

# Inscribing spaces and experiences for subjectivity in the primary school: An ethnographic approach

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## Resumen/ Abstract

The aim of this paper is present some issues and findings coming from the ethnographic Studies developed at four primary schools as part of the research project "The role of primary school in the construction of children's subjectivities" (BSO2003-06157, sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003-2006). The main emphasis of this presentation is to explore the ethnographic decisions taken to cope with the necessity of sharing a common methodological frame and, at the same time, to response in a flexibly way to the particular differences of each school institution.

A constructionist methodological approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schawandt, 1994; Gergen, 2006) has guided the research, by combining document analysis with interviews, discusión groups and ethnographic studies (Denzin, 1997). From the evidences collected four kaleidoscopic stories have been written. The process to construct this methodology started by making discourse analysis of documents produced by educational authorities, political parties and initial teachers' education trainers in order to make explicit their main representations of childhood and main subjectivity representations.

This research has developed a narrative approach to ethnography based on experimenting between the modes of observation, and their transcription into narratives that bring an undecided and fragmentary view of experience. This narrative approach complements with a performative perspective on subjectivity, which is based on avoiding the fixation of subjective patterns, and on favoring the description of processes and fluxes, even when those showed discontinuities, contradictions, and gaps in the construction of subjectivity.

Due to the complexity of this research, because of the multiplicity and diversity of agents and voices intervening, as well as the different trajectories of ourselves as researchers, it was crucial to discuss and share any emerging issue in the comings and goings of the ethnographical teams registered by them by means of drafts. To be able to carry out this work the four teams conducting the fieldwork met monthly with the whole research group. Four stories written under the narrative perspective (Clandinin and Connely, 2000) were produced. The final ethnographic report of each school preserves and collages the different observational and narrative strategies developed by the researchers. These narratives show the main features of children's experiences of subjectivity produced at these primary schools, and allowed to researchers and teachers to infer theoretical knowledge and educational considerations by establishing several comparisons among them. Each of them reflects on shared themes, while it also emphasizes the singularities of each observational practice and the particular stories of the observed groups and places. These themes could be common or differentiated among schools.

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**Palabras clave / Keywords:** primary education, children's subjectivity, collaborative ethnography

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## **Overall of the research project**

In this research we have studied the role of primary school in the process of construction children's subjectivity in the context of contemporary changing world. To achieve this research question we have explored the ways children's subjectivities are not only constructed, by experienced in four Catalan primary school's everyday situations as well at their discourses and practices.

Our starting point has been considered that 'a subject' is not at fix identity. By the contrary, he or she progressively constructs and assumes different identities throughout his/her life, which are the result of the relations he/she maintains with the world surrounding. In this process of self-construction, as Moore (1994: 4) has mentioned, identities are learned and interpreted 'intersubjectively', that is, through social interactions with people and cultural texts as a 'lived anatomy' taking place in an extensive and multiple personal geographical space made by different locations and positions. One of these meaningful personal geographical spaces where subjectivities are constructed is the primary school.

If we consider that subjectivity means 'self conscience of being', it is not easy to capture how children cope with primary school structures, relationships, approaches to teaching and learning, and so on. In a similar direction it seems not clear how to explore the ways children make sense of these experiences and how these experiences 'affect' their 'conscience of being'.

To cope with this challenge we decided working with the concept of subjectivity instead of identity. This implies to strongly contextualise the lived experience of the subject through an embodied understanding of experience (Patel, 2005: 276). This embodied concept of subjectivity is productively tinged with movement and travel, fluidity and shift, across contexts and experiences. The political potential of viewing the subject as process rather than a fixed entity serves to include and acknowledge the multiple, competing and contradictory positions that are both concurrently and disparately invoked within the subject and across subjects.

A constructionist methodological approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schawandt, 1994; Gergen, 2006) has guided the research, by combining document analysis with interviews, discussion groups and ethnographic studies (Denzin, 1997). From the evidences collected four kaleidoscopic stories have been written. The process to construct this methodology started by making discourse analysis of documents produced by educational authorities, political parties and initial teachers' education trainers in order to make explicit their main representations of childhood and main subjectivity representations. After an accurate process of negotiation with four primary schools selected by the criteria of intentional random (Patton, 2002), a field work started by observing different scenarios and situations where practices of subjectivity were mediated.

This research has developed a narrative approach to ethnography based on experimenting between the modes of observation, and their transcription into narratives that bring an undecided and fragmentary view of experience. This narrative approach complements with a performative perspective on subjectivity, which is based on avoiding the fixation of subjective patterns, and on favoring the description of processes



and fluxes, even when those showed discontinuities, contradictions, and gaps in the construction of subjectivity.

In an initial moment, the ethnographic work consisted of going to the field to observe and transcribe situations within the classroom and transitions to other spaces (corridors, playgrounds, school trips, events occurring at other places). Later on, the observation became more deliberate, and consisted of witnessing the emergent themes within the classroom life that represented the social and dialogic construction of the infantile subject.

Field notes were complemented with analysis of school documents (school objectives, curriculum, newsletters, etc.) to produce ethnographic journals. From this set of materials several 'key scenes' (Denzin, 1997 :207-208) were written in order to explore their meanings with teachers and pupils.

Finally four stories written under the narrative perspective (Clandinin and Connely, 2000) were produced. The final ethnographic report of each school preserves and collages the different observational and narrative strategies developed by the researchers. These narratives show the main features of children's experiences of subjectivity produced at these primary schools, and allowed to researchers and teachers to infer theoretical knowledge and educational considerations by establishing several comparisons among them. Each of them reflects on shared themes, while it also emphasizes the singularities of each observational practice and the particular stories of the observed groups and places. These themes could be common or differentiated among schools.

A final report was presented to each school in order, not only to offer a responsive feed-back of their practices of subjectivity, but also to contrast ours with teachers' views. And to contribute through the research to teachers' development and school improvement

### **Collective ethnography: the complexity of a process**

The ethnographical studies considered in this paper were only a part –an important one but only a part, of the research project. So not all team's members participated in this particular work, but all of them took part of the discussions accompanying every decision-making. This situation provided a fascinating scenario for the construction of collective ethnographies where *emic* and *etic* visions (Harris, 1976) enormously enriched the process as a whole.

Due to the complexity of this research, because of the multiplicity and diversity of agents and voices intervening, as well as the different trajectories of ourselves as researchers, it was crucial to discuss and share any emerging issue in the comings and goings of the ethnographical teams registered by them by means of drafts. To be able to carry out this work the four teams conducting the field work met monthly with the whole research group.

These meetings allowed us to expound, debate and sequence all the processes carried out: the negotiation with schools –paying special attention to ethical issues; the entrance in the field; the research strategies in the field; the spaces and times for observation; the strategies to register significant "scenes"; the narrative strategies for field notes; the strategies to share the field notes with the schools, the analysis and



interpretation process, the sharing of the on going reports with schools, and the preparation of a public meeting with the educational community, in order to generate a dialogue while we shared our work.

As example of this variety of positions in the following paragraphs we present a summary of the main issues taken at each school.

### **First story: When school experience is considered as a whole**

The team who developed the ‘Green Mountain’ (fictional mane to respect its anonymity) school case considered as children’s school experiences of subjectivity not only the ones to be found in classrooms but all those provided through the multiple spaces and activities arranged for them around schooling in their long and busy day.

This position was shared with the school’s staff and had important consequences for organising field work. We wanted to *feel* and *represent* which kind of *subject* was privileged in the activities’ continuum children are exposed to since they arrived to school (many of them at 8.00 am when school starts at 9.00 am) until they leave it (many of them at 7.00 pm, although formal teaching finishes at 4.45 pm). So, we agreed with the school leaders that our ethnographical work would permeate the school activity as a whole.

These meant a very intensive data collection process consisting of: (a) analysing documents orienting and fixing the school policy; (b) observing significant scenarios and settings (children’s arrival and departure of school; classrooms, corridors, playgrounds, dining-room, library, workshops –Spanish schools have a three hours break at lunch time, in this school all children have lunch at school and they spend part of this time in the playgrounds, part having lunch and the rest attending different workshops), celebrations and events in and out school); (c) formal conversations with school leaders and teachers; (d) informal conversation with children.

The analyses and interpretation of this huge amount of date allowed us to identify three symbolic not always fully interwoven *territories* for being a subject: the *territory* of happiness; the *territory* of values, social conscience and emotional equilibrium; and the *territory* to learn school knowledge.

### **Second story: Experiencing subjectivities between care and control**

In the second school we decided to observe what was going on in each classroom. As we were five researchers, each of us was involved on following a particular group of the six grades of this primary school –one of us followed two classrooms-. During our stay in the field we accompany the life of children inside and outside the school.

Through our observations we detected that in the first years of schooling (until third grade) a care environment defines the relationship in the classroom. Since the third grade, a new issue emerged concerning with the regulation of children relationships. Finally, and since fourth grade, the school shows a particular interest for assuring the importance of the academic knowledge. In our conversations with teachers they



mentioned different interpretations and emphasis of this process. This continuity is linked with the following subjectivation practices: self-esteem, harmonious socialization and value of academic account. All under a cognitive learning umbrella that is evident in the majority of school activities. This combination produces a school climate based on respect, affection and dialog and, at the same time there is an impregnation of conventional teaching and learning practices. Under a traditional educational frame we observe that children were alive and communicative going beyond the limits of the school arrangement.

Based on the ethnographic observations, not only in the classroom but in different educational settings we found several axes, some of them as polarities, where experiences of subjectivity transit at the school scenarios between care and control; word mediation; experience and knowledge; limitation and creativity; and conscience of self and belonging to a group. The relation/tension between care and control is the main area where children subjectivities are negotiated and constituted.

### **Third story: Blurred narratives of children's subjectivities through our multiple and contradictory experiences as ethnographers in the primary school**

During the ethnographical trip, our positions as women researchers were mediated by the selection of the primary school we studied, which is located near to the university campus we carry out our work as teachers and researchers. *Etic* and *emic* distinctions became confused in the field, and for this reason we promoted the use of the strategy of blurredness in our ethnographical approach. We must acknowledge that we reconstructed the school scenes with a partial and ephemeral gaze through which we tried to preserve the fragmented events we had watched.

In addition, we focused on three different dimensions during the analysis and the interpretation of data. Firstly, we analysed children and teacher's experiences through the description of the space and time organization, and simultaneously, our biographical and professional transits between the academy and the primary school were narrated. Secondly, after observing children's self representations in/out the classroom, we interpreted how the students positioned themselves in a curriculum which is not interested in the school subjects but in their global and local experiences as children. Thirdly, we narrated the student-teacher's cooperation, for instance, in the everyday life decisions they took in the school, in order to understand social and gender relations.

Incidentally, by the creation of visual and theoretical reflections, the transcription of the multiple conversations and the inscription of the researcher's subjectivities in the ethnographical texts, we wrote a dialogic report through which we decentred and deconstructed children's subjectivities.

### **Fourth Story: subjectivity as a journey to accomplish Primary School expectations**

Our ethnography was developed in a public school near Barcelona where we made interviews with teachers and children and observations in different school scenarios. During the analysis and interpretation of these evidences we transformed them in scenes and stories.

During the ethnographical journey, our positions as researchers were changing by the relationship with children, teachers and other team researchers. Based on this



dialogical process we reconstructed the narrative of our school report where we show how children's subjectivities are considered at the school as: *unreliable* (children's experiences weren't considered important), *expected* (experiences needed to accommodate to teachers' expectations) and *in process* (subjectivity experiences are considered as steps to arrive to the end of primary school).

### Some remarks

This study makes evident how to link educational research with teacher education. The process of collaboration and exchange with teachers during the research has been revealed as a positive strategy to cope reflexively with teachers' conceptions and practices.

As in this research have participated 24 researchers (from professors to doctoral students) the decision-making process and the construction of schools narratives in a democratic and collaborative way have been extremely reach and full of insights to.

The research explores in detail how schools, teachers and children transit from wishes of freedom to practices of control; from discourses in favour of developing children's diverse personalities to a set of common and homogeneous learning rules; from adults' strategies of ruling to children's forms of resistance. Main forms of constructing children's subjectivities in primary schools transit from care to control, from the intention of developing their autonomy to the inoculation of a set of learning and behavioural rules.

This study offers alternatives to teachers and other members of the educational community to deal with current changes on the construction of children's subjectivity and to pay more attention to them in the learning and teaching relationships.

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