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# (Literature Review)
# Examining the Strengths and Limitations of Ethnographic Research: An Evaluation of Two Studies in Distinctive Educational Contexts

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**ABSTRACT**
*Ethnography offers a holistic approach to qualitative researchers in educational contexts and appeals to scholars who wish seek to reveal rich narratives through their immersion in specific domains. This review paper examines the mobilization of the ethnographic research approach reported in studies from two distinctive learning contexts: an elementary school and a vocational college. Employing the specific evaluative criteria of Punch (2005), the desk-based study draws on existing literature to document the strengths and limitations of ethnographic method and reportage to reveal edifying insights to novice and experienced qualitative researchers who may be contemplating an ethnographic study in the future. The review reveals how extensive ethnography lends itself well to presenting thick descriptions in rich narratives to demonstrate high veracity. In contrast, this research approach may be limited in its verisimilitude, especially if ethnographers abridge their methodological and analytical descriptions and fail to acknowledge reactivity.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is a qualitative research approach derived from sociology and cultural anthropology; 'ethno' refers to people and 'graphy' describes (Punch, 2005). Ethnographers inquire into features of social life from its actors' perspectives to comprehend both 'the cultural and symbolic aspects of behavior and the context of this behavior' (Punch 2005, p.152) in learning about people and their practices (Jones & Smith, 2015). Traditionally, ethnography entails the researchers embedding and immersing themselves in the research context to understand the subtleties and nuances of the sample population (Jones & Smith, 2015). Therefore, educational ethnography as a methodology offers a 'holism and richness…able to deal with the complexity of social phenomena' (Punch, 2005, p. 238), which may yield a 'thick description' (Neuman, 2006, p.382). This richly detailed narrative is 'grounded in the data of the participants' own words or descriptions' (Locke et al., 1998, p. 140).

This theoretical paper examines two studies purposefully selected since they both adopt ethnographic approaches in two *distinct* learning environments to investigate the usage and reporting of an ethnographic approach. The first paper investigates informal learning in the workplace, and the second probe the meanings associated with visual displays in a school. The combined evaluation of the two papers exposes the strengths and limitations of the ethnographic approach, reflecting how 'ethnography is a curiously double-edged sword: the difficulty of doing justice to lived social experience


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is ever-present, but the need to organize ethnographic material convincingly is also pressing' (Gay y Blasco & Wardle, 2007 as cited in Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 28).

## METHOD

The research objective of this desk-based study was to critically evaluate the two ethnographic accounts by drawing on relevant literature. The evaluation criteria that I employ to assess the papers are drawn from those proposed by Punch (2005): the framing of the research, the empirical procedures employed, and the quality of the accounts. Before the critique, I discuss the interpretivism paradigm that undergirds the ethnographic approach and summarise the two papers. Subsequently, I refer to the focal studies as 'paper 1' and 'paper 2' in the interest of brevity.

### *The Interpretivist Paradigm*

Kuhn (1970) applied the term paradigm to denote 'a basic orientation to theory and research (as cited in Neuman 2006, p. 81). The three dominant paradigms associated with social research are positivist, interpretive and critical (Neuman, 2006), each governing a 'view of the human world and the social life within that world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 7) and indicating how research should be conducted (Punch, 2005). My research interests lie in qualitative methods commonly associated with the interpretivism paradigm (Scott & Morrison, 2005).

Interpretivism rejects the scientific rigidity of the positivist approach, which 'reduces people to numbers ... its concerns with abstract formulas are not relevant to the lives of real people' (Neuman, 2006, p.82). In contrast, the interpretive tradition involves examining meaningful social actions and is closely linked to constructivism, which probes the diverse social constructions of knowledge and meaning-making (Robson, 2002). Interpretivism also has connections with hermeneutics; or making the unclear clear (Author, 2020; Neuman, 2006). Thus, it is particularly effective when seeking to offer explanations in social contexts, including educational domains.

Qualitative researchers appreciate the need to 'see from the inside through empathetic understanding or verstehen' (Scott & Morrison, 2005, p. 183). Additionally, researchers accept that they are socially connected to the subject they examine, utilizing a reflexive data collection and analysis style. Such research requires a holistic perspective towards the target context, zooms in on social actors' subjective realities and experiences (Scott & Morrison, 2007), and entails different investigative techniques than the positivist scientific field. Therefore, qualitative research often utilizes ethnographic data collection techniques, including participant observation, interviewing, and focus groups (Punch, 2005). This critique of two focal articles may assist those aligned with the interpretive epistemology, enhance their conceptual understanding, or develop methodological awareness of the ethnographic approach.

### *The Focal Papers*

#### *Summaries*

Paper 1, Boud & Middleton (2003), appears in the Journal of Workplace Learning, focusing on human resources and organizational behavior (ResearchGate, 2016). The journal draws on the learning journeys of individuals as they progress through organizations. The focal paper was written following a larger study conducted by the University of Technology, Sydney, and an Australian State government education and training provider. The theme of the chosen paper is the significance of unmediated learning as part of the normal work-life routine. Moreover, the relevance of this research was illuminated in the literature review; some commentators believe that informal learning takes precedence over formal learning, and secondly, line managers in some organizations may be unable to facilitate learning since their position may be subject to limitations (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

The researchers aimed to 'identify ways in which participants, within different workgroups in an organization, learn with and from others' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p.194). In addition, the study sought to investigate 'whether (Wenger's) theoretical framework of communities of practice is a useful or sufficient framework for discussions of informal learning at work' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 194). The researchers did not seek to address normative claims regarding informal learning but instead wished to contribute holistically to the wider discourse of workplace learning.

Data was collected by studying four separate workgroups within a large bureaucratic training organization. The report provides an informative summary of the four contexts; the tiling teachers, educational planners, human resources unit, and learning outreach team, alongside the learning challenges they encounter.

The methodological approach used in this study was ethnographic (Kisielnicki, 2008), including social network analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation at the worksites 'to document the context of work and the nature of the activities in which participants engaged' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 195). The interviews were focused on the employees' career paths and current roles, and these participants drew diagrammatic representations of whom they approached to broach work-related issues.

The researchers performed data analysis that revealed three distinctive informal learning patterns: 'the mastery of organizational processes,' 'negotiating the political' and 'dealing with the atypical' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p.198). The authors discovered that Wenger's framework was limited in informing a discussion of informal workplace learning as only some of the network features fulfilled the criteria while citing the 'complexities of actual practice' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 201). They concluded that informal learning is a crucial activity in the workplace, regularly arising through interactions with colleagues who have no formal teaching or training role as supervisors are regularly not the first to be called upon when a learning need arises.

The second paper, Thomson et al. (2007), is presented in Ethnography and Education. Attracting longitudinal ethnographic studies, the journal concerns the examination of education practice from its participants' perspectives. The paper considers meanings associated with displays of pupils' work. The report's literature review draws on policy discourse and prior research regarding the purpose of school displays and leads the authors to posit 'Could display possibly be as much a manifestation of teacher hubris as children's learning? (Thomson et al., 2007). The researchers sought to examine the cultural meanings connected to visual displays in the school environment.

The study site was the primary school 'Hollytree' in the Midlands. The school was distinctive due to its openness in design and the array of children's work adorning the walls. The ethnographic study's duration was three years, examining 'inclusion, pedagogy and the creative arts' (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 382). The research team conducted readings of the school artwork and interviewed staff, held student focus groups, collected field notes, and photographed the displays.

Following close readings of the interviews, the authors employed the theoretical framework of Cunningham's (1998) history of progressivism to analyze the data (as cited in Thomson et al., 2007). They also asked, 'what was being said about the school, everyday life within it, and what it meant to be a member of the school community?' The next stage in the process involved analyzing the content of the visual displays and asking, 'what was being represented, where and for whom?' (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 386).

The summative findings rest heavily on the notion of 'good,' divided into four thematic concepts. Firstly, the idea of 'good work'; only work which had grammatically accurate language with suitable content (Thomson et al., 2007). Furthermore, there were the 'good students.' Only pupils who completed an acceptable standard of work would have it displayed as a reward and for something to repeatedly strive for and promote a sense of inclusiveness (Thomson et al., 2007). Thirdly, the concept of 'good teaching' is expounded by displaying work as good practice by the teaching faculty translated into good work produced by the pupils (Thomson et al., 2007). Finally, the notion of the 'good school' was represented by the visual displays; they served as a sign to 'outsiders' coming in; this was a school with an excellent image - it was a successful institution (Thomson et al., 2007). While Thomson et al. (2007) did not present the displays as an ideal type, they did conclude that 'there are benefits in analyzing the material environment of schools' (p. 398).

***Epistemological Framing***

Neither paper explicitly states an epistemological or theoretical stance. However, by employing ethnographic designs, the researchers adhere to the constructivist epistemology and the interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998). Paper 1 seeks to interpret subjective participant experiences and interactions, while paper 2 aims to delve into the subjective meanings connected to visual displays. Therefore, it can be inferred that the authors perceive the value of examining behaviors and meanings which are 'continually constructed and reconstructed' (Punch 2005, p.151).

Neuman (2006) asserts that the literature review is a critical section of a research paper. While both papers do contain references to prior, relevant literature, paper two is more effective in building credibility; it refers to the historical context, policy discourse, contrasting perspectives on the subject, the theoretical framework of Cunningham (1998), and offers justification for the research design. In contrast, paper one simply introduces the theoretical framework of Wenger (1998) and refers to three authors' perspectives on the topic, one of which is Boud himself (Boud, 1999, as cited in Boud & Middleton 2003), to establish the research need. Therefore, paper one does not appear to thoroughly engage with the existing literature or fully ground the study in context. Whist Neuman (2006) postulate that 'reviews vary in scope and depth' (p. 111), paper 1 presents a potentially bad review; its scope is too narrow to familiarise the reader with the requisite background knowledge. Similarly, Neuman (2006) suggests that a literature review should demonstrate that the study builds on 'those of yesterday' (p. 111). However, it should be noted that The Journal of Workplace Learning is high quality, peer-reviewed and the guidelines for the literature review state that it may comprise a 'selective bibliography providing advice on information sources.'

An ethnographic approach involves studying the cultural and symbolic nature of behavior in its natural environment, with data collection being iterative over an extended period (Punch, 2005). For example, in paper 1, the researchers study 'diverse work groups' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p.195) for three years to examine work culture and how it impacts learning networks. However, paper one did not state the length of the study, which is quite uncommon and unexpected in an ethnographic study of this nature, where long-term immersion is generally a guiding principle of the approach. In contrast, in paper 2, the team immerse themselves in an 'outstanding' school, also over three years, to gain a profound awareness of the cultural meanings connected to the displays. The writers follow the classification of 'outstanding' from governing body inspection reports (Thomson et al., 2007).

To further evaluate research papers, it is necessary to ascertain the specific aims and research questions (Locke et al., 1998). The aims should 'identify the desired outcomes and point to the questions to achieve those outcomes' (White, 2009, p. 34). Well-defined aims can effectively steer the research (Denscombe, 2002 as cited in White, 2009), whereas 'vague aims ...can lead to researchers being over ambitious and collecting unnecessary data' (White, 2009, p. 35).

In paper 1, the aim is coherent; 'to identify ways in which participants within different workgroups in an organization, learn with and from others' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 194); the authors state that they will study a variety of teams, in the same institution, to examine learning processes. They further expand on this, explaining that they want to study how 'workers find what they need to work effectively' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 195), cogently offering a contextual definition of learning. In paper 2, the aim is 'to probe the meanings of visual display' (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 381) - one can clearly understand the researchers' objective in revealing participants' interpretations of the work exhibited by Hollytree. Written depictions and photographic examples of visual displays are presented for elucidation. Thus, both papers' aims offer clarity.

Appropriate research questions should fulfill several criteria set forth by Punch (2005): they should be 'clear, specific, answerable, interconnected and substantively relevant' (p. 249). For example, the evaluative research question (White, 2009) in paper 1 determines 'whether the framework of communities of practice is useful or sufficient for discussions of informal learning at work.' This question appears relevant and answerable in the work-based learning setting. The writers define informal learning as 'learning that occurs unprompted by deliberate facilitation' (Boud & Middleton, 2003). They identify the perspective they intend to draw upon. Combined with the aim above, one can garner an explicit understanding of the study's purpose.

Combining two vague adjectives ('useful' and sufficient') could be problematic since they invite value judgments (White, 2009). White (2009) explains that 'the only foolproof way to guard against this problem is to scrutinize every term in a question in an attempt to define them' (p. 45). Perhaps the research question could be modified accordingly.

Paper 2's causal (White, 2009) question is specific and substantively relevant to the education arena but ambiguous: 'Could display be as much a manifestation of teacher hubris as children's learning?' (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 384) due to the use of 'as much…as'. As this is a qualitative study, it is questionable how this 'manifestation' could be quantified empirically. Moreover, it could be considered a false dichotomy (White, 2009) since the question assumes only two cases of the phenomenon, yet research questions 'should be as clear and precise as possible, leaving little scope for alternative readings or misrepresentations' (White, 2009, p. 40). However, the writers do add a subsidiary (White, 2009) general question to expand on this and to support the exploration of the main inquiry, explaining that they seek to uncover general display meanings, which is perhaps a more flexible and apt approach to an ethnographic study, since 'ethnography does not set out to produce precise, objective and generalizable findings' (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 116).

***Empirical Procedures***

Ethnography has been described as 'more than a research method, more than a genre of writing… an approach to crafting knowledge' (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 22). Ethnographers exploit various methods, including focus groups, interviews, and observation, with such techniques specifically elected to meet the ethnographic purpose (Pole & Morrison, 2003, as cited in Scott & Morrison, 2007). The choice of methods should empower researchers to 'immerse themselves in a setting, thereby generating a rich understanding of social action and its subtleties' (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 514). There is no single prescribed path in approaching ethnographic studies, and depth is usually preferred over breadth (Robson, 2002). However, it is essential to uncover an account of the techniques used in assessing a research paper (Denscombe, 2014).

Neither paper offers an explicit methodology section, characteristic of many ethnographies (Mills & Morton, 2013). Paper 1 is very brief in its description of methods, explaining that the study incorporated social network analysis, long (45 minutes) semi-structured interviews, field notes, and participant observation (Boud & Middleton, 2003); the context of workplace learning informed these approaches. Paper 2 is also mixed in its approach, utilizing visual ethnography in conjunction with other methods which could be 'put in conversation' with each other (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 385). However, paper 2 is more expansive in describing its methods; a large volume of data was collected over three years, the first being a pilot study; a sign of testing the water, and 'good practice' (Denscombe, 2014, p.166). It was modified and centered on three examinations of the displays, three cohorts of year five pupil focus groups, and two clusters of staff interviews (Thomson et al., 2007). Perhaps both papers' use of a combination of methods, being informed by the research's respective contexts, allows for triangulation to enhance the quality of their research (Reeves et al., 2008), although this is not mentioned in either report.

Accordingly, the common methods mobilized are participant observation and interviewing, which naturally fit with the nature of ethnography in composing a picture of the way of life of some identifiable group of people (Wolcott, 1988, as cited in Punch 2005, p.151) as opposed to utilizing a positivist, scientific approach to yield generalizations based on statistical measures (Scott & Morrison, 2007). Participant observation is the preferred method among ethnographers (Punch, 2005) as this facilitates 'direct engagement and involvement with the world they are studying' (Reeves et al., 2008). To gain profound insight, researchers will document their observations in extensive field notes as a means to 'get inside the way each group sees the world' (Reeves et al., 2008, p. 512). In combination with interviews, participant observation enables researchers to understand subtle cultural meanings that influence group behavior (Punch, 2005). Thus, observation in conjunction with other methods can further researchers' interpretations as they consider their participants' responses while also being suitably positioned to draw upon the reality they witness. Some have termed this a strength in 'making the familiar strange' (Delamont, 1981 as cited in Scott & Morrison, 2007, p.168) since the researchers bring their own experiences and skills to examine culture from alternative perspective participants.

Interviews furnish skilled researchers with several benefits. They allow for the establishment of stable rapport and the presence of probing questions (Neuman, 2006). Moreover, interviews foster 'in-depth understandings about the experiences of individuals and groups (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 134). The use of semi-structured interviews is congruent with the notion of ethnographic interviewing espoused by Hammersley and Atkinson (as cited in Wellington, 2000, p. 80) since this permits greater interaction and reflexivity between the interviewer and participant. While the researchers in paper two did not state the level of structure incorporated in their interviews, it is reasonable to infer that in an ethnographic study of this type, the interviews would not follow a rigid structure since such a procedure is usually quantitative and survey-based (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 134). Paper 1's writers explained that their semi-structured interviews intended to elicit 'subjective experiences of work and learning, and this certainly reflects the desire to understand 'everyday events ...with an emphasis upon insider accounts' (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 90). Reeves et al. (2008) also suggest that during fieldwork, interviews can be particularly 'useful in eliciting highly candid accounts from individuals' (p. 513). Similarly, by interviewing the pupils, teachers, and headmistress in paper 2, the researchers appeared to explore a variety of personal interpretations and beliefs.

However, while the methods can be discerned, both accounts provided only scant specifications relating to data collection; paper one did not report the number of participants involved in the study overall or the workgroups (aside from mentioning that the fourth group comprised of four members), yet the writers did justify their selection of the workgroups; they wanted 'to maximize variation in workplace activity and diversity of work and working relationships' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 195). Similarly, paper 2 failed to provide the exact number of interview respondents or focus group participants. Moreover, it is impossible to infer how many interviews or focus groups were carried out and why. Furthermore, one could question the sampling rationale in paper 2; why were only year five students included? How were those students selected? How were the teachers chosen?

Similarly, in paper 1, being unaware of the size and scope of the sample could lead the reader to doubt the efficacy of the research, questioning whether 'the sample group truly represents the population and is not distorted ... by the nature of the selection process?' (Locke et al., 1998, p. 47). However, Wellington (2000) may counter this, explaining that a respondent group can never be truly representative and that compromise is a key aspect of the sampling process. Furthermore, this process may have been based on the researchers' access, so perhaps non-probability convenience sampling was employed, as it often is with smaller-scale projects (Wellington, 2000).

Both papers included excerpts from the interviews but omitted to include examples of specific interview questions. However, as Mills and Morton (2013) explained (), some ethnographers will be very explicit about their methodological approach… while others will hardly mention the method' (p.34). However, by not explicitly describing what was done and only offering broad interview themes, the authors may be exposed to doubts regarding the validity of their research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Therefore, there appears a deficit in the articulation of the methods. However, ethnography does not fit into a strict methodological paradigm, and a narrative reporting style is often observable, especially since the advent of postmodernism (Richardson, 2000). Accordingly, 'some see it as a deeply humanistic endeavor, creating knowledge through the everyday exchanges and dialogues of social life. Others define it more scientifically, seeing it as offering a rigorous and empiricist research method' (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 3). Therefore, both teams of researchers appear to embrace a humanistic stance in their accounts.

The papers are also limited in their discussion of data analysis procedures. Paper 1 explains that the analysis occurred theoretically, using Wenger's framework of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) to establish which groups, if any, conformed to the framework. Inductively, the researchers set about 'combining, compressing and synthesizing' (Scott & Morrison, 2007, p. 129) their findings, as is common in educational research. However, specific analytical procedures, including techniques for raw coding data (Neuman, 2006), were absent, and the fourteen COP criteria were not elaborated on (Wenger, 1998). Similarly, paper two states that the interview data were inductively categorized using three key themes, and a content analysis was performed on the visual records. However, the reader may be led to question what the content analysis entailed and which coding methods were employed, raising the issue of consistency in this study, too (Perri 6 & Bellamy, 2013). However, while the reports appear to offer restricted, procedural descriptions, it is worth noting that for ethnography, three typical tasks in the analysis include 'thinking, developing categories and progressive focussing' (Robson, 2002, p. 487-488) and an explicit description of analytical procedures may be viewed as superfluous to an 'a style of analysis which stresses description and interpretation' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, as cited in Punch 2005, p. 153).

Moreover, the nature of the ethnographic approach in the two reports lends itself typically to a 'narrative, literary style' (Robson, 2002, p. 187), and therefore, a full adumbration of the methods and sampling employed is perhaps abandoned on stylistic grounds. Finally, with ethnography's roots in anthropology, some researchers may purposively refrain from a broad description of the analysis, on the basis that it is an ongoing, evolving process:

> Some anthropologists shy away from an explicit discussion of their approach to analysis. It may be a dislike of codification and procedures. However, more positively, this reluctance is a tacit admission that every research stage involves thinking and analysis (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 123).

***Quality of the Accounts***

While validity has been a conventional standard to assess quantitative statistical research, qualitative researchers have proposed alternative measures (Scott & Morrison, 2007). With ethnography's purpose in uncovering truths, the standard may be adjusted to 'veracity' with the guiding question being 'how well, with what verisimilitude does this study succeed in its depiction?' (Stewart, 1998, p. 16) Therefore, when critically assessing ethnographies, the truth of the accounts may be evaluated, drawing away from the 'strict' positivist criteria of reliability and validity (Punch, 2005).

If the context is described thick enough, perhaps the reader is well-positioned to assess whether the account offers such verisimilitude. Ponterroto (2006) offers a comprehensive definition of what an idiographic, thick description should achieve:

> *(It) accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions through the researcher's understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place... captures the thoughts and feelings of participants and the often complex web of relationships among them* (p.543).

The researchers presented thick descriptions in both papers, ostensibly 'based on many hours of direct observation and interviews' (Reeves et al., 2008). Paper 1 provides vivid portrayals of the working culture of each group of employees about their responsibilities and learning experiences. It describes, in detail, the historical trajectory of each group, the relationship dynamics between different members of the organizational hierarchy, and the context-bound challenges they face. In paper 2, the thick description is a rich and colorful narrative outlining the history and location of the school, the philosophies and beliefs of the headteacher, and the socio-cultural interpretations of teachers and pupils.

Thus, ethnographies present an 'excellent way of gaining insight into a culture or process' (Punch, 2005, p. 154), and readers can metaphorically step inside each organization's culture through the lucid, interpretive portrayals offered. The following two examples highlight this, although paper 2 is certainly more detailed in its use of vivid vignettes and lengthy quotes throughout.

Paper 1:

> *The ... close working relationships with each other did prove to be generative of considerably peer learning which they valued highly. Their special position within the organization led them to be conscious of their work and plan it carefully. Their unique position was reinforced by the tensions they continually face concerning the bureaucratic procedures established to control conventional teaching activities* (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p.197-198).

Paper 2:

> *Caring and trusting were integral to the school ethos. It was evidenced by: Miriam knowing the names and circumstances of every child in the school and of generations of children who had been at the school, including those who were now sending their children there; parents who were free to come into the school at any time about almost anything...the lack of child-free spaces* (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 398).

In addition, a key intention of research papers should be to satisfactorily answer the research aims and questions (Punch, 2005). Firstly, I suggest that the aim of paper one was realized; the researchers sought to identify ways in which the participants could interact and learn from each other, and they successfully categorized three significant, overlapping patterns of informal learning amongst the workgroups: 'mastery of the organizational process, negotiating the political and dealing with the atypical' (Boud & Middleton, 2003). In paper two, the aim concerned understanding the meanings behind visual displays, which was also accomplished. The researchers established four distinctive meanings, applying the notion of 'good' to work, students, teaching, and the school, in line with Cunningham's (1998) history of progressivism as outlined in the literature review.

Both research teams also present unexpected findings; paper 2 noted how 'displays were folded into and became part of the mechanism for maintaining school rhythms' (Thomson et al., 2007), and the displays positively created a 'theatre of memory' (Samuels, 1994, as cited in Thomson et al., 2007, p. 397). Similarly, in paper 1, the writers explained how they had expected the first group, the tiling teachers, to be most aware of their learning at work, yet surprisingly found 'only a little more reflexivity about their learning than members of the other workgroups' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 198). While paper 2 drew on literature to analyze the unexpected results, paper one simply compared the finding to the researchers' lack of reflexivity noted in a previous study (Solomon et al., 2001, as cited in Boud & Middleton, 2003).

In paper 1, the researchers assessed their findings against Wenger's indicators of COP, finding the framework insufficient for their purposes. Next, they inductively turned to alternative theories, including Bernstein's (1990) construct of framing (as cited in Boud & Middleton 2003, p. 201) to explain that 'a community of practice may be strongly framed when transmission of knowledge occurs closely between members or weakly framed when transmission of knowledge is less frequent or consistent'. Finally, they cited Engeström (2001) and demonstrated how horizontal learning could occur when employees seek answers from their peers rather than the organizational hierarchy. After the application of the theoretical frameworks, the research question was answered directly 'while the idea of communities of practice provides useful ways of accounting for the phenomenon…it also has limitations and is not sufficient for…dealing with informal learning at work' (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 201).

Regarding the research question in paper 2, 'Could display be as much a manifestation of teacher hubris as children's learning?' the writers failed to return to this key aspect, raising an issue of incoherence in the report. I suggest that the lack of referral to the original question causes veracity concerns since it lacks logic and consistency in the write-up (Author, 2021a; Punch, 2005). By not responding to the central question, the reader can infer whether hubris is a critical motivating factor for the displays; the quotes provided in the account are insufficient to draw any concrete conclusions, thus leading to ungrounded speculation.

Interviews are an effective method in 'accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality (Punch, 2005, p. 168), and both reports certainly give voice to the participants via the inclusion of interview quotes. Paper 2 especially paid heed to individuals' interpretations, endowing power to those involved with detailed quotes and illuminating vignettes, much less visible in paper 1. Moreover, student focus groups in paper two could help bring to the surface aspects of a situation that might not otherwise be exposed' (Punch, 2005, p. 171). However, in contrast, 'ethnographic interviews…are confounded by the interviewer, interactional, and situational differences' (Aunger, 1994), and some level of interviewer bias is commonly present (Robson, 2005), perhaps detracting from the notion of veracity.

In addition, as both studies involved participant observation and interviews, a possible limitation that should be acknowledged is the 'Hawthorne effect' (Neuman, 2006, p. 265), a form of reactivity in which the participants' behavior alters a direct result of being studied. Therefore, when evaluating a research paper, one should consider 'whether the possibility of reactivity in the data has been considered, reported and taken into account and what steps have been taken to minimize its effects' (Punch, 2005, p. 253). Without a reference to reactivity, the reader is led to question the overall quality of the account. For instance, during interviews, responses may have been subconsciously modified; the teachers imagine that their words should fit the expectations of the headteacher (Author, 2021b). Children's feedback may also be problematic, as identified by Piaget (1929), whereby children answer at random or romance their answers. Similarly, employees might have responded politically to their supervisors (Author, 2019). However, neither paper addressed reactivity or other potential limitations (Mills & Morton, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

This review advances a greater insight into the strengths and limitations of ethnographic research in distinctive learning contexts and how procedures and findings should be documented through this critique. I observed how the researchers utilized their access to organizations to witness first-hand, and over a significant duration, the social and cultural interactions, mainly employing interviews and participant observation. In addition, the authors presented thick descriptions in their accounts, adding to their veracity. In contrast, this research approach revealed some limitations to verisimilitude, especially if ethnographers restrict their methodological and analytical accounts and fail to acknowledge reactivity. It certainly highlights the relevance of the earlier quote' ethnography is a curiously double-edged sword…' (Gay y Blasco &Wardle, 2007 as cited in Mills & Morton, 2012, p. 28).

Overall, while Paper 1 is insightful in revealing several interpretations of informal learning in specific contexts, the account could be improved with a more extensive literature review, greater detail regarding the empirical procedures, and additional interview excerpts. Paper 2 is a more persuasive and coherent account of the study performed. It effectively drew on literature to establish clear framing of the research, and it successfully extrapolated how school displays can foster inclusive learning environments, notwithstanding the lack of reference to the research question in the findings. The account provided visual evidence, thick lucid descriptions and gave extensive voice to the participants through detailed quotes

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