

# Ethnographic Knowledge for Early Childhood

Policy Brief prepared for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Early Learning

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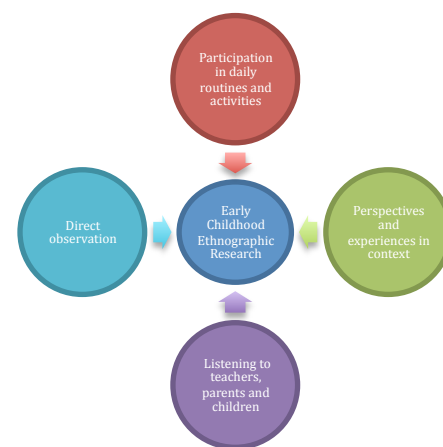
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## Ethnographic Research Can Inform Early Childhood Policy

With renewed attention on early learning, particularly the educational experiences of young children beginning school, anthropologists of education have critical expertise on how children, families and teachers are responding to changing practices and populations within early childhood. Ethnographic research, sometimes combined with other methods, provides evidence for more effective early childhood educational programs. This policy brief outlines current early childhood ethnographic research (ages 0-8) being done by anthropologists of education and similarly trained educational researchers over the past five years. It is meant to demonstrate how ethnographic research can be utilized effectively to make early childhood programs more successful for children, parents, teachers and other stakeholders.

### What is ethnographic research?

Ethnographic research is a method to engage with the people and settings in ECE. It includes direct observation, participating in daily routines and activities, and a more holistic understanding of children's early learning. Ethnographic research involves listening closely to and having conversations with teachers, parents and children instead of just asking a question and getting a standardized response. Ethnographic research systematically analyzes the perspectives and experiences of teachers, parents and children *in context*. Our policies and practices will be better, more likely to be successfully implemented and sustained, and more effectively taken up by programs and parents, if ethnographic research is a part of our program and policy initiatives.



### Ethnographic Findings - Early Learning

- Children's** identities, relationships and understandings of schools and the world around them vary dramatically across contexts.
- Parents, teachers and caretakers** often feel disconnected from the policies that guide early childhood programs. And instead of collaboration and communication, parents and teachers struggle to work together even when they come from the same communities.
- Early learning** is most successful when programs and teachers build on children's cultural understanding of teaching and learning.
- The same **early childhood program or policy** can have different outcomes depending on where it is located and who is participating.
- Global, comparative perspectives** can contribute new understandings and possibilities for U.S. early childhood policies.

## 1. CHILDREN

Ethnographic studies in multiple contexts throughout the United States demonstrate that children are not merely experiencing a biological version of development but are also developing in response to the cultural and social experiences they are having. Attention must not only be paid to "ages and stages" but also to how culture(s) children participate in open up or limit what and how children learn. Children not only learn something because they are four; they learn a very particular version of being four. Recent attention has been paid to children of immigrants, Latino children, children from working-class families, and children with developmental delays and/or disabilities. In each case, children's understandings of the world are not only explicated from surveys, observation or experimentation but from formally and informally asking many questions over time and participating alongside children, families and teachers to understand them as they see themselves as teachers and learners.

## 2. PARENTS, TEACHERS AND CARETAKERS

Despite local, state and federal interventions, many parents are left out of educational decision-making processes. Recent work such as the ongoing *Children Crossing Borders* study led by Dr. Joseph Tobin utilizes ethnographic classroom observations and video-cued focus groups to

examine the perspectives of immigrant parents and preschool teachers on the education of young children. Preliminary findings suggest that it is not just beliefs of *how* children learn but also *what* they should learn that contributes to spoken and unspoken frictions between immigrant communities and schools. This work enhances previous research on teacher perspectives on parent involvement; and suggests the need for greater attention to the values, beliefs, and goals of immigrant parents.

Teachers working in different communities, cities, and conditions share common challenges, especially in their efforts to respond culturally and individually to children's needs with solutions they feel work for children but go against best practices,

minor regulations or accreditation requirements. The professionalization of early childhood teachers, particularly in preschool and pre-kindergarten programs, is pushing out working-class women, women of color and immigrant women who come from the communities that many federal early childhood programs target. Federal early childhood initiatives would greatly benefit from their experience as well as their cultural and cognitive understanding of children.

### 3. Early Learning

Early learning begins at home where learning practices are normalized. Schooling contexts for young children need to understand and take seriously the meaningful approaches to learning that children have when they arrive. Young children and their parents are still struggling when school doesn't connect to the experiences they have in their families and communities. Young children do not benefit from overly standardized curriculum, especially when they are exclusively rewarded for behaving and thinking in one particular way. Play, as a central tenet of U.S. early childhood best practice and a culturally flexible tool, needs stronger advocates within pre-K-3 policy circles. Recent work demonstrates how social interactions in preschool affect second language acquisition.

### 4. Early Childhood Programs/Policies

Teachers, children and families struggle with different aspects of mandated programs, depending on localized circumstances. Their particular struggles can best be understood by engaging with them in local early childhood settings. For example, ethnographic data in multiple studies show that teachers feel pressure to discard the social, emotional and creative experiences early childhood has traditionally provided. New studies reveal that teachers and programs feel trapped between a) professional ideals of U.S. best practices including learning through play, developmentally appropriate practice, b) school readiness ideals that value reading and writing over other social and academic skills and c) the cultural and linguistic desires/needs of young children and their families. Programs striving to provide supportive and engaging learning environments while being culturally responsive often receive little support or recognition.

### 5. Global, Comparative Perspectives

Early learning strategies and policies in other countries can inform and/or challenge U.S. early childhood policies. New comparisons between China, Japan and the U.S. reveal a greater emphasis on leadership and child-centered approaches in China and a more rigid approach to early childhood in the U.S. Recent work in France, Guinea and the U.S. demonstrates how best practices around reading instruction can look stunningly different yet can be equally successful from country to country. Ethnographic work in Scotland highlights how federal policies on technology in ECE settings have affected teaching and learning.

SOURCES: **Teachers:** Adair (2009) *Teaching children of immigrants: A multi-sited ethnographic study of preschool teachers in five U.S. cities*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation \* Boyd (2010) *More Education and Training for Less Pay and Fewer Benefits: Early Childhood Educators Today* Eastern Sociological Society Conference, Boston \* Jones (2006) *Girls, Social Class, and Literacy: What teachers can do to make a difference*, Heinemann. **Parents/Families:** Adair & Tobin (2007) *Listening to the voices of parents*. In *Diversities in early childhood education: Rethinking and doing*, Routledge Falmer \* Arzubiaiga, Rueda, & Monzó (2002) *Family matters related to the reading engagement of Latino children*. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 231-243. \* Livas-Dlott, Fuller, Stein, Bridges, Mangual, & Mireles (2010) *Commands, competence, and cariño: Maternal socialization practices in Mexican American families* *Developmental Psychology*, 46(3) \* Tobin, Arzubiaiga, & Mantovani (2007) *Entering Dialogue with Immigrant Parents*, Bernard Van Leer Foundation. **Early Learning / Policies & Programs:** Beresin (2010) *Recess Battles: Playing, Fighting, Storytelling*, University Press of Mississippi \* Spencer (2009) *Complicating what it means to "struggle": One child's experience with a mandated literacy initiative*. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 10(3) \* Howard & Lipinoga (2010) *Closing down openings: Pretextuality and misunderstanding in parent-teacher conferences with Mexican immigrant families* *Language & Communication*, 30. \* Jones-Taylor (2010) *Blank Slates: Urban Childcare Policy in a Neoliberal Context*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation \* LeVine & New (2008) *Anthropology and child development*, Blackwell Publishers. \* Piker & Rex (2008) *Influences of teachers-child social interactions on English language development in a Head Start classroom*. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36(2) \* Plowman, Stephen & McPake (2010) *Growing Up with Technology: Young children learning in a digital world*, Routledge \* Valente (2009) *A.G. Bell's vision of the telephone-ear: Children's rights, cochlear implants, and culture*. American Educational Research Association Conference. Yoshikawa, Weisner & Lowe (2006) *Making it work: Low-wage employment, family life and child development*, Russell Sage Foundation. **Global:** Kurban & Tobin (2009) *They Don't Like Us": Reflections of Turkish Children in a German Preschool*, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education* 10(1) \* Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa (2009) *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, University of Chicago Press \* Anderson-Levitt (2004) *Reading Lessons in Guinea, France, and the United States*, *Comparative Education Review*, 48(3)

#### Recommendations:

1. **Utilize** ethnographic evidence that that is based on the intentions, goals and contexts meaningful to parents, children and teachers.
2. **Integrate** research-based assessments that include ethnographic data as much as statistics and developmental milestones.
3. **Include** the expertise of anthropologists who are informed by the perspectives of teachers, children and families involved in early learning when developing policy guidance, designing program evaluation requirements and conducting needs-based assessments.
4. **Encourage** state-based programs and research units to include ethnographic data as part of program design and evaluation so that local policymakers can better understand what is important and motivating to children, teachers and parents.