, Sansurion, Guadalcanal, Anatolia, and a Philippine *barrio* were rehearsed to encourage American educational ethnographers to think outside the box of the school.

Since the original book was published in 1991, Lave and Wenger have taken separate intellectual paths, and there has not been a concentrated programme of ethnographic research and publication on learning in non-school settings. The concepts of LPP and CoP have, rather, been mainstreamed into conventional educational research (see, for example, Timmons-Flores, 2009). This kind of mainstreaming does not provide

the robust foreshadowed problems and weapon to fight familiarity that the original book promised. The potential insights from the application of Lave and Wenger's ideas to a variety of unusual educational settings was shown in a special issue of *Teaching and Teacher Education* (Vol. 26 No. 1) in 2010, which include research on, among others, prisons, Hindu priests, skateboarding and *capoeira*. Paul Atkinson and I (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995) drew on such disparate examples of teaching and learning outside schools and higher education as trainee mediums in Brazilian *umbanda* (Leacock and Leacock, 1975), *capoeira* academies in Salvador de Bahia (Lewis, 1992; Downey, 2005), a madam training novice prostitutes to maximise their earnings (Heyl, 1979), sword-swallowing and fire-eating (Mannix, 1951) and an Albanian Bektaski Tekke (monastery) in Michigan (Trix, 1993). These are entirely parallel to the Lave and Wenger case studies both in their apparently 'exotic' and therefore apparently irrelevant focus, and in the insights they actually provide for mainstream schooling.

Instead of repeating these parallels, I have used a new example to illustrate my argument: focused on self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs among experienced and novice teachers. Teacher self-efficacy beliefs have been a focus for considerable research effort in the past decade and are a regular topic of academic papers in *Teaching and Teacher Education*. The subject would benefit from ethnographic research: do teachers or student teachers with a heightened sense of self-efficacy *behave* differently in the classroom, the faculty lounge, or staffroom, the yard or playground, or on the playing fields, when compared with their less well-endowed colleagues? The large body of research is only based on what teachers say about their self-efficacy beliefs, or what they write on questionnaires, rather than how they act, and interact, and react in their workplace. High quality ethnographic work on those with high levels of self-efficacy in education, and in other contexts, would strengthen the area immeasurably. The published research on teachers and self-efficacy also lacks imaginative ideas about how the low levels of self-efficacy beliefs in novice or experienced teachers might be raised. Yet there are bodies of research in settings away from schools or teacher education programmes on how learners experience a raised sense of self-efficacy. In the ethnographic literature on neopaganism, and especially that on feminist Wicca, there *is* a body of research on self-efficacy and its creation, accentuation and retention, which provides a challenge to the prevalent ideas in the educator subculture.

Magliocco (2004) researched a variety of neopagan groups in the San Francisco Bay area, including the famous Reclaiming Witchcraft Movement founded by Starhawk. For the purposes of making the beliefs

of teachers anthropologically strange, Magliocco's account of how her conversion to, and research on, neopaganism transformed her own sense of self-efficacy is particularly vivid and thought-provoking. The best example is one private ritual she describes (2004: 117–118) arranged for her precisely to create and strengthen her self-efficacy belief. Magliocco was at the time divorced, desperately homesick for the site and people of her doctoral fieldwork in Sardinia and the 'authentic' research she had done there. She had been moving around the USA in a variety of temporary posts for nine years, trying to get a tenure-track appointment. Her closest friends in a small neopagan coven in which she was apprenticed helped her devise a ritual that would change her:

...from a stranger to a native, from an outsider to an insider, from a position of insecurity and rootlessness to one of security, prosperity and belonging, through a series of symbolic transformations. (Magliocco, 2004: 118)

The room was set up with four altars at the compass points, also signifying earth, air, fire and water. Magliocco entered the circle in the heavy clothing she had worn in the Midwest, carrying symbols of her old life. She then moved round the four altars. At each she shed some of the winter clothing and discarded the symbols of her old life. At each altar her friends handed her symbols of the new life she wanted such as 'hawk feathers, symbolic of intellectual freedom and my ability to soar' (p. 118). Small items of Californian food and drink were taken, to put California into her body, and they planted a rose bush to signify groundedness. Magliocco describes this as 'a piece of performance art that enacted, through the use of symbols and actions, changes I wanted to see in my own life' (p. 118).

A fortnight after this ritual Magliocco got called to interview at a Californian university for a tenure-track post, and was eventually appointed. Her pagan friends were confident that the ritual was instrumental in getting the job, but *only* because she had already made several job applications in California. They believe that magic only 'works' if the sensible steps to produce the desired outcome are taken in the material world. It is not necessary to have any neopagan beliefs to accept that the ritual could have helped transform Magliocco into a more employable university teacher. The efforts expended by her Californian friends, in themselves, could be empowering. A sceptical reader, with no belief at all in the magic, could well decide that Magliocco went to the interview in a more positive, confident, empowered frame of mind: in other words she had a greater sense of self-efficacy, and that was an important factor in her self-presentation, and therefore she was in a better position to impress an appointing committee with her employability.



Greenwood (2000), who did a parallel research project in the UK, describes a Samhain (Halloween) ritual in a feminist coven. In the pagan calendar Samhain is the end of the old year, and is a time to celebrate new beginnings, and one element of the ritual Greenwood describes involved calling out everything negative the participants were leaving behind in the old year while facing a mirror. Participants then re-entered the circle made up of the rest of the coven by jumping over a fire. It is clear from the fieldwork that such rituals are empowering for participants who believe in them. The ethnographic examples from Magliocco's and Greenwood's work are examples of increasing the self-efficacy beliefs of women, but the neopagan research includes similar stories about men. For example, Greenwood (2000: 132–134) is an account of how success in magic transformed the self-efficacy of a man she calls Chrys.

Parallel examples from a religious tradition entirely different from neopaganism will serve to make the same point. David Smilde's (2007) ethnography of converts to evangelical Protestantism in the urban slums of Caracas covers similar ground. Men who chose to convert – to be born again – experience a massive growth in self-efficacy, enabling them to kick drugs, stop gambling, end affairs and break off their social relationships with members of violent gangs. Researchers have found informants', and their own, self-efficacy beliefs revolutionised by conversions, rituals, rites of passage and other revelatory experiences, from which educational reformers who want to raise the self-efficacy of teachers could learn.

I offer these examples of successful ways of changing people's self-efficacy beliefs that ethnographers have reported in fields very *unfamiliar* to educational researchers; neopaganism and Latin-American evangelical christianity. My argument is that understanding change in self-efficacy in an *unfamiliar* sphere generates foreshadowed problems, or working hypotheses, that can challenge familiarity. Instead of focusing repeatedly on self-efficacy in preservice teacher education programmes, studying the phenomenon in another milieu, especially one where it *can* be radically improved, could produce strategies for changing the self-efficacy beliefs of trainee teachers.

## 6. using theoretical concepts

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The ethnographic work of sociologists and anthropologists of education has not been noted for deploying the middle order theoretical concepts that the wider disciplines do. Useful concepts, such as the *flâneur*, the poetics of manhood, and tournaments of value are used



throughout the book to move beyond the ethnographic description. The deployment of such middle order theoretical concepts is intended here to challenge familiarity. The concept of the *flâneur* is used in Chapter 6 to refocus what a ‘deviant, school refusing’ boy in Coalthorpe was actually doing when to the growing frustration of his teachers he repeatedly failed to ‘find’ his science class. While there was a fashion for deploying the concept of the *flâneur* in British sociology a decade ago it did not get picked up in educational ethnography, despite its potential explanatory power.