Tangled up in School
Critical Analysis and Review

Reema Alsweel
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Jan Nespor


**Introduction**

The author provides a concise summary of the book’s focus and his definition of School ethnography in the introduction. “Instead of treating the school as a container filled with teacher cultures, student subgroups, classroom instruction, and administrative micropolitics, I look at one school, Thurber Elementary, in Roanoke, Virginia, as an intersection in social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school. Instead of looking at educational settings - schools, classrooms, and so forth - as having clear boundaries and identifiable contents, I look at them as extensive in space and time, fluid in form and content; as intersections of multiple networks shaping cities, communities, schools, pedagogies, and teacher and student practices” (p. xiii). The author moves the focus of educational anthropology form just within the classroom, to the many intersections that make up the daily lives of those involved. His focus is to move from looking only within the walls of the schools or classroom because “such focus obscures how political, cultural, and economic forces shape school practice and are articulated with them and ignores the many critical strands of activity that connect schools to life outside schools” (p. xiii). However, he does not abandon schools all together, instead he sees them as a point of entry. In his book, Nespor is able to look at both sociocultural structures and the human agency, a combination that is fairly new in educational anthropology. He does this by examining the different ways the ‘school’ is
connected or disconnected and the many permanent interconnections that exist with the other settings in society like neighborhoods, policies, race…etc (Page, 1999; Hargreaves, 1998).

**Funds of Knowledge**

In this book, Nespor defines funds of knowledge as the “household-centered social networks across which families share essential resources, skills, and information” (p. 34). His view of culture is thus intertwined with funds of knowledge, which he sees as made available by the “networks of activities and associations that intersect in particular times and space” (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 21). Therefore, in this educational anthropological study he focuses on the funds of knowledge brought into and taken out of the school by the different participants, and how they intersect to create a tangled web that must be unraveled so that the observer may be taken in the many different directions it leads. He deducts that the traditional way of being an outside uninvolved observer of a single setting will not be useful to truly grasp what is in front of him.

One interesting point he makes is the move away from the teacher as the only sources of knowledge in the classroom. There is a flow of consistent knowledge not only from the students, but within the community, the parents, the history, the media…etc all those who are involved (but have not been traditionally observed). This knowledge is usually lost because there is this “idea of pedagogy as flowing from an individual teacher and centered entirely on classroom processes [which] closes off concepts of teaching as grounded in relationships… of teaching as a fundamentally communicative activity that stretches beyond the walls of the classroom.” (p. 42)
Here Nespor breaks free from the traditional funds of knowledge observed by those before him, those who seemed interested “in networks or communities that are composed of humans or animate entities” all of which occur face to face and are adult centered. There is a need to look at communities made up of “inanimate or nonhuman elements, have kids as central participants, or are spread across time and space and link people through mass-distributed images” (p. 169). This has become increasingly important in kids lives and it is this funds of knowledge that “connects kids in ways that facilitate the exchange of information and shape lines of friendship and identity” (p. 171). He concludes by stating that it is this heterogeneous network of people and things, which make up the kids funds of knowledge, needs to be look at in order to “examine concepts of community, identity, and consumption” (p. 174).

Identity

Nespor views identity as having many factors, there is no static definition. It is created by living in a community which creates a strong sense of social and physical identity. Children carve out a space for themselves within the community to form their identity within that space using race, social class and gender. It is in the attributes and enforcements of race and ethnicity, which are used “as strategic resources for making sense and shaping identities in particular situations or when dealing with particular topics” (p. 154). It is in the use of objects, which are collected not only for their material value but for “the images, statuses, and meanings the things suggest” (p. 176). Finally, pop Culture is also a key factor in creating identities; it is usually tied to ones core concerns and interests and it helps in shaping their identity. Children manipulate the many symbols in the media and pop culture to move in and out of their funds of knowledge to convey different identities as needed. Thus identity is not a stable element but one that is employed and recreated by the students in order to make sense of what is around them.
Nespor compares the move through identity and its many factors as having multiple bus tickets that take the children to different locations. “This approach to culture enables Nespor to examine the simultaneous existence of multiple (and sometimes competing) cultural resources in a single situation and temporally and spatially dispersed networks that provide them… he explores the improvisational work of individuals and groups as they take up or manipulate cultural resources” (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 21).

African American as Others

As on outsider looking at the American culture through this book it was interesting to know that a lot of those labeled as less advantage kids, i.e. African Americans, were put in that situation by the government and the need to expand and ‘improve’. I felt that these communities that were built by the people and for the people were destroyed for commercial reasons making me feel that those human beings were not viewed as humans at all, but objects in the way (the use of the word ‘clean up’ (p. 86) was very hurtful). City planners and school administrators viewed space as “Euclidean geometric environment of equal, interchangeable elements, emptied of any meaning except those supplied by administrative agendas” versus how the communities that occupied them viewed them as actual “lived spaces that took their meanings from the ways people did things in them”(p. 91). By pushing people out of their environments without truly understanding their needs and their lives and creating makeshift living spaces that ended up being permanent it is not surprising to find that “school became for African American families a space designed for, populated by and controlled by others, it became an abstract product”(p. 91). How then is it expected that these students will succeed when they have been taken away from their lives and placed in a different environment not created for or by them?
Conclusion

In this book, Nespor present an ethnographic method that is fairly new. He shows the school culture as made up of many layers that come together and overlap to create a web, and in order to better understand the web, educators need to untangle it and follow the different lines. As Eisenhart (2001) mentions “the schools are ‘tangled up’, not a microcosm adapted to a particular society; or a separate or coherent entity to be compared to home or community. Rather, it is shown to be tangled up with them in numerous overlapping ways. It is to provoke richer, deeper understandings of the contexts that form a school, to make us think about school in new ways” (p. 23). Nespor shows that it is important for educators to “take their heads out of their classrooms and become more engaged with and literate about the changing world in which their work is performed… [they] need to pay more and more attention to what goes on outside them” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 56).

Nespor raises some interesting questions in the final chapters of his book. One that truly got me thinking was as a researcher one sets up an agenda for his project and goes about in his study according to that agenda; however, one does not ask the researched persons what their agendas may be. This got me wondering how I as a future researcher can go about meeting the many different agendas that may come up and make up my study. I completely agree with Nespor in his idea that research should be conducted not only for other researchers but to benefit those who need it most, the researched. This is something Nespor accomplishes successfully in the first few chapters. He is able to show educators the many factors that place their school within society. By looking at the multiple sources of information, (parents, teachers, principle, superintendent, politics, business, community, neighborhood, and history), Nespor helps
educators become active and not unknowing agents to the many complex elements that make up their classroom culture.

Another interesting point Nespor makes is how the presence of an observer fundamentally shape the outcomes of the interviews. I believe this could be a very interesting research question: how does the presence of an observer or interviewer as an outsider affect the researched and the event? Anthropologists stand on the side and observe the other, but what if it was the other way around? What if the others observed the presence of the researcher and behaved accordingly? Nespor tries and interacts with his subjects which he describes as requiring a certain degree of ‘openness’ and the result is that the kids are more comfortable and open with him and treat him as part of the group and not an ‘other’.

In his conclusion, Nespor believes that he cannot summaries the events he has written about as they will constantly continue to change. He believes that the many layers he presented in the different chapters are too complex to simply reduce. He decides that “instead of rearranging my arguments under a coherent theoretical umbrella, I shake them up one last time” (p. 196). Therefore, I feel that there is no real conclusion; instead there are many layers that together make up the school environment. It is true that this view of intersections is one that helps makes the understanding the school/ student cultural dynamics easier to comprehend. However, his drift in the final chapters from a teacher and school oriented text to a more academic and research oriented one makes his conclusion even more of a blur to those who can benefit from it the most. The book ends with many questions indicating that more research need to be conducted.
References

