

Ethnographies of Education and Anthropological Knowledge Production

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Summary

From an anthropological perspective, (educational) ethnography is much more than just a method in terms of a set of techniques but a way of taking a place in and grasping the world that ethnographers aim to represent and comprehend. With an imperative of “being there,” the ethnographer travels to specific locations to establish some form of physical presence in the field site. The idea of “location,” therefore, is central to educational ethnography in several ways. Research on education among different categories of people in Nepal, and a vast body of ethnographic literature on education around the world, demonstrates the centrality of “location” in anthropological knowledge production. This article discusses “location” as a conceptual category in order to explore the different analytical levels at which it operates in anthropological knowledge production on education. It does so in three different ways. First, ethnographers’ locations in the field—their biographical trajectories, academic backgrounds, and social positions—lay the ground for the ways in which ethnographers ‘see’ education in the field. Second, the historical context and sociopolitical developments of specific geographic locations, in this case Nepal, draw attention to ways in which existing societal concerns foster particular research interests on education and consequently shape knowledge about a given geographical location. Third, conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of spatial sites within and beyond institutions of schooling allows ethnographers to explore the multiple and often conflicting meanings of education. This awareness on the multiplicity of ethnographic locations in educational ethnography promises to deepen our understanding of education, broadly defined, through a rigorous and highly contextualized inquiry that highlights multiple and contested voices and presents subjective modes of perceiving reality.

Keywords: reflexivity, ethnographic location, educational anthropology, Nepal

Subjects: Education, Change, and Development, Education and Society

Introduction

In 1996, the American anthropologists Bradley Levinson, Douglas Foley, and Dorothy Holland published the then-ground-breaking anthology *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*. It was dedicated to “students everywhere who struggle to make sense of school” (p. vii) and, as Lois Weis (1996) pointed out in the foreword, was among the first published volumes to explicitly address the global dimensions of education through a comparative, context-dependent approach. This did not mean that ethnographic accounts of education were new in the mid-1990s. In fact, numerous studies of socialization and enculturation emerging from the American tradition of cultural anthropology

from the 1930s onward and school and classroom ethnographies anchored in the British sociology of education from the 1950s had already laid the foundation of an anthropology of education (Delamont, 2012; van Zangen, 2012).

The interest in wider formative, educational processes and the socializing role of the school as an institution, broadly mirrored in the dual history of American and British ethnographies of education, conflated in *The Cultural Production on the Educated Person*, which provided an analytical framework for addressing “the logic of education in its varied cultural contexts” (Levinson et al., 1996, p. 21). Approaching Western-style mass schooling as a historically distinct form of education, which had gained tremendous legitimacy globally since the mid-20th century, the text sought to place such forms of state-organized or state-regulated forms of intentional instruction, and related ideas of the “educated person,” within a wider context of culturally specific educational practices by which members of societies are identified as having more or less knowledges. The analytical implications of this were first to explore schools as social and symbolic spaces for people of different classes, genders, castes, and ethnicities to interact and to contest what it means to be an educated person at particular points in time within institutions. Second, it called for an analytical perspective that would move beyond the school as an institution and take into account other and often competing sites of cultural production of the educated person (Levinson et al., 1996). In sum, the book was a strong plea for a localized, comparative, and historically grounded approach to ethnographic studies in education and certainly did inspire many anthropologists engaged in schooling and ethnography.¹ Moreover, it served, at least indirectly, as a reminder to look critically at the way in which we, as anthropologists and ethnographers, understand and construct the discipline itself—as deeply localized, historically produced, and anchored in political economies of a global academia.

Though not pretending to provide a comprehensive global review of all ethnographic research in education, Anderson-Levitt’s (2012) collection of articles in *Anthropologies of Education: A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling* demonstrates, across the world, a plurality of research traditions. The global flow of academic knowledge on education through, among others, student and staff mobility and research collaborations, combined with a common interest in schooling as the globally predominant form of institutionalized education, has to some extent led to a convergence of research foci, areas, and methodologies. Yet it is also evident that these have emerged from distinct disciplinary roots and in response to local concerns and national priorities. This calls for a need to acknowledge the anthropology of education in plural (i.e., as anthropologies of education [Anderson-Levitt, 2012]) and reminds us to continuously reflect upon the question of translation, that is, how native terms translate meaningfully into notions of education, schooling, learning, socialization, and so on needed for a shared language and dialogue on education. Within this tradition, “education” must be approached in a broad sense. The term, thus, includes (a) intentional forms of learning taking place in schools and other institutionalized forms of collective learning; (b) processes of learning and teaching that happen through social practice, including apprenticeship; and (c) formative processes of acquiring, transmitting, and producing knowledge for interpreting and acting upon the world (Froerer & Portisch, 2012; Levinson, 2000).

Central to these developments in the discipline of educational anthropology is a reconsideration of “location,” in other words, a concern about the way in which we locate “education” — disciplinarily, theoretically, and methodologically. Using our research experiences from Nepal as an empirical lens, the aim of this article is to revisit “location” as a conceptual category in order to explore the different analytical levels at which it operates in anthropological knowledge production on education. This will help to push the analytical and methodological boundaries for the objects of inquiry in the field of educational studies broadly defined, where “education” has predominantly been studied within the institutional and spatial confines of schools and classrooms. As indicated earlier, recent debates in the subfield of educational anthropology have helped challenge the boundedness of educational sites as ethnographic fields by extending the boundaries for exploring processes, meanings, and discourses of education. Not surprisingly, this reflects general attempts to reconceptualize the ethnographic field in anthropology and redirects the focus from bounded field sites to shifting locations (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

In this article, we aim to explore the ways in which the idea of “location,” implicitly or explicitly, figures in educational ethnography. We do so through a discussion of three interrelated issues, which are central to the shaping of our objects of inquiry and for exploring the multiple meanings of education within and beyond institutions of formal learning. In the first section, we reflect on the ethnographer’s location in the field through an account of our own biographical trajectories, academic backgrounds, and social positions. We thus lay the groundwork for an understanding of the way in which our own gaze on education, and the way in which we approach it theoretically, normatively, and empirically, is a product of our own educational upbringing. The second section locates education research in Nepal within the historical context and sociopolitical developments of the country. Here, we draw attention to the ways in which particular societal concerns in Nepal have contributed to a fostering of certain anthropological research interests in education. This process of knowledge production has invariably shaped the idea of Nepal as an ethnographic location associated with particular characteristics and in many ways representing what Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have referred to as “pure field site.” In the third section, through a focus on the concrete spatial sites in which we conducted fieldwork, we explore education in a multiplicity of locations, across time and space, rather than limiting it to schools as the perhaps most obvious site. We conclude by reflecting on what the anthropological idea of location has to offer to educational studies.

The Ethnographer’s Location in the Field: Biographical Trajectories, Educational Experiences, and the Ethnographic “Home”

The imagination of the field has always been integral to ethnographic projects and the imperative of “being there.” The field that ethnographers study occurs in the social world and takes them to locations in which they establish some form of physical presence. This literal “situatedness” of the researcher directs attention to location as socially produced through ongoing interactions (Massey, 2005). This idea of location, involving an embodied practice, compels ethnographers to examine how individual voices relate to others, mediated through their own perspective, educational background, and social position.

Educational ethnography—like any other ethnographic endeavor—is fundamentally intersubjective, and the eyes through which we, as ethnographers, see the world, the questions we raise, and the meaning we construct are influenced by our own biographical trajectories and educational experiences within and beyond schools (Thapan, 2014).

In this section, drawing on our own experiences, we foreground the “location” of the ethnographer. As scholars doing research in the same regional context, namely Nepal, and with a shared interest in education, our widely different backgrounds as, respectively, a “white” European and “dark” South Asian, both females, have implications for the way we enter the field and the relationships we establish and hence for the knowledge we produce. This point reflects and speaks into general discussions on reflexivity, authenticity, and positionality (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989; Okely & Callaway, 1992), which have been fundamental to the last three to four decades of anthropology. Our in some respects contrasting positions thus highlight dilemmas of insider-outsider positions and relate to this problematic distinction between “native” and “non-native” anthropologists, as well as to issues related to conducting fieldwork “at home” or “away.” This raises the question of where “home” is and what ethnographically constitutes the “home” in a context where the archetypical fieldworker—the Western male anthropologist—has been contested for several decades (e.g., Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Narayan, 1993). While this debate from an epistemological and methodological point of view may seem overdue, it is nonetheless important to keep reflecting on our researcher positions and explicating the kind of relations that we establish with the people that we seek to represent (Narayan, 1993; Palriwala, 2005). This also points to the importance of paying attention to changing relations of dominance, how these contribute to reconfigure what counts as “pure” and “impure” field sites (cf. Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), and by implication how ethnographers locate and relocate themselves within those sites.

Valentin first encountered the Nepali educational system as an exchange student of anthropology at Tribhuvan University in 1991–1992. Nepal had just been declared a democracy in 1990, and ideological and political battlefields institutions of higher education continued to be deeply affected by ongoing strikes and protests, which resulted in numerous cancellations of classes and disruptions in academic schedules. Moreover, the style of teaching and learning with its focus on rote learning and memorization was distinctively different from pedagogical practices the author knew from her own upbringing in the supposedly egalitarian Danish state school system, which with its roots in progressive education gained its legitimacy through a student-centered, anti-authoritative, and critical approach. A few years later she returned to conduct fieldwork in a squatter settlement, Ramaghat, in Kathmandu for a total of 20 months spread over two periods of time, first in 1994–1996 for her master’s thesis and again in 1998–1999 for her doctoral research. Focusing on, respectively, children’s experiences of growing up urban poor and the educational strategies of squatter families, her work was anchored in educational anthropology, by then an emerging subfield of Danish anthropology growing out of previous interests in the anthropology of childhood, critical studies on education, and development-oriented studies (Anderson, Gulløv, & Valentin, 2012). Her interests corresponded with a priority on education by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), which funded fieldwork for the

doctoral project. Recurrent visits to the squatter settlement, since the first visit in 1994 well into the second decade of the 21st century, have allowed her to follow how expectations and practices of education tied to a particular social class are transferred and transformed across generations.

A planned research project on youth and urbanity in Kathmandu in the early 2000s was cancelled because of the escalating violence of the civil war between the Maoist movement and the state of Nepal (1996–2006), which made it both uncertain and unsafe to embark on a long-term research project. The armed conflict put its imprints in all corners of the Nepali society and thus came to inform research conducted in the country in the years to come. Hence, in the period 2007–2009 Valentin took up a study, also funded by DANIDA, on the role of education among young Nepalis who in a context of armed conflict and widespread poverty had migrated to India in their search for improved life conditions. This opened up a window for exploring the skills and resources with which migrants encounter new social settings and the larger migratory circuits of many Nepali families. This interest extended into a study conducted in 2010–2014 on the sudden increase of Nepali students in Denmark from the mid-2000s, their incorporation into overlapping education and labor markets in Denmark, and the link between current practices of student migration and the consolidation of a relatively new middle class in Nepal.

Changing field sites from a squatter settlement in Kathmandu and Nepali communities in Delhi to a Nepali community in Copenhagen, partly concentrated in residential areas less than a 15-minute walk away from the university, Valentin in a way moved “home.” Focusing on a group of international students in Denmark who have occasionally been accused by the media and authorities of using study residence permits as a ticket to the labor market (Valentin, 2012a, 2017), the project inevitably responded to controversial political and public debates on immigration. Thus she had to negotiate access to and continued presence in a migrant community whose economic, legal, and social position in the Danish society was very different from her own but which she also met around a common set of references to Nepal. Meanwhile her frequent visits to Nepal are returns to another “home” — Kathmandu as a place where she spent an important part of her late youth life and Ramaghat, where she grew up as a fieldworker and, despite fundamentally different life conditions, has developed strong social and emotional ties with people over a period of nearly 25 years. Never having experienced poverty or stigmatization herself, she will never be able to fully identify with the people, but numerous common moments and memories provide a ground for reflection on shared human experiences.

As a Nepali citizen, Pradhan was born into the Nepali education system. Her educational experience was a product of a national education system of the 1980s and 1990s that placed importance on homogeneous national identity and where the Nepali language was positioned as a very powerful symbol of Nepali nationalism. This vision was embodied in a popular slogan of the time—*Ek raja, ek desh, ek bhasa, ek bhash* (one king, one country, one language, one dress). However, she also lived through the period of momentous social and political transition in Nepal. In 1990, the new constitution of Nepal marked a pivotal moment by declaring Nepal as a multilingual and multiethnic country (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, & Whelpton, 1997; Hutt, 1991). Pradhan belonged to an ethnic minority, the Newar, with Nepal Bhasa, in colloquial speech also known as Newari, as her “mother tongue.”² However, she did not learn this language in schools. Her school, complying with the education policy of the time, used Nepali as the language of

instruction and English as the language of examination. These broader political shifts therefore were not just distant changes but resonated at a personal level in Pradhan's life. Pradhan's research interest thus emerged amid this contrasting experience of her schooling in a monolingual nation, popularly known as the "Panchayat" system (1951–1990), where she received her foundational education in the Nepali language, and later growing up in multilingual and multiethnic Nepal (post-1990), where school education could be provided in other minority languages. Her doctoral research, therefore, focused on this politically controversial issue of minority-language education to understand the everyday implications of these political shifts.

For this fieldwork Pradhan returned "home," but it was a very different home than the one with which she was familiar. She had been away from Nepal—in India and the United Kingdom—for almost a decade before beginning doctoral fieldwork. During this time, Nepal had gone through a range of social and political changes, as discussed earlier. Moreover, her schooling experience was very different from the schools that she was researching. Her school instruction took place mainly in the Nepali language, and written examinations were in English. The idea of "mother-tongue" education was therefore very new. Her research on Nepal Bhasa education positioned her as an insider, one who identified with Nepal Bhasa as a mother tongue and had some command over the language, but also as an outsider, who did not know how to read and write the language. Despite her "insider" position in Nepal, the heterogeneous contexts of the everyday lives set her as "outsider," mainly due to her limited competence in Nepal Bhasa and her education trajectory.

This multiplicity in a person's biography, that anthropologists have begun to refer to as being "halfies," may lead to an ambiguous terrain of both familiarity and unfamiliarity (Narayan, 1993). It is in this context that Pradhan had to undergo many informal "tests" to prove her Nepal Bhasa competence during the course of her research. Many did not believe that she could converse in Nepal Bhasa because, as she was often told, of her "unaccented" Nepali. The schoolteachers and language activist usually gave her a sentence to translate into Nepal Bhasa, which was then assessed on the basis of speed, accent, pronunciation, and so on. Despite her lack of high proficiency, she surprised many with her ability to converse in Nepal Bhasa at all. Pradhan's experiences of conducting research at "home" and studying her "own" people uncover layers of entangled identities and illustrate that "a person may have many strands of identification available" (Narayan, 1993, p. 673). It was through this personal experience of schooling in the mother tongue that much of the analysis in her doctoral research was shaped.

As illustrated here, Valentin and Pradhan obviously had very different starting points for conducting education research in Nepal, both with regard to personal experiences of education and related ideas of social mobility, (in-)equality and discrimination, and their position in the field. In some sense, Valentin, especially in her early studies, represented the "classical figure" of a nonnative anthropologist, though not a male, studying the underprivileged "native Other" away from home, entangled in deeply asymmetrical relations. As a Nepali citizen and ethnic Newar studying language practices of her "own" people in Nepal, Pradhan, on the other hand, occupied an "insider" position, potentially giving her a more authentic and authoritative voice. However, her limited fluency in Nepal Bhasa, emerging out of her personal biography and educational trajectory, positioned her as an "outsider" (see Palriwala, 2005 for a discussion on "other Indian"). Therefore, what the two biographical accounts reveal is most of all how

problematic such dichotomies between insider-outsider positions are and related to this where and how to locate the fieldworker's "home." These experiences question the utility of concepts such as native versus outsider and home versus abroad and urge us to appreciate ethnography as a process through which researchers examine "the ways in which each of us is situated in relation to the people we study" (Narayan, 1993, p. 678). More generally, a focus on our own way into and positions within a continuously evolving field illustrates how specific research interests in education have grown out of our ongoing movements between different locations, more specifically the different biographical, disciplinary, and geopolitical positions from which we speak and shape our objects of inquiry.

Historical Contexts, Local Realities, and Educational Locations

The strength of location as a conceptual category lies in its potential to uncover different layers and sites in which anthropological knowledge is produced and which lend meaning to, in this case, education in specific historical contexts. Anderson-Levitt's (2012) collection shows us how ethnographers of education often delve into specific issues predominant in the country of research. This is not necessarily because there is a national tradition of scholarship, as she argues, but because local concerns make certain dimensions of education more visible and open up particular vantage points that are not available or obvious in other places (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). This plays into dominant ideas of what constitutes a "good" field site defined in terms of "its suitability for addressing issues and debates that matter to the discipline" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 10). This apparently "place-" and "time-bound" empirical base of ethnography enables us as ethnographers to construct analytical frames that allow us to discover certain realms of scholarship. Showing how we and other educational researchers have defined specific research themes and perspectives in response to societal concerns and disciplinary debates, this section seeks to shed light on Nepal as a location of anthropological inquiry. It is important to keep in mind that Nepal was never colonized in a political sense, but the development of an anthropology of Nepal was as much a colonizing project as it was in the rest of South Asia, though it took place much later (Des Chene, 2007).³

Our studies on education have been inherently shaped by this endeavor of making sense of "education" in the historical context of Nepal. The sociopolitical transition in Nepal during the 1980–1990s, as mentioned earlier, and the following changes in the education system provided a fertile ground for exploring the relationship between formal schooling and social mobility. However, as the very rich collection of papers in *Global Schooling, Local Meanings* (Anderson-Levitt, 2003) tells us, what is happening on the ground may not always align with intentions of national/global-level planners. Ethnographers of education have therefore pointed out and criticized the important gap between official discourse and educational practices on the ground (see, e.g., Carney & Rappeleye, 2011b). Likewise, in her research, Pradhan (2016) explored the ways in which students navigated their way through different languages and the contradictory notions of identity associated with it, as they constructed what it means to be educated in their own mother tongues. Her research illustrates that, contrary to the essentialist categories of identity espoused in both nationalist discourse and ethnic activism, the students display

affiliation to multiple languages and identities that are seen as neither incompatible nor binary opposites. The implication of this perspective is not only on the everyday practices of the schools but also on the broader meanings of education in a given context.

The idea of the “educated person” was largely based on the empirical work carried out in Nepal by Skinner and Holland in the mid-1980s. In their paper titled “Schools and the Cultural Production of the Educated Person in a Nepalese Hill Community,” Skinner and Holland (1997) point out ways in which different actors construct the meaning of “educated person.” For the Nepali state, education was a space to put intense focus on state-building and national integration. For the students, however, it was a space to challenge existing caste hierarchies and use the newly found identities of an “educated person” to distinguish themselves from the “uneducated” ones. Pradhan has employed this theoretical framework, which, combined with her personal experiences in the education system, is a avenue by which to discuss ways in which language competence shapes the perception of success/failure of schooling and the struggles around the production of the “educated person.”

While both Valentin’s and Pradhan’s research is grounded in education processes in Nepal, Valentin’s (2005) work on educational practices among squatter families in Kathmandu reveals a different aspect of the tense relationship between education and inequality. Strongly promoted by foreign-funded development projects and a global rights-based discourse, schooling has since the mid-20th century been given a high priority in national planning in Nepal, resulting in an enduring public and political faith in formal education as *the* means to progress. Nepal is, of course, not unique in this regard since schooling has been seen as instrumental in nation-building across the postcolonial world (e.g., Bledsoe, 1992; Coe, 2005; Levinson, 2001; Stambach, 2000). However, extending classical debates on the role of education in social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990) to Nepal, Valentin’s (2005) study showed how the formal education system through its organizational structures and practices continued to exclude certain categories of citizens despite promises of social justice and equal opportunities. At the same time, and in line with Skinner and Holland (1996), the study also revealed how schooling can open up a social and symbolic space, which encourages and legitimizes new social alliances across, for example, caste and gender boundaries. Highlighting the divergent expectations held toward schooling and its outcome, this research explored the way education was understood and played out in the context of the urban poor in Nepal. Other ethnographic research on education in Nepal has equally shown how schooling holds a transformative potential through its ability to make people envision other realities—in relation to, for example, gender (Ahearn, 2001; Madsen, 2006), civic participation and citizenship (Petersen, 2011), violence (Pherali, 2011), future aspirations (Kölbel, 2013), and engagement in planned development (Faye, 2017).

As indicated, the political attention paid to the expansion of a nationwide, inclusive education system in Nepal has been reflected in a scholarly interest in schooling as an instrument to social mobility and national homogeneity. As pointed out by Liechty (2003) in his study of urban youth in Nepal, the rise of a new consumer-oriented, urban middle class whose social status partly depended on their ability to purchase access to education led to an increase in the demand for private schooling during the 1990s. This contributed to widening the gap between an underfunded, state-run school system catering only to the poor and a wide range of private

schools of varying quality and price (Caddell, 2006; Valentin, 2005). The marketization of education went beyond the boundaries of Nepal, as did the aspirations of middle-class youth, many of whom were recruited by educational consultancies operating in Nepal for foreign institutions of education (Thieme, 2017). With this massive increase in transnational migration for education, Nepal now stands out as the country with the highest outbound student mobility ratio in South Asia (Lawton, Angulo, Axel-Berg, Burrows, & Katsomitros, 2013).

Valentin's interest in transnational student migration from Nepal to Denmark, thus, was prompted both by the observation of a new type of educational actors (the consultancies) in Nepal and a sudden appearance of Nepalis in Copenhagen, notably, often in restaurants and cafés where they worked in order to pay education fees and sustain a living in Denmark. As a "back door" to the study of student migration, their engagement in the service sector served as a lens to understand the often blurred fields of education and labor in contemporary processes of migration (Valentin, 2012a, 2017). As a country that was never colonized, Nepal does not have historically established pathways of student migration, so Denmark was initially an unknown destination for many. However, the study (Valentin, 2015, 2017) was in many respects illustrative of a new type of migration in which higher education figures as a driving force in interrelated processes of social and geographical mobility (Olwig & Valentin, 2015). Approaching education as a transformative experience arising from learning to navigate in different and uncertain environments (Gardner & Osella, 2003, p. xxii; Rao & Hossein, 2012), the study also shed light on ways in which young people, beyond rational strategies of social or professional upliftment, use student migration as a frame for exploring and inhabiting the world (Valentin, 2015).

Our research interests and different positions in the field conflate in a joint research project. Funded by the DANIDA and framed as a so-called South-driven collaborative research project, it is institutionally located within Nepali research institutions and focuses on the multiple and often contradictory "uses" and engagements in public finance of education. The broader context of Nepal has provided a fascinating entry point to this study. First, the education sector is the largest recipient of public resources in Nepal. It receives 15% of the national annual budget (UNESCO, 2009). Second, in Nepal 45% of people see the education system as corrupt or highly corrupt (Transparency International, 2013). This empirical context has opened up opportunities to understand the dynamics of state-citizen relations, by closely investigating the economic transactions, investments, and everyday forms of public finance management as they appear in different sites, contexts, and institutional arrangements.

This aforementioned approach to the study of education represents a context-specific understanding that emerges from a complex interplay of experiences of structural inequality and prospects of social mobility in Nepal. First, given the historical evolution of mass schooling in Nepal, which was closely tied to the modernistic nation-building project that followed a century of autocracy by the Rana dynasty (1846–1951), much theory-building has been on education as a state-led development project and its unequal reach (Pherali, 2011; Sheilds & Rappleye, 2008). Ethnographic studies of education have been very valuable to put a spotlight on the implications of education policy and social inequality on the everyday lives of people (Pigg, 1992; Pradhan, 2016; Skinner & Holland, 1996; Snellinger, 2016; Valentin, 2005). Second, as issues of inequality gradually took center stage, both in political practice and academic analysis in Nepal, possibilities

opened to explore how social relations and social hierarchy play a role in education experiences. Scholars have therefore sought to understand the worlds of meaning constructed by people and a variety of ways in which they navigate those (Ahearn, 2001; Karki, 2016; Pradhan, 2017; Valentin, 2005). Third, the more recent focus on education-related migration grew out of previous ethnographies of education that took seriously the worlds of meaning that young people construct. These worlds are obviously not static but mirror and respond to historically shaped imaginaries, which are both products and sources of the massive outbound migration from Nepal from the turn of the 21st century. Both education and migration are key concepts to imaginations of a better future, making migration for higher education appear particularly promising. The societal urgency of this issue has fostered a scholarly interest in the multiple meanings ascribed to education in interrelated processes of geographical and social mobility (Valentin, 2015, 2017), related ideas of return (Ghimire & Maharjan, 2015; Valentin & Dhungel, 2016), and the institutional mechanisms that facilitate such migration (Thieme, 2017).

Locating “Education” in the Field

The broader geographic location of the ethnographic research, as discussed in the previous section, has been highly productive for exploring the multiple and contested meanings of education. But where and how does an ethnographer situate him- or herself to produce that knowledge? Where are the concrete field sites, and how do we grasp them? In this section, we discuss the multiple locations of education, both within and beyond the spatial confines of schools and other overt forms of education institutions. As pointed out by Levinson (1999), education holds an ambiguous status in anthropology. On the one hand, much educational anthropology has been confined to the study of institutions and turned it into “school ethnographies” rather than educational ethnographies broadly defined. On the other hand, among anthropologists outside the field of educational anthropology, the importance of schooling in structuring peoples’ lives in the contemporary world has often been underestimated (Levinson, 1999, p. 595). Hence, ethnographers of education must consider carefully how to choose ethnographic sites in ways that can reveal different dimensions—expectations, experiences, practices, or discourses—of education. Is it to observe classroom activities, to follow pupils back and forth to school, or to take part in teacher-parent meetings? Or is it to “hang out” on the streets and observe those who do not go to school, to listen to life stories of parents and grandparents over a cup of tea, or to follow the illiterate parent to government offices to understand what it means not to be able to read and write in situations where it is expected? This choice of ethnographic site is obviously determined by the research questions but is, consciously or unconsciously, also shaped by the practical and logistics considerations undertaken by the researcher. Regardless, as Gupta and Ferguson (1997, p. 4) argue, it “enables [a] certain kind of knowledge” while excluding other kinds. Unpacking the field sites in which we have grounded our studies, we demonstrate how we in different ways have challenged the boundedness of educational sites and how this has allowed us to comprehend the issue of education from multiple angles.

Pradhan's research was primarily located within the premises of two schools. Locating her research in these two schools provided her with a window to the multilocal realities of education. Her experiences in this school were an opportunity to understand the issue of minority-language education in a context of intense political transition. Even while the regular routine activities of the school—such as morning assembly, attendance register, time-tabled subject teaching, didactic methods of teaching, and so on—might be similar across different schools, these schools' specific focus on minority-language education made the schooling experience differ from other mainstream schools. It was while sitting in the Nepal Bhasa lessons that she was able to appreciate the difference between the spoken language and the written language, and the ways in which language teachers struggled to negotiate the legitimacy of the minority language in its written form. During her attempts to use Nepal Bhasa for written work, teaching, and reading newspapers, the author uncovered many ways in which various kinds of language competence—speaking, reading, and writing—are seen, quite erroneously, as synonymous to each other. This experience also opened her inquiry into the process of constant correction, repetition, and training of language and its certification through national examination boards, which were central to the ways in which schools negotiated the legitimacy of Nepal Bhasa as the language of education. Though these were fairly universal strategies of schooling, the process seemed more prominent in the classes that taught minority languages and in the contexts that were less mainstreamed. In addition to the activities in the school, Pradhan walked along with children on their way home while talking to their parents. This provided an opportunity to position the school dynamics within the larger social context.

Valentin's entrance point to the study of educational practices and interpretations of those among the squatter families was, so to speak, in reverse. She initially located her study in the settlement, which she knew from previous fieldwork, and spent the first couple of months familiarizing herself with the people and interviewing both children and elder family members about experiences of education. Only well into the fieldwork did she start following school-going children to their respective schools. Because they attended a range of different schools, she did classroom observations in four state-run schools and made shorter visits to a number of private schools catering to low-income families. In addition to this, she frequently visited the centers of two nongovernmental organizations, which were active in the settlement, among others, by providing scholarships to needy children, setting up adult literacy classes, and organizing various awareness programs. Unlike Pradhan, Valentin did not obtain the same systematic and detailed data that enabled her to comprehend the dynamics of a few educational institutions, but by observing different types of institutions she learned about various pedagogical practices and competing ideas of proper education. Competent in everyday spoken Nepali, she obtained the most invaluable insights into the uncertainties of squatter life through her continuous engagement in the relaxed and informal conversations about joys and sorrows arising over rounds of tea-drinking, peeling potatoes, chatting in the sun, or watching soap Bollywood movies on TV. It was largely by moving beyond the school as an institution, both analytically and in concrete terms (cf. Levinson & Holland, 1996), that she could grasp the dynamics that often hindered access to schooling but that also made people believe firmly in formal education as a pathway to a better life.

While Valentin's early fieldwork was anchored in a territorially defined setting (the squatter settlement) but not limited to it as a bounded field site (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), her later studies on migration from Nepal to, respectively, India and Denmark, raised other methodological challenges in locating "education" in the field. Although addressing widely different types of migration, the role of education in interrelated processes of geographical and social mobility was a common focus of the two projects (Valentin, 2012b, 2015). Informed by a transnational perspective (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), this interest calls for a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which can help identify people's geographical and social mobility over time, border-transgressing networks of social relations in which they engage, and the structures that condition their mobility or immobility. In concrete terms, this means that the ethnographer must either follow people on their journeys (Paerregaard, 2008) or pay attention to the wider spatial and temporal horizons toward which they orient themselves (Olwig & Valentin, 2015b) without losing sight of existing regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). However, it is important to keep in mind that no matter how mobile people are, they are always "in place" somewhere, and that is where we, as ethnographers, meet them.

In her study of Nepali's youth who had migrated to India during or soon after the end of the conflict, Valentin was based in Delhi, where she encountered her informants mainly through existing networks. In terms of social class, caste, and educational status it was a diverse category of people, but they had a common self-ascribed identity as *pravasi Nepali* (Nepali migrant). Because of the challenges in identifying specific geographical locations or institutions with a large concentration of Nepali migrants, it was difficult to find appropriate sites for conducting participant observation. Hence, addressing people's migration and education experiences, she relied much on informal conversations and interviews rather than on observations of actual educational practices. This resulted in an analytical focus on individual narratives, expressed through an idiom of past experiences and future expectations, however still with attention paid to the social context—homes, workplaces, and migrant organizations—in which the meetings took place and which were important sites for observing contemporary migrant life in Delhi.

While ethnographies of education, as our different research shows, could be fruitfully conducted in any location—inside or outside education institutions—the physical location does make a difference for the production of "situated knowledge." The questions that the ethnographers ask demand them to pay close attention to subjective experiences of the researcher and researched within the broader sociopolitical location that shapes education experiences. By grounding ourselves and our research within the broader contexts, ethnographers open up possibilities for comprehending how education in its multiple forms is imagined, performed, and lived amid the unpredictability of everyday lives.

Conclusion

Ethnographers of education around the world have contributed to anthropological theory, building on education research by unraveling the dilemmas in and paradoxes of education and exploring the multiple and often conflicting meanings of education (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2004; Levinson et al., 1996). What is common in this strand of

educational ethnography is an endeavor to deepen our understanding of education, broadly defined, through a rigorous and highly contextualized inquiry that highlights multiple and contested voices and presents subjective modes of perceiving reality. Central to this is how different actors position themselves, sometimes in conjunction with and sometimes at odds with the dominant discourses (Levinson & Holland, 1996; Willis, 1977/1981). In continuation of this, Van Zangen (2012, pp. 313–316) has argued that ethnographers carry a potential to produce contextualized insights on social processes, making ethnography a “subversive activity,” one that could potentially challenge the existing hierarchies and modes of political control. This specific epistemology, or the “ways of seeing” as Wolcott (1999) popularized it, in turn enables a production of a particular kind of knowledge that is engaged in open-ended interpretation of data and presented through fine-grained accounts of educational experiences.

We conclude this article by asking what anthropology can offer to the larger interdisciplinary field of education studies, which has often been limited to schools and other institutions of intentional learning as bounded educational sites. Picking up on a principal concept in anthropology the article unpacked “location” from different perspectives. First, we addressed the ethnographer’s location in the field, that is, how our own educational experiences and personal backgrounds have made us “see” educational phenomena in certain ways and how sociopolitical developments in Nepal and funding priorities have contributed to determine the foci of our research—in other words, how we as ethnographers embodying particular versions of the educated person stemming from our early educational upbringing and later academic socialization engage with matters of educational relevance in the field. Second, a focus on the place—in this case Nepal—as an ethnographic location served as a reminder to always take into consideration not just the historical context in which contemporary ideas of education are shaped but also how these places in themselves have become objects of anthropological inquiry. This ultimately compels us to reflect on the legacies that we as positioned researchers carry into the field and how this influences our understanding of culturally and socially constructed meanings of education in different places. Finally, we discussed the location of education in the field, that is, the specific settings in which we have explored education ethnographically. In doing so, we advocated for an approach to the study of educational processes that does not restrict itself to institutions alone but which is equally committed to include other sites of learning and teaching, not necessarily as an endeavor of the individual researcher’s but of the discipline of educational anthropology.

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Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to list all the important work on ethnographies of education. Notable ones include Stambach (2000), Stambach and Hall (2017), Froerer and Portisch (2012), and Valentin (2005).
2. The term “mother tongue” is used to reflect both popular and official usages. The terms *matri bhasa* (“mother tongue” in Nepali and Tharu) and *ma bhay* (“mother tongue” in Nepal Bhasa) were frequently used by the respondents.
3. Anthropology in Nepal started when the decolonization movement was taking place in other countries in the world. And yet, the earliest anthropological projects focused on mapping and cataloguing different people in Nepal, similar to colonial anthropology elsewhere. The anthropological representation of Nepal thus follows a trajectory of colonial scholarship albeit in a politically noncolonial empirical context of Nepal (see Des Chene [2007] for a detailed discussion).

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