

METHODS AND ETHICS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD COLUMN

Dealing with Unforeseen Consequences: Methods and Ethics in an Ethiopian Primary School

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When I traveled to Ethiopia to carry out my doctoral fieldwork, one of the books I took with me was *Preschool in Three Cultures*. In this classic study, Joseph Tobin and his colleagues used video to capture days in the lives of preschool classrooms in Japan, China, and the U.S., and then they shared the footage with teachers, parents, and administrators to get their views about what was going on. My research project focused on the school as a site of learning about health and disease, and since Tobin's method struck me as a great way of approaching this, I decided to adapt it.

Visiting the primary school in the neighborhood where I'd settled, in the town of Jimma, I received a warm welcome from the administrators. I sat in on several different classes and grades, and after a few weeks I chose one class to focus on, and began filming.

When I first began observing Mrs. Hannah's classes, she seemed more at ease with my presence than other teachers.



(Mrs. Hannah is a pseudonym.) Born into a family of teachers, she had taught primary school for more than 20 years. At the time I met her, she was teaching a first grade class.

After filming for a full day, I turned to editing. A friend had helped me translate the dialogue from Amharic, and based on my sense of the day's tempo and salient events, I edited the video down to about 15 minutes.

When I shared the film with Mrs. Hannah, she was a little embarrassed at seeing herself on the screen, but she provided a rich commentary, describing the advantages and challenges that different students brought with them to the classroom. With Mrs. Hannah's approval, I also showed the film to the parents of the students in the class. Crowding around my laptop, they smiled and laughed; asked to comment, they expressed unanimous approval of the education their children were getting, and they consented to my showing the film to others.

Busy with other parts of my research project, I let more than a year go by before I showed the film to the other teachers at the school. To my surprise, their reaction was restrained; it was difficult to

get responses from them—either criticism or praise.

One evening not long afterwards, Mrs. Hannah called me on the phone and urged me to meet her right away. I found her with her pastor at the church near her home. Distraught, she explained that the new principal of the school had taken offense at the film and had questioned her reputation as a teacher. She was afraid of losing her job.

Together with the pastor, we worked out a plan to repair the situation: I would arrange meetings with the principal and with officials at the local Education Bureau. The new principal hadn't actually seen the film but was acting based on hearsay. If she and her superiors saw it, and received assurance that I supported Mrs. Hannah as a teacher, surely we could clear this up.

As it turned out, however, the principal became, if anything, more negative upon seeing the film. She was particularly critical of a scene in which Mrs. Hannah pinched some students as punishment for forgetting their places in the roll call.

At the Education Bureau, the officials had many questions. "Why did you choose to record her, rather than some

other teacher?” they wanted to know. “Because she was at ease with me being there,” I explained. “I felt we had a good relationship.” “You filmed for a whole day. Why did you choose only those parts for the film?” “Because I wanted to show things that would spark conversation,” I said.

My feeling was that open discussion about what went on in schools—how education worked in practice—was a positive thing. But it wasn’t clear that the administrators shared that view.

The central issue, they confirmed, was Mrs. Hannah pinching her students. But her actions were hardly exceptional: I’d seen other teachers at the same school do worse—act far more aggressively—and almost everyone I spoke to who had been through school in Ethiopia could recall creative and sometimes cruel punishments that their teachers inflicted upon them.

Why all the fuss, then? Was it because it was on film? Some people, I heard, suspected the footage might be used by opposition parties to attack the state of the Ethiopian education system.

Although in our meetings the principal and the administrators maintained that it wasn’t right to make an example of Mrs. Hannah for a practice that was commonplace, Mrs. Hannah herself told me later that she had been demoted from the status of teacher to teacher’s assistant. The government had apparently issued new directives against corporal punishment, and any sign that they weren’t being implemented was unwelcome.

Looking back, I ask myself what I should have done differently. I’d presented the school administration with a letter that described my research plan in what I felt was a clear and honest way; I’d explained myself as best I could. But I couldn’t dispel the feeling that the school administration suspected I was there to evaluate them.

In all this, the positive things that the film conveyed got lost: Mrs. Hannah’s dedication to her work, the deference the children showed towards her, and the warm relationships she’d established with many students and their parents—all this was overlooked.

With characteristic magnanimity, Mrs. Hannah forgave me for my role in this affair. And since this activity was supplementary to the main line of my research, the episode didn’t derail my study. But it taught me some lessons. One is that even seemingly low-risk activities like recording a day in the life of a classroom can have major, unexpected consequences for the people involved.

It also left me with some questions that I struggle to answer. Chief among them is how, in the face of contingencies, we can best balance our commitment to the project of learning about humanity against the risks of causing harm in the process.

REFERENCE

Tobin, Joseph J., David Y.H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

