

Learning to See the New in the Familiar

Nicholas J. Cutforth, University of Denver

For the past three years I have been a regular visitor to an elementary school in an African-American neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. Most of my time at the school has been spent in the gym working with Mrs. Tracer, the physical education teacher, often observing her work, sometimes doing some teaching myself, and at other times teaching alongside her. After my first visit to her gym, I was both distressed and fascinated by the behaviors of the teacher and her students. I wrote in my journal:

The PE teacher is a nice lady, but her teaching methods come from another era. The kids stand in lines and do exercises which are outdated. There is no skill teaching or social development going on, just games.... In a soccer game, a large girl fell over the ball much to the amusement of all the other kids. She tried to hide her embarrassment... but I could sense how much she was hurting inside and hating the experience. This was typical of what I saw and is a memory which will stay with me for a long time.

My observations did not conform to my beliefs about physical education teaching, and the actions of Tracer and her students differed from anything I had previously experienced. The upper grade physical education program was dominated by units in soccer, floor hockey, and volleyball. Each lesson began with a brief warm-up followed, in the first week of each unit, by practice of essential skills and, in the subsequent four or five weeks, by tournament games. Many of the elements of physical education I considered essential were missing from the curriculum: mastery of a progression of basic movement skills, motor play activities, opportunities for students to cooperate and problem solve, and activities which enabled students to learn about fitness planning. The teacher did not change the rules of games to accommodate the varied skill levels nor did she incorporate skill tests, cognitive tests, or improvement in her grading practices. I saw little evidence that she had remained up to date with current trends or critically reflected upon what she was doing.

In addition to teaching at the school, I have interacted with numerous faculty and students, shared stories and lunches, and helped out at events such as school assemblies, talent shows, and graduation ceremonies. My social immersion in the school has allowed me to be both curious about and familiar with everyday processes in the school while reducing my visibility as an ethnographer. Taking part and sharing in the emotion of these events

Volume 7, Number 1

103

FOR
to Todeschini
ersità degli Studi di Milano, Italy

JURY
JURORIAL TEAM
 L. Bernaert, Belgium; F. Buchberger,
 Austria; K. Byrne, Ireland; I. Bordas, Spain

RD OF CONSULTANTS
est, Raymond Bourdoncle, F. Busch,
etahan, E. Foldberg, D. Hellawell,
ywood, H. G. Klinzing, C. Merazzi,
itter, D. G. Mulcahy, J. J. Peters,
ozarnik, C. Scurati, J. -A. Tschourmy,
niscorte, J. H. C. Vonk

Education examines policies, theories and training of teachers at preservice and of Europe. The official journal of the on in Europe (ATEE), its audience professional concern with or interests in the groups.

SN 0261 - 9768.

Outside EC £195.00/US\$340.00, post free.
 Inside EC £70.00/US\$123.00, post free.

ORDER FORM

institutional ☐ personal rate

ion copy of *European Journal of Teacher Education*.

HING COMPANY

on, Oxfordshire OX14 3UE, UK
235 553559
nellon, Florida 34430-2025, USA

has enabled me to think with the participants as well as about them and has enhanced my understanding of school processes. To use van Maanen's (1988) words, in witnessing daily life in the school I have become a "student of a culture" studying participants' ways of being and seeing as well as my own. I have recorded my experiences in various ways: in a journal, class papers, annual reports to university administrators, letters, and, during last year, as fieldnotes and interview transcripts for my doctoral dissertation. My writing documents aided my development from a confused, naïve, and detached observer to a more informed, contemplative researcher.

The negativity of my early observations of the character of the gym suggests I was looking for what was wrong rather than for what might be right. My initial perceptions of Tracer's program grew from my assumptions of what physical education settings should be like and what children need. However, they failed to take account of the implicit values guiding school life. From studying and interacting with the physical education program, I have better insights into the contextual factors that influence perspectives of this program.

Keeping Perception Open and Receptive

The nature of what is good for students in physical education lessons is a philosophical question I have asked myself and many people in the school over the past year, including Tracer, her students, other teachers, school administrators, and parents. I now regard this question to be considerably more complex than when first writing in my journal three years ago.

Let's return to the initial stages of my working with Tracer and consider why I was often shocked, surprised, and troubled by what I saw. I was fascinated by the ritual to every gym lesson: the students line up outside the gym until told to enter, get dressed, sit in squads for roll call, perform a warm-up and sometimes a drill, and then play a game. The students seemed to expect to be told what to do and did not question anything. Tracer, who is less than five feet tall, seldom prefaced her directions with "Please," or "Let's," or "Would you?" Instead she said, "Shut up," "Shut your mouth," and "Throw your gum away." I was concerned about the emphasis on competitive team games and noticed how important it was for the students to be winners. Points won or goals scored produced much elation. On one occasion, at the end of a volleyball game, a student scrawled "winners" and "losers" in large letters on the chalkboard next to the respective squads.

In observing such episodes I felt uneasy with the seemingly negative manner in which Tracer talked to her students, and how she did not consult them when making decisions about class time and space, nor explain the basis for her decisions. One day I wrote, "The kids seemed to take both the activity and Mrs. Tracer's manner for granted. None of them confronted

her or seemed upset by what they were b the dilemma of whether to object openl

Corrine Glesne (1989) describes "culturally-appropriate" ways in order setting. In Glesne's example, this mear sexist treatment of Sikh women, she cor been allowed to stay. My field notes re the ways students experienced lesson c a basketball catching game in which s eliminated, I wrote: "My feelings of di high. I felt sorry for those kids who unsuccessfully to catch a basketball though several kids were successful, if get better and the weaker kids get wor However, for me to criticize Trace appropriate. Instead I kept my thoug as researcher, I am faced with the d alternatives but not wanting to dest

While I have been learning how Tr always share her viewpoint. The reg form a relationship characterized b port. On reflection, I believe my ou with my comments and actions tov trusting me and sharing informatio shared.

Learning to See What Resides in

As my visits continued, I came Tracer's teaching stemmed solely education. As I read about issu reflected upon my experiences, I vented me from seeing many qua

Teaching in the hot, overcrowd poor acoustics and limited space practices and learning situations While I had my own views about gym, my field notes show many o met with limited success. For ex on my own, any deviation from was likely to leave the students c maintain control. After one les vulnerable without Mrs. Tracer i traditional role of teacher as au Tracer, my lessons allowed me disciplining. As I recorded it: "

about them and has
use van Maanen's
become a "student
seeing as well as my
s: in a journal, class
letters, and, during
my doctoral disserta-
it from a confused,
, contemplative re-

character of the gym
in for what might be
w from my assump-
e and what children
elicit values guiding
physical education
actors that influence

education lessons is
many people in the
ents, other teachers,
this question to be
in my journal three

Tracer and consider
y what I saw. I was
lents line up outside
for roll call, perform
game. The students
t question anything.
d her directions with
id, "Shut up," "Shut
concerned about the
v important it was for
red produced much
e, a student scrawled
l keyboard next to the

seemingly negative
w she did not consult
pace, nor explain the
med to take both the
e of them confronted

her or seemed upset by what they were being asked to do." I struggled with the dilemma of whether to object openly to some of her methods.

Corrine Glesne (1989) describes how a researcher must act in "culturally-appropriate" ways in order to maintain access to her research setting. In Glesne's example, this meant that when faced with the blatant, sexist treatment of Sikh women, she could not object or she would not have been allowed to stay. My field notes record many instances of concern for the ways students experienced lesson content. For example, after watching a basketball catching game in which students who dropped the ball were eliminated, I wrote: "My feelings of disdain for this activity were running high. I felt sorry for those kids whose gym period consisted of trying unsuccessfully to catch a basketball thrown at great speed to them. Although several kids were successful, it seems ridiculous that the better kids get better and the weaker kids get worse when this kind of thing happens." However, for me to criticize Tracer's methods would not have been appropriate. Instead I kept my thoughts to myself and wrote, "Once again as researcher, I am faced with the dilemma of wanting to suggest other alternatives but not wanting to destroy the rapport...."

While I have been learning how Tracer views the act of teaching, I do not always share her viewpoint. The regularity of my visits has enabled us to form a relationship characterized by naturalness, mutual trust, and rapport. On reflection, I believe my outwardly non-judgmental stance along with my comments and actions toward her during these visits led to her trusting me and sharing information that otherwise might not have been shared.

Learning to See What Resides in the Setting

As my visits continued, I came to realize my initial perceptions of Tracer's teaching stemmed solely from my socialization into physical education. As I read about issues surrounding urban education and reflected upon my experiences, I realized my pre-conceptions had prevented me from seeing many qualities in her teaching and her program.

Teaching in the hot, overcrowded gymnasium enabled me to recognize poor acoustics and limited space made it difficult to organize effective practices and learning situations appropriate for better-equipped settings. While I had my own views about what should have been going on in the gym, my field notes show many of my early efforts at teaching in the school met with limited success. For example, when I taught physical education on my own, any deviation from Tracer's strict routine and teaching style was likely to leave the students confused to the point where I struggled to maintain control. After one lesson I wrote: "For a moment I felt quite vulnerable without Mrs. Tracer in the gym." However, when I adopted the traditional role of teacher as authority figure and essentially taught like Tracer, my lessons allowed me to spend more time teaching and less time disciplining. As I recorded it: "The [lesson] went quite well, I was quite

authoritarian, almost like Mrs. Tracer, and the students did really well. Mrs. Tracer came in just as I was finishing and was able to see it (which I was pleased about)."

Second, during games I noticed a great deal of noise, activity, enthusiasm, and corresponding excitement. For example, soccer games engaged attention, allowed movement, demanded fast-paced action, and provided entertainment. Spectators sat on the benches completely absorbed in the action, and when the ball came in their direction they lifted their feet so as not to interfere with the game. The constantly changing substitutes sat with Tracer on the opposite side of the gym, and two boys took part by holding on to the unstable goals. Cries of "Go get it, Trace!" and "Kick it, kick it!" could be heard as legs flew in all directions. Everyone laughed when a female student writhed in mock pain when the ball was kicked against her legs. When goals were scored, Tracer raised her fist in the air, sharing in the excitement and jubilation. My notes read:

The game was quite exciting. I was impressed by the emotional involvement of the students in the game and also by the happy atmosphere around this gym. There was so much effort being expended on the floor and as much energy being shown by the observers.

The students' perceptions of their physical education experience added an equally valuable dimension to my interpretation. At the end of one lesson I asked a student if she had enjoyed the game: "Yes, it was fun. Everybody passed it a lot. We played like a team. It was cool." Actually, in my view the students had not played as a team in the traditional sense of passing the ball and helping each other. I wrote afterwards: "Perhaps kicking a ball in the same direction as five other classmates represents this student's concept of teamwork." And on another occasion: "The [students'] skills are really poor, but they have fun. Is this so bad?"

Third, students told me they discussed upcoming games in Tracer's class on the telephone, on the playground, and in the classroom; classroom teachers said they knew from students' behaviors when tournaments were taking place in gym. From my conversation with teachers and parents, I wondered whether the sports media contributed to students' intense desire to win. Perhaps the gym is the only setting where certain students can experience success.

Finally, Delpit's (1988) discussion of African-American children's understanding of direct and indirect commands, of their expectations for teacher authority, and of differences between middle-class and working-class speech provided me with an alternative lens through which to see Tracer's actions in the gym. For example, it was not uncommon for her to glare at a misbehaving child and say, "You're mother said that I could whoop you." When waiting for her eighth grade students to get dressed and be quiet, Tracer would frown at them and say, "Park your rear end on that black line. Fold your legs and sit up. You sound like the fifth graders." In interviews, eighth graders have told me the following: "If she didn't

have that cor
us around be
to goof aroun
her students

Genuine ca
expressed in
complexity o
by the words
about them.
exterior she
"They know
beneath the
love you too,
you care abo
concerned, I

Tracer is p
Older boys v
on her shoul
often hug h
Sometimes s
an eighth gr
while waitin
glaring at hi
to overstep l
ball to her, h
I would eith

Recognizin

One role c
researcher i
in a manner
or she proce
interpreting
can drain te
(1992) descri

My instin
from what I
to what I s
instincts co
stand this e
me to see pe
I would not
observing a
meaning" (C
has enable

Volume 7, N

really well. e it (which I ty, enthusi- es engaged d provided rbed in the ir feet so as ites sat with by holding it, kick it!" ed when a against her aring in the

have that control, they'd think they could run over her," and "She bosses us around because she wants the best for us. She wants us to learn and not to goof around." I also learned to notice occasions of subtle humor and how her students enjoy these moments of levity.

Genuine caring exists between Tracer and her students which is not expressed in words. In one of many acknowledgments of the moral complexity of her practice, I wrote: "If Mrs. Tracer were to be judged solely by the words that she says to the kids, she could be accused of not caring about them. However, it seems that they know that underneath her hard exterior she really cares." She believes students respect her sternness: "They know that what I say, I mean I'm not playin'." She also believes beneath the sternness they see a caring teacher: "You have to tell them, 'I love you too,' ... that you care about them, that you [are] bein' mean because you care about the way they are behavin' and you are concerned. If I wasn't concerned, I wouldn't care."

Tracer is popular and genuinely respected by students and colleagues. Older boys will sometimes express their feelings for her by putting a hand on her shoulder, older girls will stroke her hair, and younger children will often hug her on the playground, in the hallways, or during gym class. Sometimes students' actions suggest awe. I remember one occasion when an eighth grade boy playfully knocked a basketball from under her arm while waiting to enter the gym. She pretended to be angry, and while glaring at him said, "Give me back that ball, boy!" The boy was careful not to overstep his limits and after a couple of bounces dutifully returned the ball to her, having reveled in gaining her attention. During my early visits, I would either have missed such incidents or perceived them differently.

Recognizing What is Seen and Not Seen

One role of the researcher is as "neutral broker" (Elliot, 1988). Here the researcher is a detached individual who wants to collect and process data in a manner free from subjective bias. The broker is "neutral" because he or she processes the interpretations and judgments of respondents without interpreting or judging their educational practice. Such a role implies one can drain teaching of much of its uncertainties and ignore what MacDonald (1992) describes as the "chronic messiness of daily practice."

My instincts as a teacher, however, prevented me from being detached from what I was studying. And while they made it possible for me to react to what I saw and care about whether it was "good" or "bad," those instincts contribute to the difficulty I experience when trying to understand this environment. This continuous struggle has, over time, enabled me to see personal qualities of Tracer, her students, and her program which I would not have thought possible at the beginning. In addition to merely observing and describing events in the gym, I have learned to "read the meaning" (Barfield, 1977) of Tracer's and others' texts. This new literacy has enabled me to see not only what is valued in a teacher's practice, but

the cultural, social, and personal forces that may influence what is valued. In this, my fourth year of visits to the school, I remain both a cultural outsider and insider. My role as researcher continues to be entwined with my involvement in other aspects of school life. Presently, I am sharpening my interpretation of activity in the gym and my ability to collect participant perspectives in order to reveal underlying images related to what is collectively understood as good and right educational practice. What features of Tracer's practice contribute to meaningful experiences for students? How do her actions embody her view of a good life? These are but a few of the questions I am able to pursue now that I have learned how to see the new in what, at the start, I mistook as the familiar.

Notes

1. Portions of this article were presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, Chicago, November 1993.
2. The author is indebted for comments and support to Dr. David T. Hansen, College of Education, University of Illinois-Chicago.

References

- Barfield, O. (1977). *The rediscovery of meaning*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Education Review*, 58 (3), 280-298.
- Elliot, J. (1988). Educational research and outsider-insider relations. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1(2), 155-166.
- Glesne, C. (1989). Rapport and friendship in ethnographic research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2(1), 45-54.
- MacDonald, J. (1992). *Teaching: Making sense of an uncertain craft*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.