

Doing ethnography in a bilingual and multilingual context

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This paper describes and analyses my role as a bilingual ethnographic researcher in a bilingual school in Sweden. My study is part of the transnational research project "Investigating Discourses of Inheritance and Identity in four Multilingual European Settings" (IDI4MES), funded by the European Science Foundation via HERA - Humanities in the European Research Area. The project consists of case studies in four European settings; Birmingham, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Tilburg. The aim of the project is to analyze literacy and language practices carried out by multilingual and multicultural adolescents in the four settings mentioned above.

The focus of my paper will be on the degree of 'bilingualness' and 'biculturalness' that I as a researcher have had in different school contexts that I have been researching. I am bilingual in Spanish and Swedish and have, in some cases, shared linguistic and cultural capital with the informants. In such contexts, I could be considered as a bilingual and, to a varying degree, bicultural researcher. There are, in my opinion, many advantages to being a bilingual researcher in the context where one is conducting research. First and foremost it is practical to understand the languages in which most school events take place since it allows me as researcher to immediately (without interpretation/translation) understand a particular situation, eg. what students are discussing, what they are laughing at, what they are having difficulties with, etc. Second, sharing the same linguistic capital as the students brings me as researcher closer to the 'in-group', i.e. the students. Third, the mere fact that I as researcher am bilingual, even though not necessarily in the same languages as the students, makes us share the feeling of being a bilingual, i.e. someone who lives their life in at least two languages (my definition). Fourth, as a teacher at one of the schools suggested, by being a Spanish speaking researcher I contribute to the legitimization of the minority language Spanish in a context where Swedish is the dominant majority language, thus raising the status of Spanish in the eyes of the students.

The data collection has also generated data in languages that I do not master. The effects that this has on my role as a researcher will also be discussed. There are many interesting aspects of our roles as ethnographic researchers that would benefit from a deeper analysis and discussion and it is my aim with this paper to contribute to such a discussion.

The sociolinguistic and ethnographic approach to literacy and language practices that is used in the project aims to contribute to the methodological and analytical development of the research field of multilingualism.