

## **The impossible dream: challenges in reporting an institutional ethnography of a government primary school in Ethiopia**

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### **Background of the study**

From 2000 – 2001 EC<sup>1</sup> I worked as a teacher training coordinator at a government college in Tigray, Ethiopia with the international development organisation VSO. The government's educational reform agenda sought to introduce participative evaluation and development planning in schools, and continuous professional development for teachers (Mitchell 2014). These reforms have been widely accepted by governments around the world and acquired the status of 'global education policies' (Verger et al. 2012), yet teachers and principals in Tigray questioned their relevance to the contexts in which they were working, and I too began to question the cross-cultural relevance of the values and relations implicated in these policies (Guthrie 2011; Tabulawa 2013). It was this perceived policy/context gap, and the under-researched nature of Ethiopian schools as social and educational institutions which provided the initial impetus for my current PhD research at a government primary school in Tigray region. I am developing an ethnographic case study which attends to the perspectives of the school community – students, teachers, parents and *woreda* [local authority] officials – to address the questions:

- What and whose purposes are served by the school? And
- How are the interests and agendas of different groups mediated by processes and structures in the school?

The fieldwork phase of this study comprised 6 months of data collection at 'Ketema School', spanning the end of 2006 EC academic year, and the beginning of 2007 EC (i.e. April – December 2014). This involved me attending lessons, meetings and cultural events in and around the school, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Ethiopian calendar is 7 years and 9 months behind the Gregorian calendar used in Europe and other parts of the world.

a sustained focus on the activities of a single class of students as they progressed through Grade 6 and into Grade 7. Important data sources in this study are:

- *Fieldnotes from participant observation.* Roughly 1/2 million words of fieldnotes and 2000+ photographs, including observational data of activities in school, participant accounts (what people told me), and transcriptions of the ‘talk in action’ of people in the setting (Lofland & Lofland 2006).
- *Institutional texts.* A variety of texts, for e.g. exercise books, posters and minutes from meetings.

Analysis is currently in progress, and reporting will explore the social organisation of students in the class (particularly ‘one to five’ student networks and monitors), and ‘the meeting’ as a site for mediating the interests and agendas of different groups.

### **Challenges to analysis and reporting**

This section of the paper shares some methodological challenges encountered in the course of this institutional ethnography, particularly during the current phase of analysis and reporting. These and related issues gave rise to the musical reference in the title of this paper, a recurrent ‘earworm’ for me during fieldwork. The quest ‘to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe’ (Leigh & Darion 1965) encapsulates my feelings towards the ethnographic approach, which – like the romantic ideals of Don Quixote – is simultaneously desirable and unattainable.

#### *Partial, incomplete knowledge*

The more I come to know about the school, the greater is my awareness of gaps and biases in my knowledge (this irony has been noted by Agar, 1996). While an institutional case study is necessarily ‘multivocal’, I have found capturing a representative range of voices to be unmanageable. Take teachers, for example, as a single tier of the school community. A wide range of characteristics seemed to be associated with patterns of perspective and activity amongst teachers, including gender, generation, religious affiliation (Orthodox Christian, Muslim), contract (permanent, temporary), Party membership and initial post-school qualification. Any individual teacher will display a different mix of these and other important characteristics, and it is not possible to attend equally to all. While I used various means to elicit accounts from different sections of the school community, my data collection and analysis are necessarily influenced by those with whom I had closest relations. Open coding of participant accounts on Atlas.ti allowed me to identify my top informants based solely on the number of coded data segments. This process showed me that all of my top 10 informants, whose voices feature strongest in the data, were male staff members, and 7 of these were from the ‘younger’ generation; only *after* these over-represented sections of the school community did the voices of

female teachers and students appear in the data. This is not a coincidence, and reflects my own social position as a youngish male educator, but it has ethical implications for the interpretation and representation of voices in the school which must be acknowledged (Chilisa 2012).

### *Boundaries*

Ketema School had physical and legal boundaries – a stone-walled perimeter, lists of staff and students on roll; but the boundaries of my interest are less easy to specify. Take temporal boundaries, for example. To maximise my understanding of the case (Stake 1995) I was interested in the accounts of former teachers and students, but it is not yet clear to me how these accounts – obviously of interest – are to fit within the ‘bounded system’ of the case (ibid.).

### *Context*

By convention an early chapter in a case study will locate the school in a particular social-historical-economic-policy context (e.g. Ball 1981). In locating the institution certain figures are generally drawn upon to facilitate the reader’s sense-making and ‘naturalistic generalisations’ – for example, the quality of local housing, the number of staff and students on roll, academic performance data for nationally recognised exams. Locating a school in this way is an imposition, indicative of the audience for whom the ethnographer is ‘translating’ (Agar 1996). In reporting, I seek to strike a balance between the socio-cultural, economic and historical factors that participants considered important, and those which will enable readers to locate the institution within broader structures of sense-making.

Contextual details can be of ethical and analytic significance. In the UK it is not uncommon for an ‘anonymised’ school to be discoverable on Google in less than a minute. In Ethiopian educational research, schools, universities and locations are quite often but not always named. I have opted not to make public even the name of the town where the school is located. This necessarily entails some academic deception and loss of potential analytic insights. In this case, sustained ethical thinking has been involved in weighing potential benefits against potential risks (Stutchbury & Fox 2009), and the solution is not unproblematic. Unlike the issue of ‘partial, incomplete knowledge’ discussed above, this is not a problem which the ethnographer can admit and ‘pass on’ to the reader; there is no way to escape a firm decision on the level of contextual detail to be disclosed at the reporting stage.

The challenges discussed above relate to the analysis and reporting stages of institutional ethnography. For the most part they can be alleviated but not extinguished. This is not to deny the utility, or indeed the *necessity* of ethnographic approaches to oppose hegemonic assumptions about the nature and purposes of schools and schooling; rather, it is to re-affirm that quixotic imperative ‘to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe’ (Leigh & Darion 1965).

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