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Learning in Educational Settings: What Classics Can Teach Us about the Value of Attending to Participant Perspectives in Social Practices

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The background of this article is an interest in the value of attending to participant perspectives when exploring educational activities. By including participant perspectives as objects of inquiry, I refer to an explicit attempt to capture, describe and analyse the nature of engagement participants display as they contribute to classroom practices, online activities, play or any other kind of socially situated practice. For instance, being a student or pupil in a class or an adult learner may be seen as engaging in clearly defined roles with specific entitlements and obligations, transparent to everyone. Yet, students in the same class, or all those who can be described as adult learners, differ in the ways they engage in their everyday practices; their motives will differ as will their interpretations of what is expected of them as participants (Sahlström & Lindblad, 1998; Illeris, 2003). A minority student, a student with learning difficulties or a student living under conditions of personal stress, may perceive an instructional setting very differently from students with other backgrounds, and this difference may be consequential for the nature of their participation and possibilities to learn. Participant perspectives are explored by focussing on the experiences of being involved in a situation. Various strands of phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry explicitly provide tools for gaining access to human experiences (Dieumegard et al., 2019), but I will argue that the attention to participant perspectives is worthwhile as a general element when analysing learning, and it may enrich our

understanding of education/instruction. Our capacity to theorize learning in an increasingly diverse world will be strengthened by attending to the nature of engagement that participants display inside and outside institutional settings. I will illustrate this by referring to and summarizing some classical studies in the history of educational research, which, in my opinion, have added lasting insights about learning by attending to participants' perspectives. A common element of these studies is that the research operates in what I, following Hanson (1958), will refer to as a "context of discovery". i.e. the assumption is that the details of the activities we refer to as learning cannot be known or understood until we have in-depth insights into student engagement.

The tension between structure and agency

In the social and human sciences, there is a classical and important tension referred to as the structure-agency divide. This divide reflects differences between research and theories that, on the one hand, focus on how social structures determine human action and life trajectories, and, on the other hand, theories that take everyday social action as the basic point of departure when analysing human activities and the organization of society. When studying education, and socialization more generally, the structural, or functionalist, perspective implies that the focus is on how people are shaped and constrained by structures and by institutional conditions of their society, such as social background/class, family origin, cultural capital and other factors. This position, shared by otherwise irreconcilable perspectives such as marxism and the functionalism of the founder of educational sociology Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and others, implies that structure and institutions maintain social order and make society possible (in the marxist version this happens to the detriment of the majority of citizens in capitalist societies). The role of education and learning is to make people fit into mainstream society and avoid what at a given time is seen as "deviance" (which, given the social climate, may be criminality, homosexuality, left handedness, atheism etc.). The central principle guiding research is that people are not independent of their social origin, and macro-conditions essentially determine processes of

socialization at the micro-level. Research conducted in such traditions often points to how social privileges, such as educational success, career and income, gender etc. correlate with the opportunities people have in society.
The alternative perspective builds on the assumption that social structures and institutions are grounded in, and exist through, social action. That is, social structure and institutions are continuously ”made” by people in and through their everyday social actions. Schools are schools because people (students, teachers and others) come there every day and ”do schooling” by engaging in teaching, learning and socializing. In this bottom-up perspective, ordinary and mundane social actions produce and maintain the continuities we recognize as social structure. A central assumption in traditions, such as micro-sociology, social phenomenology, cultural psychology and certain branches of social psychology, ethnomethodology and other approaches, is that human agency plays a central role in social life. That is, people exert agency and have the capacity to modify social activities and perhaps even shape their own lives. They may also contribute to transforming activities as well as institutions. Following this line of reasoning, attempts to analyse social practices thus make it necessary to pay attention to participant involvement and perspectives on what they are engaged in. The general spirit of much of this line of thinking is captured in suggestive formulations by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), one of the founders of ethnomethodology, when he argues that people are neither ”puppets” controlled by the strings of their social origin, nor are they ”cultural dopes” mindlessly following social norms (cf., Lynch, 2012).

This contrast between perspectives, or even world-views, is consequential at many levels in research, including issues such as how research problems are formulated, what methods are considered relevant for research and what counts as interesting results. For instance, in terms of research outcomes, a focus on structure implies that researchers are expected to produce strong (or sometimes lack of) causal relations between the conditions where people are socialized and their educational trajectories. Such causal connections are generally hard to prove in a strict sense, so

what research often produces are correlations between backgrounds and outcomes, and, if these are significant in the statistical sense, an interesting result has been reached. In a more agentic perspective, the expected outcome is to document and analyse the functional nature of social practices, for instance how people act and interact when in contexts of teaching and learning, and the consequences this will have for the participants and the institution in terms of interactional dominance, problem solving, learning and socialization more generally. Case studies, documentation of concrete practices and descriptions of how they unfold provide the means by which social action can be understood and explained in functional terms and as situated in specific activities. Interesting questions concern what can be learned at a general level from such cases and detailed inquiry, thus the generalization being conceptual rather than statistical (for examples, see below). In the post-Second World War period, leading social scientists, such as Antony Giddens (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) (1977) and Peter Berger (1929-2017) and Thomas Luckmann (1927-2016) (1966) and many others have attempted to bridge this gap by suggesting how structure and social action are neither separate, nor mechanically related, but rather interdependent, evolving and dialectically interwoven in complex societies.

Researching teaching, learning and education in the context of the structure-agency tension

In the study of learning, instruction and socialization, this difference between research perspectives is important to keep in mind. It points to the crucial role of perspective-taking in research, and the importance of considering what can be learned about the social world through different approaches and in relation to the knowledge interests of the communities that will use the results (Habermas, 1968). Thus, macro-analyses of the correlations between social backgrounds and educational performance, provide interesting results for policy and politics, and fit well into media and public discussions about education. Ministers of education,

policymakers and others will comment when results from international comparative studies are published, especially PISA[1] results, which are marketed through extensive media coverage as valid indicators of the effectiveness of educational systems (Landahl, 2020; Landahl & Lundahl, 2017). However, in many respects such studies provide less of value for teachers, educationalists and other professionals engaged in the daily practices of instruction and supporting students in classroom environments. The latter have slightly different knowledge interests in their professional activities. The results of large-scale studies are aggregated at a level which is very abstract in relation to the concrete task of teaching mathematics or language to diverse learners in an increasingly differentiated educational landscape.

Three elements in the research strategies that accompany the structure-agency divide are important to consider in the context of studying teaching and learning (and many other social phenomena). First, mainstream research in the structural perspective generally works in what Hanson (1958) describes as the ”context of verification.” This implies that the variables in terms of which backgrounds and outcomes are described (age, intelligence, educational performance measures, scores on scales of motivation etc.) are decided on prior to the concrete research effort is launched. Traditionally, researchers would even formulate hypotheses of the expected relationships before they generated their data. Research at the opposite strand, focusing on how people engage in social interaction, generally operates in what Hanson refers to as the ”context of discovery”. In this context, the focus is on how a social activity or situation evolves or the consequences it has for participants. This is not assumed to be known beforehand, but rather emerges from the research and the situated understanding it produces.

Second, mainstream research generally focuses on *products* of teaching and learning. This can be seen in most large-scale studies, international comparative research of educational performance and similar approaches. Such studies, however, say very little about

[1] Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA

processes of teaching and learning, i.e. about how students come to know, and how teachers and others may help them to do so. As John Dewey (1859-1952) (1963, 1966) emphasized throughout his long career in philosophy and education, it is not possible to infer the process of learning by looking at the product. Following a similar line of argumentation, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), the most influential developmental psychologist of all time, argued that IQ test results primarily document products of thinking. They do not show how children think in daily activities, nor, even more importantly, how they develop intellectually. Development primarily has to do with qualitative aspects of cognitive functions, not with having more or less of the same intellectual ”stuff.” This was a revolutionary insight in its time, and Piaget drew the conclusion that he and his many collaborators had to attend to children's perspectives on the world if they were to understand development (Piaget, 1973). They did this by observing and interviewing children and listening to how they interpreted the social and natural world they live in, and which provides the physical and communicative ecology which their cognitive development adapts to. This intellectual turn-around, focusing children's perspectives, implied that he embarked on research in the ”context of discovery”, where the characterization of development eventually was the result of research, rather than something that was assumed to be known beforehand.

As a third point, instruction and educative processes largely rely on inter-personal communication in shared spaces (which nowadays occasionally may be digital). For professional knowledge to appear relevant in such situations, insight into participant perspectives is essential. This implies that there is an interest for one actor (the teacher/researcher) in understanding how another person or group of persons (pupils/students/apprentices) interpret a situation, a problem, a formula or a concept (cf., Vosniadou, 2008; Scott et al., 2013). There is also a need to observe and understand learners' involvement in activities and their concrete engagement as they attempt to learn, solve problems or teach. Teaching is a communicative and situated enterprise, rich in indexical contributions to communication, such as: ”what do you mean?”, ”think carefully” and ”do you remember what we talked about last

week?", which are contingent on what is, and has been, said and done in a classroom or in some other interactional context. Studies of learning in various academic subjects, for instance, seek to clarify how learners understand what they encounter and what they are supposed to learn (cf., Ametller et al., 2007; Duit, 2007). Again, when such activities are researched, the questions will concern qualitative issues as they were in Piaget's (and other developmentalists') studies: a focus on understanding how people approach tasks, what they struggle with, how far they get and the nature of support that would be productive.

The historical primacy of the functionalist perspective in research

In a historical perspective, the view of structure as primary, and individual and collective action as secondary, was a foundational assumption of most social sciences emerging in the 19th century, and it was built into the core of their research agenda. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), originally a philosopher, formulated the basic doctrines of positivism as guiding principles for sociology, a term he suggested for the new, empirically orientated, discipline dedicated to using empirical methods to study social issues (Lenzer, 1998). The road forward for the study of society and human behaviour, positivists argued, must be to model social science on the natural sciences, especially physics, which was seen as the "Queen science" in terms of objectivity, logic and theorizing. By using experiments, objective data and variables that can be reliably measured, and by incorporating other methods and analytical procedures of the more advanced sciences, social science would make progress and find its place as a recognized scientific enterprise. This intellectual climate implied that the empirical disciplines branching off from philosophy during this period (mid-19th to mid-20th century), such as sociology, psychology, educational research and other areas, were shaped in an era of positivist epistemological ideals, where universal laws of causality were seen as scientific and as providing the model for the expected outcome of scholarly inquiry.

In passing, it is interesting to note, however, that alternative perspectives and opposing voices about how to conduct research in the human and social sciences appeared during this period as well. Perhaps the most well-known of these alternative traditions is hermeneutics, a philosophy and epistemology with many interpretations, but where the essential element is a focus on interpretation and understanding of human activities, experiences and predicaments (cf., e.g., Gallagher, 1992; Ihde, 1999). Another, and in some respects related, tradition is phenomenology and phenomenological inquiry, which also has many interpretations, but where the focus is on human experience as the primary source of knowing about the world for people (Giorgi, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) attempted to formulate a foundation for phenomenological research which has inspired many social scientists, all the way from literary scholars to computer scientists. A third tradition, which is highly significant in the specific context of educational research, emerging at about the same time, is pragmatism, associated with scholars such as William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Pragmatism has played, and continues to play, an important role in educational research . Here, processes of learning, knowing and instruction are conceptualized very differently than in mainstream research (cf., Clancey, 2011; Garrison et al., 2022).

This brief account sketches the legacy of social science research, and the intellectual climate in which it developed. To be scientific, generally meant to adapt to a positivist ideal about how to generate data and how to do research to reach universal and causal laws of human behaviour that mimic what can be found in the study of atoms. Other traditions have had to argue for their perspectives to qualify as research against the backdrop of these, often taken-for-granted, assumptions. At a practical level, it is not surprising that such traditions have dominated the research agenda. Most questions that were raised, and continue to be raised, have been formulated from institutional and systemic perspectives: how can we make schooling more effective? How can we increase the performance on tests of educational outcomes? What are the life careers of people who have graduated from upper-secondary school in relation to those who have not? These are perfectly

legitimate questions to raise in the context of analysing systems where people spend increasing extended periods of their lives. But they do not necessary provide a complete, or even informative, background for understanding instruction, learning and development as daily practices in classrooms and other sites where human talents are cultivated.

The historical development of research on learning, development and to a large extent teaching, mirrors the general pattern described above. Modern empirical research on learning (and cognition more generally), for instance, first appeared as experimental work in the psychological laboratories in Germany and the USA during the latter half of the 19th century. The experiments were supposed to demonstrate the methods that produce the best performance and/or the best retention of what was learned. Although some interesting results emerged from this research, for instance the role of rehearsal in memorizing (Ebbinghaus, 1885), the results were hard to generalize to anything beyond the rather peculiar laboratory setting itself. A classroom situation, by comparison, is infinitely more complex and dynamic than a controlled laboratory setting, and it has proven hard to generalize between contexts. Later, a range of other perspectives on learning and development emerged, and they often rely on observations and other qualitative data originating in analyses of classrooms and other contexts of instruction and learning (see below).

Thus, the alleged conflict between quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods in social science that has been debated for so long is exaggerated and generally not very illuminating. There are questions of a quantitative and causal (even if causality in a strict sense is rarely, if ever, achieved) nature between variables that lend themselves to quantification, and there are questions that concern how children (and adults) think and develop, what they find difficult to cope with, how they develop friendships or solve conflicts and other issues of relevance to professional activities. The latter kind of research by necessity involves paying attention to participant perspectices and has grown in significance when societies become more diverse in terms of their organization,

institutional arrangements and aspirations for citizenship than what was the case when social science emerged. Social transformations such as migration, multiculturality, digitalization, prolongation of education, democratization, minority rights, gender issues, a rapidly expanding knowledge base and changing labour markets make the social fabric of society much more complex.

In the wake of these societal changes, accelerating in the post-Second World War period, additional questions about the nature of learning, schooling and education thus become visible. This is hardly surprising. Examples of such questions would be: How do we support learning by newly arrived immigrants in schools and classrooms? (Bunar, 2015); Why do so many students lose interest in learning in general or in learning science/maths/foreign languages or whatever? (Anderhag et al., 2016); How do children/pupils/students learn to understand proportional reasoning? (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Vanluydt et al., 2020) or the concept of evolution (Sinatra et al., 2003)?; How do teachers prevent racism and handle controversial political, religious and other issues in classrooms? (Flensner et al., 2021; Jovanović & Marić, 2020)?; How do patients learn to monitor their own health by using mobile technologies (Bengtsson et al., 2018) and so on. Questions of this kind invite research approaches that consider how learning is organized in different social practices and require in-depth insight into the communicative dynamics of these settings, i.e. they concern the *what* and *how* of teaching, learning and knowing in an increasingly complex society and here participant perspectives are central for theorizing as well as intervention.

Researching learning, development and the communication of knowledge: including participant perspectives

All societies have a need to reproduce the knowledge and skills which have emerged through history in that particular community. This implies that they must create contexts and institutions that

allow for young people to engage with, and contribute to the development of, the ”cultural memory” of their society (Donald, 2018). There must be interactional niches, where knowledge and skills are encountered and where they may be picked up by newcomers, who later will carry them on to new generations in a never-ending cycle. In this dynamic, it is interesting to analyse learner perspectives and participation in social practices, whether these are designed for learning or not. In fact, the more complex society becomes, the more we have to learn throughout life and outside formal instructional settings as well. Digital skills, which most people have learned outside formal schooling, exemplify this pattern.

In spite of the historical dominance of mainstream research, there are many classics in educational research that have provided important insights into how educational institutions operate, and they have done so by using a bottom-up approach focussing on participant perspectives and engagement. Just to exemplify, in *Life in classrooms*, Philip W. Jackson (1928-2015) (1968), originally a psychologist, reported a study of the daily lives of teachers and students in classrooms. His research approach is ethnographic, involving extensive participant observation of what teachers and students do in class, and his work followed the logic of research in the context of discovery of avoiding to make too many initial commitments about the nature of social interaction in these settings. What Jackson shows is how teaching, when analysed in its own right, is an inherently complex and ”opportunistic process”, where ”neither the teacher nor the students can predict with any certainty exactly what will happen next.” In this social dynamic, ”[p]lans are forever going awry and unexpected opportunities for the attainment of educational goals are constantly emerging” (p. 67). Thus, the teachers he followed had to innovate and adapt to situations in ways that they found to be conducive to learning. He shows how teachers developed skills in ”crowd control” in the attempts to handle ”as many as 1000 interpersonal exchanges” every day in school. Taking the student perspective, he shows how they learned an important skill in this particular social setting: how to wait. They waited for teacher attention, for assignments to be given out, for their turn to respond, for the lesson to be over and so

on. The analyses point to some of the many peculiarities of this communicative eco-system which are not prevalent elsewhere in society.

Jackson's study focuses participants' perspectives, and it provides a very different and down-to-earth account of the communicative logic of classroom activities, and what teachers and students do. Jackson's work is a case study and this is interesting because it points to a different kind of generalizability than the statistical one guiding mainstream research. One central conclusion of his analyses, among others, is that there is a clear pattern that regulates the activities and that is not the official curriculum. He referred to this pattern as "the hidden curriculum" (p. 33) of the classroom, i.e. the socialization that follows as students adapt to values, norms and expectations that they learn to identify in the classroom and school culture. The hidden curriculum is not taught, but rather inferred by students as they comply with expectations which are largely tacit. In this process, students learn about themselves, their performance and how they are perceived by teachers and by the institution. The concept of hidden curriculum is thus a product of research conducted in the context of discovery, and this idea had a strong impact on research and on the public debate about education. It is a conceptual generalization by means of which we can understand and discuss educational practices and socialization of young people. A search in some of the leading databases shows that there are hundreds, if not more, studies that continued on the basis of this finding, exploring how socialization and cultural reproduction are organized and how students struggle to adapt to classroom life.

Another classic study, carried out in university settings, is the seminal work by William G. Perry *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A Scheme* (1970). This study is interesting at different levels. In a developmental perspective, what Perry analyses is intellectual and ethical development among adults, university students. In most theorizing, development has been seen as a research topic that is relevant for children and young people. The dominant conception at the time construed development as something that was completed at a specific age and

usually quite early in life. In Piaget's case, children were assumed to reach the "formal operational" (and most advanced) stage at around 12 years of age (Piaget, 1952). By this age the cognitive structures – schemas as Piaget referred to them – characterizing adulthood and mature logical thinking were present. What Perry shows in his research is that people do develop beyond this as they are exposed to and adapt to new opportunities. Thus, development has no final stage or end point, it may well extend into adulthood. This position later has become widely accepted, for instance in the context of adult education, and it is a basic premise in sociocultural research on learning and development (Säljö, 2023). Perry's interest in student learning grew out his work as student counsellor at one of the most selective and prestigious universities in the USA. What he noticed during his long-term career as counsellor was that in spite of the selection of students that took place before joining this institution, and the fact that those enrolled were all graduates with top grades wherever they came from, there were students who failed. As a counsellor these were the students he met. But in these encounters, he had no reason to doubt their scholastic capacities. Rather, there had to be something about teaching and learning at the university that did not match the expectations or experiences of these students. Put differently, student failure and even drop out did not happen by accident, there had to be something that was going on in the daily practices of teaching and learning that students could not cope with. He started gathering data systematically by interviewing students repeatedly and documenting how they studied.

One of the central conclusions of his work is that many of the students who failed had difficulties adapting to the nature of learning and the conceptions of knowledge on which teaching and learning were based in the university context. For example, some students assumed that knowledge–what they were supposed to acquire–was either correct or incorrect, i.e. they had a "dualist" conception of knowledge as either true or false as Perry puts it. What they expected was to learn (i. e., memorize) were the "truths" of their area of study. However, what they encountered was a more "relativistic" and expansive interpretation of the nature of knowledge. Teachers argued that there were different, and

sometimes even conflicting perspectives on a particular issue, and different research methods were used and yielded slightly different research results. They expected analyses and arguments for positions and claims. Thus, the basic assumption that guided much of the teaching was that what is true or correct in a scientific sense depends on the theories and perspectives used in scholarly inquiry. One theory points in one direction, another one in a slightly different direction, and conflicts between positions are frequent and, in fact, even expected. When facing argumentation of this kind presented by the teachers in class and in seminars, students with "dualist" conceptions were confused. Their assumption was that they expected the teacher to give them the correct answers and not to take a detour of presenting all these alternative perspectives. Perry then describes how students, though not all, embark on a journey where they develop conceptions of knowledge that allow for the existence of multiple perspectives ("multiplicity"), and they accept that there is not always one correct position or best method. Intellectual work relies on flexibility and the capacity to see problems, and the world, from different perspectives. What they learn is that knowledge, to some extent, is contextual and subject to modification as time goes on and new findings emerge. Perry also shows how this developmental trajectory has implications for students' ethical argumentation and the acceptance of more world-views in terms of religious beliefs and other respects.

Again, this research is in the context of discovery and builds on an in-depth documentation and analysis of a specific social context, the university. The rationale for this work is that there has to be something that happens in the setting that is functionally related to the fact that students succeed or fail. It is not the general capacity for learning of students that is the issue, nor is it their ambitions or motivation, rather it is what they do and how they engage in local academic practices that is decisive. The generalization that follows from this is that learning is not a uniform phenomenon if you pay attention to participant perspectives. Different students hold different interpretations of what it means to learn, and this will guide their concrete learning practices. This is a result that can be generalized at the conceptual level to many university and other

settings as extensive research has shown (cf., e.g., Entwistle, 2009; Marton & Säljö, 1984; Ramsden, 1988).

One of the basic ideas of the above examples is that learning and meaning-making are not general and abstract phenomena, they are always situated in social practices. In addition, the examples show the value of attending to participant perspectives and what they engage in as they go about learning. This type of knowledge is relevant for understanding difficulties that students may have and it provides a basis for interventions. Making claims about learning thus implies situating the argumentation in a context where there is a particular kind of learning, in these cases within educational institutions. But learning is also an element of many other settings, including professional practices. Several studies, conducted in a context of discovery, have shown what professional learning involves using similar approaches. The anthropologist Chuck Goodwin (1994) analysed how professionals develop what he refers to as ”professional vision”, i.e. ways of perceiving objects and processes that are relevant for a particular professional group. In one of his studies, Goodwin (1997) shows how learning was orchestrated on board a research vessel, where chemists engaged in analysing water and water quality. In one of these activities, novice members of the team on board had to learn how to take a test of water using a a piece of string which served as an indicator of water quality by changing colours. The point here was to learn to stop a chemical reaction when the material became ”jet-black” as opposed to just ”black.” Thus, this colour category of jet-black is specific to this community, and it derives its significance from the role it plays in judgements and expertise in this particular activity. It is not a preformulated category that can be acquired outside the practices of the scientists, and it has no specific meaning outside the specific testing described. In order to be competent members of the team, the apprentices–newcomers–had to be scaffolded to appropriate the relevant distinction between black and jet-black by the more experienced members of the team through verbal and non-verbal guidance and through exposure to samples at various stages. The experts would attune the perceptions of the novices by asking questions and by helping to them to distinguish jet-black from other kinds of black. Other examples of professional learning,

and what the transition from novice to expert implies in a participant perspective, can be found in research on learning how to read medical images in professionally relevant ways (Asplund et al., 2011; Gegenfurtner et al., 2019), how meteorologists learn to interpret satellite images to make weather forecasts and study the atmosphere (Hoffman et al., 2017), how master mariners make students accountable for their decisions when navigating in simulators (Sellberg et al., 2021) or how student architects through critique by experts learn to see what is a relevant way of analysing architectural design (Lymer, 2009). The examples of analyses of learning and knowing in participant perspectives may be multiplied, but I will not go further here.

Concluding remarks

The main point of the argumentation above is to argue for the value of research that takes the participant perspective when attempting to understand learning and development. Thus, research approaches differ in terms of methods and explanatory frameworks, but so do the questions that are asked about educational processes in increasingly complex and knowledge-intensive societies. It is important to consider the central role that research in the context of discovery may play in inquiries into educational practices. Today, young people in many parts of the world spend 9 or 12 years in educational settings. If we include preschool and university, a substantial proportion of children and young adults spends 15 years or more of their lives in educational institutions. To an increasing extent, we live in an ”education society” (Nilsson, 2006). This observation implies that schooling becomes a more complex research topic, where a multitude of issues have to be taken into account in research: learning, cognitive development, literacy skills, identity development, friendship, health and well-being and so on. In the study of educational success, history has shown that it is tempting to ”import” explanations that have their origin in research in other contexts. For instance, during recent decades, explanations of school failure to a large extent have been based on categories that have been imported from neuropsychiatric and neuropsychological disciplines. Earlier in

history we have seen how intelligence testing provided similar accounts of children who were unable to participate in education.

An alternative strategy for research, is to analyse educational practices as they unfold and try to understand how they can be modified and improved on the basis of analyses and theorizing that concern education as an institutional activitity and by paying attention to participant perspectives. This implies engaging more intensively with the *description* of educational processes and how children/students succeed or fail when participating. This implies both describing what they do, and how they cope with various situations from an analytical point of view, but also giving a voice to children (and other learners) by articulating their perspective on what happens in school. In studies of student welfare meetings when school problems are attended to by teachers and experts, it seems to be quite unusual that the student's own perspective on what has happened, and why it has happened, becomes part of the agenda and the decision-making. Rather, institutional perspectives dominate situations when the future of students is decided on (Hjörne & Säljö, 2019; Tegtmejer et al., 2018).

A related argument for focusing on concrete practices and participant perspectives in research is to retain the *integrity* of educational (and other social) phenomena. Educational practices are very diverse as are students. Education also has many goals: learning, personal development, the promotion of a democratic and tolerant mind-set and contributing to equity exemplify what current curricula say about what should be achieved. This implies that there is a multitude of considerations that have to be taken into account as instruction is planned, implemented and evaluated. A consequence of this increasing diversity is that access to participant perspectives and experiences gives a broader and more fine-tuned conceptual background for understanding how students adapt to and engage in classroom and other practices. This is an important source of knowledge for those responsible for teaching and learning in the expanding educational systems across the world.

As a final point, and from the perspective of understanding learning and development, it is important to realize that they are *situated* phenomena. By initial commitment to abstract ideas about what constitutes learning, and by relying on data that refer solely to products, a complex reality of many diverse activities is subsumed under a very abstract heading. Learning is a multifaceted and diverse process, and by increasing our understanding of what promotes and supports the kinds of engagements that result in learning, our capacities to intervene and support will increase. Adopting this knowledge interest, analysing and giving voice to participant perspectives is vital, even necessary.

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