

Introduction: Honoring and celebrating diversity in educational research

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I have been privileged over the last several decades to have spent time in nearly all of the countries represented by the contributors to this special issue. All of these experiences talking with colleagues, trying to teach in unfamiliar contexts through language differences, learning about and visiting schools, talking with teachers and students – have taught me that while much is different, much is also the same. Education, and special education, in all of our countries bear some remarkable similarities. The timeframes vary, the policy details are different, but the patterns are familiar.

Students with disabilities, for example, have historically been excluded, separated, and less well understood by our various systems. Those with the most significant or challenging/confusing disabilities come to notice last and all too frequently receive the least. But over time, policy commitments to compulsory schooling, “schools for all” and the notion that “everyone can learn” have led to *special* education and a new professional group of teachers, specialists, therapists and interventionists. Despite the differences across our cultures and national experiences, there have been similar patterns of first focusing on what students don’t know, cannot do and need to learn and do to be more like their peers. We then develop a range of responses – teaching strategies, professionals, even *places* for learning that are targeted on “what works” to address the assumptions of deficit and need. The questions our educational systems have historically asked, and are still trying to answer are: 1) Why do some students have difficulty learning? 2) What causes it? 3) How can we “fix” or remediate these difficulties? 4) How do we best organize our schools to deliver these solutions? These questions tend to rely on inquiry traditions that “describe, predict, and control,” or at the very least strive to enumerate, verify and prove. About disability, these traditions would tend to ask: what is disability; what is its nature? While we have learned much from these objectivist traditions about learning, schooling and disability; there was also much these traditions had not allowed us to know until a growing number of scholars and researchers began to draw upon different inquiry traditions to ask different questions and describe, interpret, understand and explain more and more about the educational enterprise. The articles in this special issue ask some of these different questions about special education, disability, learning and schools.

Interpretivism and Education

Interpretivism describes a set of beliefs about the world that tends to ask different questions like “What meanings do people hold about disability?” (Bentley, 2008; Davis, 1995; Devlieger, Rusch & Pfeiffer, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Ferguson, Ferguson & Taylor, 1992; Minow, 1990; Naraian, 2008; Rioux & Bach, 1994) or “How do people experience disability?” (Brewster, 2004; Goodley, Lawthom, Clough, & Moore, 2004; Linton, 1998; Linton, 2006; Murphy, 1990; Titchkosky, 2003). These kinds of questions seek to discover “why”, “how”, and “what does it mean”? in an effort to better understand. Understanding how families experience having a child with a disability or how adults with disabilities experience learning (Bjarnason; Lang & Ohlsson, this issue), understanding what students themselves think about their schools, classroom and participation (Tetler & Baltzer, this issue), and understanding the complexity of communications between children and adults who experience different kinds of communication challenges (Anderson & Tvingstedt; Assarson, this issue) are all addressed by the contributions to this special issue. Each of these research efforts not only describe aspects of the educational enterprise that are not frequently noticed, but they also provide the reader with interpretations, explanations and understanding that other inquiry traditions do not offer. These deeper understandings are needed and welcome in the field.

While associated with a range of knowledge traditions and philosophical labels, interpretivism as an approach to inquiry has long standing traditions in other fields such as sociology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973), and psychology (Bruner, 1990; Jacob, 1992; Tesch, 1990; Mitchell, 2003). Interpretivism also encompasses a wide variety of methodological approaches, from ethnography to ethnmethodology to discourse analysis, naturalistic inquiry, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Although there were early examples of interpretivist research in both education and special education (e.g., Edgerton, 1967; Groce, 1985; Kidder, 1989), over the last twenty years, and despite debates (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Gage, 1989; Howe, 1988; D. L. Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000), interpretivist inquiry has emerged as a legitimate approach to educational inquiry – albeit still sometimes a minority one (e.g., Brantlinger, 1997; 2000). There has been a steady stream of textbooks focused on teaching educational researchers to use qualitative methods within the interpretivist tradition – many in their 4th or 5th edition (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). More important though have been the studies themselves – what they reveal and help us understand about learning, disability, and schools.

Thickness in educational research

The quintessential methods of interpretivist research, as characterized by Wolcott (1993; 1994) involve *looking* using the skills of participant observation, *listening* through open-ended, semi-structured, and group interviews, and *thinking* about the resulting data through the stages of analysis. The researcher is advised to seek thickness – a common metaphor in discussions of qualitative methods and one that was adopted and popularized by Clifford Geertz (1973) as *thick description*. Thick description is crucial to an interpretive understanding of the social (and educational) world. Most qualitative researchers use *thick description* to emphasize that data collection is “not simply a matter of amassing relevant detail” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 255), but rather a commitment to capture the richness of context and the varied and multiple meanings present. In any social context, in all social interactions – including the teaching/learning interaction – there are not only multiple perspectives at play, but each of those perspectives possess varied and multiple layers of meaning. *Meaning*, then becomes one of the key dimensions of knowledge that interpretivism can uniquely offer.

Exploring *meaning* across our various countries has taught me – and reinforced in me – the need to explore and use interpretivist approaches to inquiry because it is better able to explore the complexities, ambiguities and general “grayness” of much of what happens in the day to day life of schools and classrooms. Schools and classrooms have a dailyness and particularity that is not easily captured by the tools of objectivist research. Thus, I am in agreement with Shulman (1986), who pointed out twenty years ago that any mature social science must encompass competing schools of thought, and Robert Merton who commented about sociology that, “No one paradigm has even begun to demonstrate its unique cogency for investigating the entire range of sociologically [and even educationally] interesting questions” (cited in Shulman, 1986, p. 28.). The very nature of schools and the work that takes place in them requires that we employ as many approaches to inquiry as we can.

Most studies that rely upon qualitative methods and interpretivist ways of viewing social phenomena rely upon thick description to gather details about the phenomenon of focus and to convey the rich complexity of what they find. Beyond thick description, however, we have with this issue the opportunity to explore – along with other examples from educational research – three additional types of “*thickness*” in research: thick inscription, thick explanation and thick prescription (D. L. Ferguson, 2005; P.M. Ferguson, 2005). Figure 1 briefly describes and illustrates the differences and relationships among these types of thickness in research and I will use them to begin to locate the contributions to learning and knowledge in education that is included in this issue.

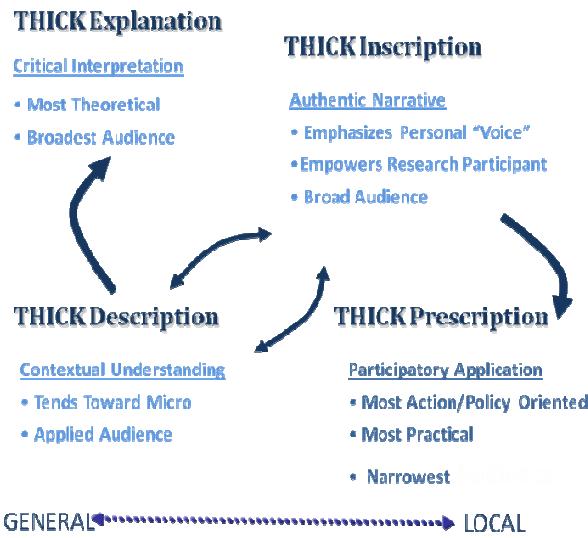


Figure 1: Dimensions of Thickness

Thick Inscription relies most on having data that are thickly described, but goes further to seek to “give voice” to those rarely heard – to *inscribe* their point of view and description of experience as a way of giving voice. For example, Janko (1994) helped her readers understand the perspectives and experiences of families adjudicated as having abused their children, and how their interactions with the judicial system and the people they found there were responsible for silencing that voice. Holm (1997) invited teenage mothers to share their own experiences through photographs and poetry and in so doing offers entry into the unique mixture of joy and challenge these young women faced as they engaged in “public posing and private thoughts” (p. 61). A range of writers have contributed to a substantial women’s literature that inscribes not only women’s views, but explore women’s experiences and the meanings they take from those experiences (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Asch & Fine, 1988; Smith & Hutchison, 2004).

In this issue the article by Bjarnason explores the ethics and challenges of trying to provide thick inscription of the experiences of families who have a child with a disability and how these experiences change over time. This analysis offers caution to others who seek to interview people in vulnerable positions who might wish to also give these disempowered and frequently disenfranchised people voice. In a similar way Lang and Ohlsson use in-depth interviews with adults with physical (Lang) and intellectual disabilities (Ohlsson) along with observations aided by audio-taping of educational interactions between the adults and their teachers to both give voice to these

adult's experiences in learning situations, and to further explore the nature of the interactions between adult learners with disabilities and their teachers. In quite a different way, Tetler and Baltzer give voice to elementary students about their own classrooms and participation in schooling. It is ironic that the very recipients of much of our educational research and practice – students – are only rarely asked their opinions and thoughts. Using more structured interviews, these authors reveal how these young students with and without disabilities interpret and understand a range of aspects of pedagogy and learning.

Thick inscription can often lead to *thick prescription*. Janko (1994) sought in the end of her book to offer recommendations to social service and judicial personnel about how to better understand and interpret the experiences of families of abused children by better understanding the contexts in which they lived. And to some extent Bjarnason's analysis of the ethical issues raised by interviewing people in vulnerable positions ends up seeking to at least recommend, and perhaps prescribe, specific ways researchers might better protect their efforts to give voice. A more direct example of thick prescription is the work of Morin who describes the organization of schooling for students in difficulties in Danish schools by focusing on the dilemmas in the organization of general and special education, which, when understood and addressed in particular ways can improve the functioning of both systems. Certainly in my own work (e.g., Ferguson, 1998; Ferguson & Meyer, 1996) I have spent time in schools observing, interviewing, and sharing back what the research team learned with the expressed purpose to help the school improve their practice. By "mirroring back" information about what happens in the daily complexity of schooling, educators in those setting are frequently able to then "see" things differently to define new problems to solve. This kind of ongoing work in watching schools led, in my case, to offering a framework for schools to systematically and systematically improve their practices (Ferguson, Kozleski & Smith, 2003).

An exploration using *thick description* is found in the work of Andersson & Tvingstedt who use video to gather more nuanced and subtle information about the communication patterns, communication signals, non-verbal, and other alternative forms of communication that occur and contribute to the meaning all present make about what is occurring. What is interesting about the video observations is that they allow the thick description to occur even after the observers have left the setting as they view the tapes repeatedly to find new data each time.

In this issue, Assarson offers an example of *thick explanation*. Such research usually builds upon the thick description of earlier research to speak to a broader audience by providing a more theoretical explanation of the particulars of any one study. In my own early research (Ferguson, 1987), I borrowed a device from a classic study of schools by Willis (1981) to first

present by description, but to then spend additional chapters creating a thick explanation for the findings using a more critical lens. In a similar vein, a growing disability studies literature engages in critical interpretation of disability in order to understand disability, as a fundamentally social, cultural, political, historical, discursive, and relational phenomenon (e.g., Barnes, Oliver & Barton, 2002; Davis, 2006; Linton, 1998; Shakespeare, 2006). In so doing, Assarson is creating an epistemology of impairment that relies much on the thick description and thick inscription of earlier research. Assarson uses the tools of discourse analysis to examine the linguistic processes teachers and students use to adjust their discourses in light of the “ruling discourses” that are present. She places the specifics of a particular school into a larger post structural examination of the organization of communication between teachers and students.

Thickness in educational research, then, is one way of appreciating, and celebrating, the diversity of interpretivist research. This set of papers uses the power of interpretivist inquiry to explore all types of thickness in research, and in so doing, contributes both to our increasing understanding and our appreciation of the kinds of questions that can and should be asked about schools and education. While education, or special education, may never comfortably encompass some of the variety that is being explored in interpretivist research— like the confessional tales of Van Maanen (1988), the autobiographical ethnography of Ellis (1993), Ronai (1997) or Wolcott (1994), the ethnographic fiction of Angrosino (1988); or the dislodging scholarship and stories of postmodern storytellers (Danforth, 1997; Gergen, 1994) – the contributions to this special issue contribute to pushing the boundaries of learning and knowing we have so long relied upon and that’s something to honor and celebrate.

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