Ethnographic Monitoring: Hymes’s Unfinished Business in Educational Research

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This essay describes the process of Hymesian monitoring, a collaborative effort to understand voice in education, so crucial in Hymes’s later work. A report of ethnographic monitoring in 1970s Philadelphia and a recent collaborative project in the Caribbean demonstrate how one can work from the voice of the pupil, through that of the analyst toward that of the teacher and back, checking what each party brought into the analysis and treating each of these voices as legitimate. [Hymes, ethnographic monitoring, Philadelphia, Barbados, ethnopoetics]

Dell Hymes passed away in 2009, at a moment when his work (after a long period of relative silence) had started to attract the attention of a new generation of scholars (e.g., see Rampton 2007 and 2009 for a survey of the recent impact of Hymes’s work). Interested scholars and students naturally turn to the better-known and widely available parts of his oeuvre; in this essay we wish to point to some of Hymes’s lesser-known work and argue that it merits attention.

In the middle of his career as the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, Dell Hymes published a (now largely out of print) monograph entitled Language in Education: Ethnolinguistic Essays (1980). The book contains an introduction and eight essays, four of which were republished later in the more well-known Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality (1996). Even though both books are monographs, they are essentially a collection of articles that Hymes had published in the mid- and late 1970s, mostly in fairly obscure journals, books, and as keynote presentations. “Finding” Hymes’s work requires a tremendous effort on behalf of the interested reader; so having two collections of his work on education as published reference volumes is a great thing on its own.

In what follows, we discuss the importance of some of the 1980 essays that were not included in the 1996 book, and place a few things in a wider perspective. We then analyze in depth the program Hymes labeled as “ethnographic monitoring,” and explore it within (1) Hymes’s, his colleagues’, and his students’ involvement in Philadelphia schools through an analysis of the final report they wrote on the project for the National Institute of Education; (2) a Caribbean classroom context through an analysis of Van der Aa’s fieldwork practices in education that included narrative analysis workshops for teachers. We conclude by offering a few pathways for implementing Hymes’s call for ethnographic knowledge to be shared, democratic, and open to all: knowledge from and for the people (see also Blommaert 2010a).

The Ethnolinguistic Essays

As said above, Hymes (1996) incorporates quite a bit of the original 1980 essays; the lead essay in both books is Speech and Language, one of Hymes’s most powerful statements on linguistic inequality, and in many ways his language-political manifesto. Yet, both books differ in general orientation and pitch. The 1996 book can be read as a statement on
sociolinguistic ethnography: it sets out to explain ethnographic practice in detail and moves into a detailed analysis of children’s classroom narratives, all done from the viewpoint that language is not just an opportunity for speakers but often also a problem, a constraint; and that basic sociolinguistic issues such as the distribution of linguistic and narrative resources have to be part of any ethnographic inquiry. The earlier book, in contrast, develops a meticulous and robust framework for making ethnography a full part of educational research, even beyond Hymes’s interest in narrative or even language issues. It can be seen as Hymes’s program for educational ethnography.

The earlier book also has a different order than its later counterpart. It starts with a lecture Hymes originally gave at the invitation of Sol Tax in a lecture series aimed at bringing together ideas about human evolution from the four fields of anthropology. The 1962 paper, entitled “Functions of Speech: An Evolutionary Approach” (Hymes 1980:1–18), is programmatic: it is the first real “call” for anthropologists and linguists to seriously consider meaning as something that extends beyond the referential function of language, a point that has proven to be extremely valuable in considering children’s linguistic repertoires, especially when studying children’s narrative meaning making. Most of this narrative view on children’s ways of speaking has later found its way to the 1996 collection.

The second essay in the book, “Speech and Language: On the Origins and Foundations of Inequality” (Hymes 1980:19–61), points the reader to inequalities in how speech forms are (largely) politically organized by deploying a Bernsteinian complication of the message-form (or meaning-form) as consisting of both elaborated and restricted codes. In the third essay, “Qualitative/Quantitative Research Methodologies in Education: A Linguistic Perspective” (Hymes 1980:62–87), Hymes sketches the evolution within linguistics (in the United States in dialogue with anthropology) from a science largely occupied with internal structures to one that engages with social context and use, and extends beyond the linguistic sign: toward a semiotic view of language issues in the classroom, a point elaborated on in the final essay: “Language in Education: Forward to Fundamentals” (Hymes 1980:139–160).

The three following essays form a cluster, and it is a pity that the middle one was left out when preparing the 1996 collection. Two of these three essays were republished there under the heading “Part 1: Ethnography,” namely “What Is Ethnography?” (Hymes 1980:88–103) and “Educational Ethnology” (Hymes 1980:119–125). Hymes develops the idea that ethnography as a social practice (also aiming at social change) is cumulative, cooperative, and comparative; and consequently, that knowledge also needs to have these three elements if it wants to count as “democratic knowledge” (1980:119). The middle essay, “Ethnographic Monitoring” (Hymes 1980:104–118), exactly discusses the cooperative part of ethnography, and it is this part that forms the foundation of his real long-term goal for social change in education. We will get back to this below. The seventh essay, “Narrative Thinking and Storytelling Rights: A Folklorist’s Clue to a Critique of Education” (Hymes 1980:126–138) ties back in with the narrative inequality issue that was raised in the second essay, and elaborates this with concrete examples from the lecture hall, discussed by both Hymes and Courtney Cazden. The final essay, “Language in Education” (Hymes 1980:139–160), raises a few fundamental points about where knowledge about education is located. To Hymes, “part of what we need to know in order to change is not known to anyone; teachers are closer to part of it than most linguists” (1980:139). Let us now delve somewhat deeper into the basic assumptions and ideas articulated in the 1980 collection.

**Cumulative, Cooperative, Comparative**

In this book, Hymes defines what we would now call a learning environment and offers it as an object of research (see Heath 1983 for a discussion of the breadth and depth of such
an environment). Cazden (2001:78) notes that in studies of nontraditional classrooms outside of the ethnographic tradition, “mention of affective qualities of the learning environment are hard to find.” This is to say that a lot of educational research has simply ignored its positive qualities. For Hymes and his contemporaries, Cazden and Heath, the school, a local institution where children come to learn and be reproduced as social beings, is part of this learning environment, and too often educational research stops at the school gates. For Hymes, research on schools should take into account neighborhoods, homes, parents, teachers, and the like. Schools can then become case studies, of which we can collect many, and compare those cases against each other. By activating the voices of parents, teachers, and children (Hornberger 2006:284) and have them cooperate in the research project, it becomes possible to incorporate their voices in creating a new theory about schools, how children learn in such an institutional environment, and how some children are excluded from the resources that one needs to have access to in order to be successful.

Hymes then identified the problem with most educational research: it was not really focused on the child—a real child, performing real learning practices in a real social environment. When in the 1960s and 1970s ethnographers entered the field of educational research, their preoccupation with specific cases (a child, a group of children, an individual school) was seen as “not representative” and “anecdotal,” and most of their findings were quickly discarded as falling within the “error margin” of serious research yielding averages and patterns of “normal” development. Hymes reacts by designing in the three articles we mentioned (“What is Ethnography?,” “Ethnographic Monitoring,” and “Educational Ethnology”) a sustainable long-term program for an ethnography of education, part of which consisted in making education and educators themselves more ethnographic—that is, more democratic, more accessible to voices presently unheard or marginalized, more concerned with real processes than with the metric of averages and normalcy.

This program is threefold and operates at three levels: it is cumulative at the microlevel, cooperative at the mesolevel, and comparative at the macrolevel. At the microlevel, Hymes’s ethnographic project in education is concerned with narrative inequality (as demonstrated in the 1996 book) and his ethnographic program at the microlevel consequently consists of a cumulative series of ethnopoetic analyses of classroom and home narratives (e.g., of children, see Cazden 2001 and Poveda 2002; of educators, see Juzwik 2004 and Willaert and Creve 2005; of parents, see Jinkerson 2010) as the basis for any ethnographic enterprise in education of this kind. It is at the mesolevel that ethnographic monitoring, the cooperative aspect (and the focus of this essay), operates. It provides the link to what members know and an accumulated comparative understanding of what members of communities more generally have known and done (the ethnological macrolevel; Hymes 180:105). Yet, “the ethnography of Malinowski and most other classic ethnography—mere ethnography—does not address such questions as ‘How can we make this canoe better?’ ” (Erickson 1979:186). It is precisely by being involved in a process of ethnographic monitoring, or in other words by becoming more participating than observing, that this can become a reality. Participant-observation has always been a part of ethnography, but it is crucial to extend this into a cooperative effort at the level of communication throughout our involvement, to bridge the “timing and sequencing” problem, also raised by Erickson (1979:183). In other words: if we want “school people” to be more observant as participants then we must become more participating as observers.

What we will do next is to provide two concrete examples of what ethnographic monitoring is and can mean in educational research. It positions itself at the mesolevel, that is, between an interest in accumulated cases and a comparative generalization; and that it extends in its practice to both ends. In other words: it mediates the interests of
everyone involved. This will become clear through Hymes’s endless concern for developing intimate, and thus vulnerable relationships with schools (elaborately demonstrated in the NIE report); and through looking at a concrete example of how teachers and other school stakeholders can benefit from the work at the microlevel (demonstrated in the narrative teacher workshops held by Van der Aa in Barbados).

**Hymes’s Philadelphia Report**

From 1978 onward, Hymes and David M. Smith (who became director of the Center for Urban Ethnography around that time), started to receive funding from the National Institute of Education for the ethnographic study of learning in various contexts (see also Gilmore and McDermott 2006:203–204 for the historical context). The funds were administered through the Graduate School of Education (GSE) at the University of Pennsylvania of which Hymes was the dean. Concretely, the project focused on “unspecified issues surrounding the acquisition of language art skills” (Smith 2002:173). In this realm, Professor Morton Botel, also of GSE, had developed a state-approved plan for a major curriculum reform in the field of language arts. From the beginning it was stressed how important and vital the active leadership of the three principals of the participating primary schools would be. Part of this involvement was shown by the fact that each of them was enrolled in an Ed.D. program at GSE. Their respective dissertations also investigated one aspect of the implementation of the program. It is in this context that one should situate Hymes’s Philadelphia project on ethnographic monitoring.

The three-volume report, which the authors retrieved from the Hymes archives kept at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, consists of more than 800 pages discussing the theoretical and methodological rationale (the latter one mostly written by Hymes himself) followed by extremely detailed reports on the schools under scope, written by colleagues and graduate students (Hymes et al. 1981). David M. Smith, coauthor on the first grants, later author and PI for the final grant, wrote a section on general findings and an important epilogue that discusses the scope of such a project by analyzing one teacher and one principal’s story regarding their experience as collaborators. Let us now go into a more detailed account of this program.

**The Ethnographic Monitoring Program**

In the first pages of this extremely detailed and comprehensive report, Hymes discusses the mode of inquiry consisting of a threefold purpose and three practical steps. Let us begin with the purpose (Hymes et al. 1981:5). First, Hymes makes an epistemological point by saying that this program should contribute to our knowledge of teaching and learning. This epistemological stance was firmly interdisciplinary and Hymes was addressing multiple audiences, including anthropologists, linguists, educational scientists, educators, and much more (see, e.g., his broad vision in the essay on educational ethnology, also included in the 1980 collection). Secondly, he is concerned that such a program, and by extension any ethnographic work in education, should develop and sustain cooperative relationships with a set of schools in a largely black urban setting. From Hymes’s later work we can easily see that this can be replaced by any educational setting where voice, the praxis of meaning with real interests, or perhaps meaning with consequences, is a real problem (Blommaert 2008). Ethnographic monitoring is intended to make visible emic knowledge from educational voices that are vulnerable (Blommaert 2008) and that are obscured by capitalist-homogeneous responses to a multiplicity of voices (as is often the case with national or federal language policies). Finally, Hymes sees the purpose of an ethnographic mode of inquiry into education as one that should be compatible with both the demands of
knowledge and the demands of cooperation. Canonical educational research often suffers from paying attention to one over the other, or to none at all. Then Hymes turns to three practical steps to make this purpose operational.

First, ethnographers consult teachers (or principals) to identify what issues concern them most (Hymes et al. 1981:5). Of course it is implied that the ethnographer would prefer schools that are already seen as problematic, or schools where it is suspected that voice is an issue.

A second step is to observe behavior relevant to that issue in a series of contexts in and out of the classroom (Hymes et al. 1981:5). Hymes’s interdisciplinary view shines through in the use of the term behavior, which could refer to any practice in the classroom, or even any educational practice outside of the classroom. Educational linguists could understand here a sort of ethnopoetic intertextuality, or perhaps a study of narrative resources that at a microlevel inform us of the core issues having to do with gaining or losing voice.

The final step would be to share our findings with the teachers and the principal (Hymes et al. 1981:5). Mind here that Hymes does not take this last step lightly, nor does he imply here that the microanalysis is the sole business of the ethnographer (see, e.g., the Caribbean case study below). Rather, he says that “the purpose of the third step is to make the findings the possession of the school people who have contributed to their discovery” (Hymes et al. 1981:6).

Hymes used a range of compelling arguments for taking narrative as a privileged locus of issues of voice (see Blommaert 2009 for a detailed discussion). There is, however, no reason why other communicative resources would not be worthy of inclusion in a Hymesian ethnographic program for education, and Rampton (2006) provides an excellent case for interactional sociolinguistics as an approach that offers us the critical cumulative microevidence that enters into ethnographic monitoring. The question of “narrative versus conversation” does not occupy us, because both obviously provide us with patterns of systematic marginalization, silencing, and disenfranchisement, and this also counts for literacy resources (see Wortham 2006 for an exemplification of this methodological pluralism, and Heath 1983 for an impressive early account of the various dimensions of communicative economies that enter into a learning environment).

The Anthropological Logic

In a next section of the report, Hymes then points out the ontological status of a program such as ethnographic monitoring by paying attention to its anthropological roots (something that obviously never escaped his attention). He describes for each of the steps also its “anthropological logic” (Hymes et al. 1981:10–13). It is imperative to stress this, because it seems at first that the steps are pretty straightforward and (perhaps apart from the cooperative aspect) not very different from other, more canonical approaches (Hymes et al. 1981:6). This is of course where the real craftsmanship of Hymes comes in, a craftsmanship much needed to fully grasp the humanistic and democratic change that is embedded in the program described above.

Hymes comments on the first step, that anthropologists always seek knowledge that is already out there, and that is known and valid for the people that make use of it. He argues for a comprehensive understanding of education, an understanding that is particular to a certain (type of) school. Therefore it is important to not only document what is already known but also support teachers’ quest for information that they do not yet know (Hymes et al. 1981:7).

The logic of the second step lies in the fact that in education, children’s (sociolinguistic) behaviors may differ dramatically depending on context. For Hymes, the study of children’s sociolinguistic resources can only be really valid when studied in a variety of
contexts: the classroom, at home, among friends, in the playground (1981:8–9). And (in the Burkeian sense) he smirkily adds that a lot of their behavior obviously depends on what audience they are satisfying. In other words: are there any adults present in the audience? Perhaps an ethnographer or a parent? Very important in this endeavor (an empirical study of sociolinguistic resources in and out of school), Hymes argues for patience: not everyone can report at all times accurately what one feels and experiences (1981:9). Therefore some “routine” ways of speaking may not be directly observable by the teachers or the parents, but once the researcher brings them out (through the emic–etic ontology of anthropological fieldwork) teachers or parents may be surprised and interested. It means that, as opposed to older one-sided ethnographic work, not only the anthropologist is surprised at what he or she discovers but also so is the teacher, the parent, the principal, and so on. This type of research is processual and highly collaborative, and here we arrive at the term monitoring. As Hymes argues, through this monitoring “one can find out what counts in fact for children on the part of the principal; as involved with their children’s education in part of the parents,” and so on (Hymes et al. 1981:10). In other words, Hymes stresses here the need for sharing knowledge among all interested educational actors, including the ethnographer.

Finally, Hymes underscores that “the point of the third step is more than courtesy” (1981:10). He proposes a continuing mutual inquiry, not just “reporting back,” because intensive and genuine cooperation is at the heart of ethnographic monitoring. There are sound intellectual reasons for that (Hymes et al. 1981:10–11).

Here we come to the threefold paradigm that Hymes so intricately tries to weave, a paradigm with multiple levels and very similar to what he once identified in Native American verse: a pattern of onset–ongoing–outcome. At the onset, or microlevel, we find a cumulative ethnopoetic effort (which involves narratives of teachers, children, and parents); at mesolevel an ongoing ethnographic commitment (that monitors and backchannels the analysis of voice to the cooperators); and at macrolevel an ethnological outcome: a cumulative knowledge of each school in relation to the whole. Hymes ends by saying that “a framework starting with issues identified by teachers, and continuing cooperation, may make findings more acceptable and likely to be utilized” (1981:13). Essentially this means that close relations need to be developed in schools and that these relations need to be maintained. Up to this day the Penn GSE keeps in contact with public schools in the Philadelphia area (personal communication, Nancy H. Hornberger, May 2009).

Intimate Relationships

As indicated earlier, it is imperative in ethnographic monitoring to have a long-term commitment to the schools that are part of the project. Hymes and Smith had set up a remarkably delicate web of relations in Philadelphia between the GSE (its Dean, professors, and graduate students) and the school personnel (incl. teachers, children, and parents active in the school). As said, the principals of all the schools involved were also enrolled in a doctoral program at GSE, and many professors who worked on the project were part of the doctoral committee of the principals. In this way, it was easy for the principals to welcome the “additional” relationship (working with the professors on the ethnographic monitoring project through their graduate students) and they gladly helped out in finding teachers willing to cooperate on the program (Hymes et al. 1981:20). The principals also participated in conferences, and school personnel in general have since its inception (now roughly 30 years ago) been invited to the annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum at Penn.

Of course, teachers were also part of the intimate relationships that had developed. Several teachers took part in the Forum as well as in courses at Penn. Hymes reports of one
teacher specifically, who came to “seek ethnographic skills for study of the actual teaching of writing,” most likely inspired by the cooperation and the pathways, or mobility, it offered (1981:20). Parents came into the picture in two projects that were more or less devised by African American graduate students studying the community setting of black schools in West Philadelphia. Commenting on researchers’ roles in working with parents, Hymes sketches here a very delicate picture of a young teacher who became a graduate student at Penn, but now has to learn again to “take the slower route of listening and identifying the problems more surely” (1981:23). On this note, David M. Smith recalls that “at least one of the African American teachers who worked with us in the project enrolled in and finished a doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania” (Smith 2002:175). Naturally this would be the main concern in such an intimate web of relationships: the roles (or identities), voices, and interests that the different actors articulate need to be made explicit. But in doing so, as in any good marriage, meaningful and open communication remains the key element.

As for the children, Hymes does not mention them explicitly as active participants in the research, but they are of course central to the project’s concern with children’s literary and artistic skills, as well as in its aim of recentering educational research toward the individual needs and interests of the child, rather than focusing on defining problems in terms of variables common to all schools.

**Democratic Knowledge**

On his webpage, still maintained posthumously by the University of Virginia, Hymes indicates being

interested in combating elitism and narrowness and the playing of “Western mind games” at the expense of the rest of the world. . . . Two vital issues for the field are (a) to ensure that anthropologists are the knowledgeable peers of members of any other discipline concerned with peoples and topics anthropologists study and (b) to justify scholarship in its relation to the interests and abilities of others. [Hymes n.d.]

Hymes touches on two very important issues that are related to what we are discussing here. Both have to do with knowledge as being highly political. The first issue implicitly demarcates anthropology as a discipline concerned with the study of all aspects of humanity. It opens up anthropology to topics that other disciplines, such as educational research, exclusively consider their own.

The second issue that Hymes touches on in the statement on his University of Virginia website is related to the different steps of ethnographic monitoring. Through the ongoing process of this program, ethnographers not only define their research topics in relation to the interests of school personnel but also offer pathways to make full use of and contribute to their abilities: they find out what is already known and apply that emic knowledge toward their own theoretical framework, a framework that they are happy to share with the school community. This process can be situated within the cooperative framework and offers teachers and principals the opportunity to take classes at the university, for instance. In other words: it creates mobility.

In the report, the systemic principles and structures of collaboration are very democratic. During the project, graduate students who did fieldwork in the different schools regularly met with the professor-investigators at Penn, and they had to engage with a different culture of exchange and dialogue. David M. Smith says about this that “seminar participants are not used to sharing data with their professors so that they can reflect on them together. They expect to be evaluated” (Hymes et al. 1981:792). And commenting on
the position of Hymes in all this, he adds that “this problem was further exacerbated by the fact that Hymes was both dean and a recognized name in the field. . . . Some graduate students found it difficult to treat him as a collaborator, and in effect, a peer” (Hymes et al. 1981:792). The system that drove this project, clearly, faced obstacles of tradition—most importantly the tendency for democracy to stop in front of established position and hierarchy. Most crucial in the whole process, however, are the potential and systemic equality of voice and the facilitation of this pursuit by the numerous communications across the board: between graduate students and teachers, teachers and professors, the dean and the principals, etc. To Hymes, this equality of voice defined ethnography as an intellectual and political enterprise, and ethnographic monitoring was the practical implementation of it.

We have now arrived at the crux of ethnographic monitoring: creating opportunities to give an equal weight to people's voice: that of the ethnographer, but also that of the collaborators in the field. Here we turn to the Caribbean.

**Ethnographic Monitoring in a Caribbean Classroom**

Ethnographic fieldwork with St. Joseph Primary School in Barbados has opened up some possibilities to work with Hymesian monitoring. The Barbados project did not have the same scope (initially only one school participated) or the same funding (a small fund from a Caribbean educational NGO) as the Philadelphia one, and should therefore, rather, be seen as a microethnography of “monitoring voice.” It took place in the context of a wider research that Van der Aa conducted on the sociolinguistic construction of Caribbean nationalisms (Van der Aa 2006). The research focused on how Barbadian and Jamaican nationalism was celebrated during two key moments: the celebration of Heroes Day in Jamaica, and of Independence Day in Barbados. Part of the Barbados research developed in the school context because these institutional sites are highly participatory in such festivities. It was found that Barbadian primary schools were celebrating Independence for a whole month during November each year and that every school stakeholder (from children to teachers and parents) actively participated in it. The fact that the ethnographer came from a European background obviously brought along and invoked all the historical perils of inequality and power. However, once the steps were followed and an intimate relationship of trust was built between the ethnographer and the school personnel, a lot was possible. Let us take a look at the case under scope.

Barbados is an independent Caribbean nation within the British Commonwealth. The language of daily communication is Barbadian Creole but Barbadian English is the vehicle for institutional communication, for example in the classroom. Barbados has an educational system that was developed and implemented under British rule, which means that Barbadian schools also have O-levels, or the so-called “common entrance exams.” This works both as a stimulus (if they pass O-levels, it is quite easy for Barbadians to study in England or the United States) and as a tool for exclusion (very few pupils effectively succeed). The island has several primary and secondary schools, a few tertiary institutions such as a teachers’ college, and a university (a partnership with Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago).

The Ministry of Education puts firm emphasis on the use of English as the medium of instruction, and refers in its brochures to the “British variant” of English (Barbados Ministry of Education 2000). However, access to British English resources is limited and teachers have a hard time modeling it in the classroom. The language of instruction is not a given subject, but an object that needs to be modeled (see Fenigsen 2007 for a detailed discussion). Barbadian English (not Creole) is the real language used in the classroom. One can therefore speak of a continuum of linguistic resources in which there are many varieties available (Barbadian Creole, Barbadian English, Standard British English,
Standard U.S. English, African American Vernacular English, Jamaican Creole, etc.) out of which teachers and children are permanently making choices.

Not all resources are equally available to all children and teachers, nor does everyone have the same command of, for example, British English resources. During the fieldwork in St. Joseph Primary, the class teacher mentioned the instance of an 11-year-old pupil who had lived in the United Kingdom with his aunt for several years, and had gained a “Cockney” accent on returning to Barbados. Even though the child mastered British resources much better than the other children, he was mocked and discriminated against for mobilizing a local variety of British English in a context that could not understand it (in the case of his peers), or that did not approve of the social class context associated with its use (in case of the class teacher “He cyan’t [cannot] be coming all the way from England fi [to] talk Cockney!” [personal communication, Mr. Stone, November 19, 2005]). A further discussion of Cockney, social class, and identity among youngsters in the United Kingdom can be found in Rampton 2006. Finally, the mastery of the different linguistic resources that make up the local continuum is “truncated”: it is composed of “specialized but partially and unevenly developed resources” (Blommaert 2010b:103–106).

St. Joseph Primary

The classroom fieldwork took place during three weeks in 2005 and five weeks in 2007. The entire project on Caribbean nationalisms ran from roughly 2002 to 2005; and the classroom research took a shape of its own after a while. St. Joseph Primary school became the prime hub for the set-up of a local network of educational actors that participated in a project that could be described as ethnographic monitoring: it was cumulative because after the first period with St. Joseph (a pseudonym, 2005) several other schools began participating: St. Anthony, St. John, and St. Mary (all three pseudonyms, in 2007), as well as the Erdiston Teachers College and the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill. It was cooperative because the ethnographer participated actively with the children, the teachers, principals, parents, teacher educators, and university professors. And it was comparative because of its robust ethnographic knowledge that was collaboratively created and that was productively applied to other contexts such as the teacher education classroom: many of the narrative examples and analyses found their way to the Barbadian teacher training programs.

Let us now briefly rehearse the three steps of an ethnographic monitoring program as sketched by Hymes in his NIE report discussed above: the first step is for the ethnographer to consult teachers (or principals) to identify what issues concern them most (Hymes et al. 1981:5). The second step is to observe behavior relevant to that issue in a series of contexts in and out of the classroom (Hymes et al. 1981:5). And the third step involves sharing the findings with the teachers and the principal (Hymes et al. 1981:5). Below we discuss each of the steps for the Barbados project.

Step One: Identifying the Problem

The original intention of the project was to find out how the Independence of Barbados was discussed, performed, and reenacted in the concrete primary school classroom. At classroom level, teachers could then benefit from the ethnographic analyses to understand their pupils’ performances and competencies better. After that, analyses could be used in teacher education classes and in university as lesson material. Parents were also invited to comment and children could enjoy the attention their performances received. So far the plan. However, what started out as an ethnographic monitoring of children’s verbal artistry quickly converted into a study of inequality, truncated sociolinguistic resources,
and other unplanned stuff. That is exactly what ethnographic monitoring does: precisely because of its cooperative nature, it rapidly repositions and realigns the research plan with the interests of its main stakeholders. After recording a few classroom sessions in which children were telling stories, it became clear that the interests of researcher (narratives as verbal artistry) and teachers (grammatically and generically correct narratives) were different. In what follows we discuss a narrative workshop session from the 2005 period in which one of St. Joseph’s classroom teachers is invited, along with one of the tutors, to comment on a transcription Van der Aa made of a story told by Shawna, a ten-year-old girl who was a student in their class. The story concerns the Independence of Barbados from the British and was told during a special dedicated afternoon session. For about two weeks in November 2005, each afternoon two or three children were asked to come up front and tell a story about this particular topic. We must now turn to step two of the monitoring program: once the particular needs or problems of an educational setting are clear, we need to start observing all the behaviors that are relevant to it.

Step Two: Listening to Shawna

The story we discuss here was told by a child in a primary school on Barbados’ South Coast, St. Joseph Primary School, on November 21, 2005. Van der Aa had gotten to know one of the teachers working there, who was serving as president of the Independence Day Carnival Committee. When approached about participating in the research project, St. Joseph’s principal agreed and soon after arrangements were made for Van der Aa to attend and record classroom activities, and to hang out in and around school. The school consisted of 85 students at the time, along a 60:40 ratio of boys to girls. Each grade (from one to six) was composed of only one class, so consisted roughly of 13–15 students. That particular afternoon Van der Aa was recording and attending a session of grade four, in which the teacher had asked the children to come up front and to produce a narrative about “what Independence means to them.” In the previous classes students were well prepared for this sort of exercise by means of the distribution of plenty of historical information concerning Barbadian history.

We want to focus on the story of Shawna now, a ten-year-old girl. After the story was recorded, a transcript was made that tried to grasp both poetic and interactional features. The transcript below shows the elicitation of the story by the teacher, as well as its ongoing turn-taking (often as interruptions by teachers and peers). In the same transcript, however, some of the story elements are reformatted to show their patterned narrative properties through indentation and numbering (in terms of lines, verses, and stanzas). We consider a line to be a sentence-like, predicate structure that is usually but not always signposted by an initial particle such as a time word. Verses are groups of lines that belong together based on principles of equivalence such as repetition and parallelism (Hymes 1996:163). Several verses form stanzas, bigger units that also belong together on the basis of these same principles. In our transcription below, indentation indicates the verse beginnings and shows subordinate clauses as being an essential part of the narrative flow. Numbering serves to clearly identify the different units: lines are indicated by Roman numerals, verses by small letters, and stanzas by capital letters (based on Hymes 2003:135ff).

This implicit verbal structure may be a systematic way of performing, of speaking, particular to a certain group. These sort of ethnopoetic analyses attempt, as Blommaert notes, “to unearth culturally embedded ways of speaking—materials and forms of using them, that belong to the sociolinguistic system of a group, and that have a particular place in a repertoire due to their specific form-function relationships” (2009:269). This (separate) focus, or “spotlight” on individual narrators pays not only attention to what is said explicitly (sentence level) but also allows the analyst to discover relations between lines
and verses in the narratives (see also Hymes 2003:36–80). These relations are often not noticed or consciously produced by narrators, and may therefore be considered to be the “cultural dimension” of narration. This gives stories a certain flow or rhythm, which in previous ethnopoetic classroom analyses turns out to be consistent and “measured” (see, e.g., Hymes 1996; Poveda 2002).

Other transcription conventions can be found below. Here are the first two stanzas of Shawna’s story:

Teacher:
Yes, Shawna, can you also tell us something about Independence eh?

Shawna:
yeah (2.5)

(a) 01 What Independence means to me (4.0)
02 [independence? (3.0)]

Teacher:
=A little louder, come up, you going . . . (imitates the pupil’s body posturing)

Shawna:
(b) 03 Independent mea-means not dependent or
04 (0.7) controlled by any person or thing.
(c) 05 It means that. (0.5) you were not allowed to do certain thing
06 and just escape (1.5)

(B)
(a) 07 We were once ruled by the mother country England.
08 we? b-broke away because it wasn’t fair for us (2.0)

Tutor:
=Hey Shawn (short for Shawna) it was to us .

Shawna:
(looks up disturbed)
(b) 09 =SINCE we have broke away,
10 we now have our own national symbols,
11 our own prime minister, (0.5)
12 our own (0.5) governor general,
13 and our own rights (0.5).

The story then continued with a discussion of Barbados’ national emblems (flag, coat of arms) and ended with a discussion of the education system under the British rule.

Shawna told her story mostly in standard English, and displayed a great deal of verbal artistry here: she carefully crafted verses that thrive on repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. A nice introductory stanza was followed by a second stanza, in which she explained and described what had changed in Barbados since it became independent. The rhetorical coherence was partly achieved by repetition of the words “now” and “our,” stressing the current independent state. The teacher and the tutor also helped Shawna manage the story. The teacher’s comment before the telling was aimed at adjusting the student’s body posturing and loudness of voice, both typical elements of a traditional performance ethic in schools. The correction of the tutor was of a different nature: she had noticed that Shawna was using a nonstandard construction by replacing the proposition to by the proposition for, in “it wasn’t fair for us.” This lexical correction disturbed Shawna visibly, which is noticeable in the next line, where she stressed the word since and firmly reclaimed the floor to continue her telling. From lines 3 and 8 (“mea-means” and “b-broke”) it is clear that Shawna was also slightly stuttering. This seemed not to bother the teacher and the tutor. When she had finished her story, she was complimented by the teacher after a very short pause and got a round of applause by the children as well.
What both of the teachers did not notice however, was Shawna’s nonstandard syntactical–verbal construction in line 9: “since we have broke away.” This shows that it was not so much that both teachers were ignoring or misrecognizing children’s verbal artistry but, rather, that they themselves, in the best case, were “willing to let go” in favor of the child’s storytelling skills, or in the worst case, were unaware that there was an error to begin with. In this last scenario, it would seem that both children and teachers have unequal access to certain standard resources, and thus, as Fenigsen (2007:247) writes, “the teachers teach about standard English (‘correct speech’) but model it little.” It also shows that our original idea, namely that teachers were misrecognizing children’s verbal artistry, is rather one-sided. Through a profound ethnographic engagement with the teachers the real problem became clear: that both were suffering from an unequal access to standard resources. Here we need to turn to step three of the monitoring: bringing knowledge back to the people involved in our research.

**Step Three: Monitoring Dynamics**

Mr. Stone (Shawna’s teacher) and Mrs. Small (Shawna’s tutor) both came in for a consulting session that Van der Aa had set up the day after the storytelling. These sessions were regularly conducted by and formed part of the monitoring process in which children’s stories were discussed with teachers and parents. This particular evening, Shawna’s story was up for discussion. The recording was played first and then both teacher and tutor got the transcript. Here are some of their comments. First Mr. Stone:

yeah man, again it makes sense with the verses and stanzas . . . it’s like when you listen to these children they got rhythm you know (snatching his fingers, smiling) but now you can see on paper, on the page . . . there is these words that rhyme, like . . . (puts on glasses) line 9, 10, 11, our, our, our, bam-bam-bam (snatches fingers again), you know it’s like a flow. [Mr. Stone, November 22, 2005]

What Mr. Stone did here is to value the researcher’s approach to these sort of annually rehearsed, generically rigorous classroom stories. He appreciated the verbal artistry involved in the tellings of the stories, something that we did not expect. Transcribing the stories both ethnopoetically and interactionally has proven recognizable to the teachers participating in the research.

When asked to comment on the correction in line 8, Mrs. Small (the tutor) said:

Mrs. Small: It is our task to make sure that the children at all times talk in the standard language, as this is very important for their future, you know, as citizens, in the world . . . but then . . .

Jef: May I just quickly interrupt here, it was only a very minor mistake right?

Mrs. Small: Right, but even small mistakes can become such a big issue, see . . . this one small proposition deya [here] could make a major difference if you sit with boss man . . . you coulda wear suit and tie, nuff [a lot of] bling [jewellery] and say “oh man that ain’t fair for me” and no way you will get the job, a so it go. [Mrs. Small, November 22, 2005]

Mrs. Small first stressed the importance of grammar in her classroom because it serves children to get jobs, but also it orients children to a center that seems to lie elsewhere, being “citizens of the world” by speaking standard English. She then commented on how a linguistic detail (as she replicated the exact same one that she corrected in Shawna’s story) eventually leads to exclusion when conducting a job interview: a Creole lexical item is not acceptable for certain employers.
So what about a Creole verbal or syntactical construction? Because Van der Aa found asking the tutor about the nonstandard construction in line 9 that was not corrected a bit confrontational, he decided to end the session with a general invitation to add comments. It was then that Mr. Stone brought up the issue spontaneously:

Mrs. Small: Yes, it is correct. [Mrs. Small and Mr. Stone, November 22, 2005]

Mr. Stone’s initial doubts about the grammatical incorrectness of “since we have broke away” in standard English were resolved in the favor of Creole. Mrs. Small’s confirmation attests to two things: the closeness of standard and Creole resources and the unequal access to the former that actually impacts on both teachers’ and children’s metapragmatic awareness and sociolinguistic behavior.

What can we make of this? It is clear that it is very important to actively “bring back” analyses to the field when doing ethnographic monitoring. It serves not only as an aid to reflection for the practitioner (in Mr. Stone’s case) but also as a possibility for the researcher to reflect on his or her own practices. In a developing country such as Barbados with a very narrow labor market, it is indeed very important that children also acquire a degree of grammatical competence by being exposed to standard English resources that will eventually secure their upward social and economical mobility. Children like Shawna, and how they are evaluated by teachers, show us a glimpse of the linguistic enregisterment of the state through their storytelling and how this can possibly lead to a misrecognition–denial of voice. It shows us the manifold ways in which everyday speech activities are caught in a web of institutional and behavioral ideologies, naturalizing particular forms of disqualification and scanning pupils’ situated behavior accordingly. It is when we see educational discourses and meta discourses as situated and lodged in layers of contexts that we can see them as sociocultural and political objects, that is, as things that can tell us a story not on “truth” or “lies,” but on the actual patterns, processes, and relationships that make up learning.

A Final Step: Taking Stock

A final thing we should ask ourselves when engaging in ethnographic monitoring has to do with the equality of all the actors or stakeholders involved. In other words: who gets what from it?

Even though children are 49 percent stakeholders in education, it also means that they as the biggest group do not really have any decision power. Yet, a good ethnographic monitoring project makes sure that children are optimally involved in the process. In our Barbados case, we ended up with the following balance.

During the project, children were able to star as the child narrators they really are. Many of them felt proud to be recorded, they felt important and took Van der Aa on many field trips to the country to attend their family and friends’ families’ picnics, cricket tournaments, and so on. Hymes has always insisted on using narrators’ real names, a practice we have gladly followed in this essay. Children were also given a printout of a (simplified) ethnopoetic transcript, in which the story was somewhat isolated, together with a picture while they were performing. A colleague of another school, and a friend of Van der Aa, had put together picture and text in a nice frame for the children to take home. It was reported that in most cases, both children and parents took pride in the interest that was invested in their narrative skills.
The teachers of St. Joseph have expressed interest in looking at their students’ narrative competence in such a way as presented above: through the organization of narrative workshops in which concrete cases are discussed. Two teachers have also said that it would be particularly interesting for them to discuss children they conceive as “problematic” storytellers or performers, and so separate workshops with these educators were conducted.

The principal of St. Joseph has received extra funding for his school because it has participated in an international educational research program, and with the help of some people at the University of the West Indies, the principal was able to secure the extra funds that were used to acquire new furniture. An additional charity project delivered a few boxes of free children’s books, something that a school can never have enough of.

Finally, the ethnographer gains as well through a renewed collaborative methodological insight and through acquiring new theoretical insights by taking seriously the voices that make up Barbadian ways of speaking.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Business

Such conclusions as the ones we drew on our Barbados case could only be drawn by engaging in a process of ethnographic monitoring in which we worked from the voice of the pupil, through that of the analyst toward that of the teacher and back, checking what each party brought into the analysis and treating each of these voices as legitimate, as different angles from which the same social and communicative reality was seen and acted on. A hit-and-run methodology in which the narratives of the pupils were recorded by an analyst and then taken away, so to speak, into the analyst’s world of interpretation and understanding, would never do the work. It could have led to a celebration of Shawna’s artistic talent as a narrator, and bypass the institutional regime in which such artistry was actually located and against which it is measured and evaluated. In other words: such a procedure would fail to elucidate what Shawna can actually do and achieve with her storytelling skills, or, what such skills mean and represent to her in real life. Hymes was relentless in emphasizing this: that research should not be content just emphasizing the potential equality and beauty of cultural resources, but must explain why such valuable resources are in actual fact unequal, and why the value of such resources can change from context to context or era to era.

The program of ethnographic monitoring is political, theoretical, and methodological; and its insistence on collaboration offers ideal circumstances to observe and understand voice, so crucial in Hymes’s later work (the subtitle of Hymes 1996 is “toward an understanding of voice”). It creates this opportunity through (1) listening to what the real problems are for real people in real situations; (2) carefully observing the semiotic resources that are at play in principals’, teachers’, students’, and parents’ lives, and also in the wider community; and (3) offering collaborators a place to reiterate their voice through making known their concerns with the way the work was conducted, its subsequent analyses, or any other issues. In other words, ethnographic monitoring is the basis for analyzing voice in educational discourse: voice as an opportunity for learners and as a target for education, and also as an obstacle and constraint for many individuals and groups. Linguistic and other cultural skills are thus detached from their locus in mainstream research—the individual’s mind and character—and placed where they belong: in a social environment in which it matters how other people hear and read you, and what kinds of judgments they will pass on your speech or writings. Ethnographic monitoring starts from the requirement that the analyst participates, and does not just observe, because the analyst is very much part of the social environment in which the research takes place.
and to which it needs to be fed back—not as a matter of choice but as a matter of political, theoretical, and methodological requirement.

Later work testifies to the fact that this fundamental position of the researcher as an actor of change, as someone who automatically “intervenes,” did not become mainstream but remains a position for which elaborate and precarious argumentation is required. The distinction, for instance, made in Cameron and colleagues (1992), among research on, for, and with others, obviously recalls many of the programmatic aspects of ethnographic monitoring (ethnographic monitoring is in fact mentioned: Cameron et al. 1992:52). Perennial debates in schools of education around the world about tightening research ethics to the point where the individual and contextual situatedness that was a key to educational ethnography is all but outlawed further testify to the fact that ethnographic monitoring is very much unfinished business in education. Ethics Boards and other research clearance houses push educational research increasingly away from intensive case-based work toward abstraction and generalization, toward the medians and averages that determine standards in education. Real life knows no averages, wrote Randolph Bourne about a century ago (see Bourne 1992); there is much truth in that, but we have learned in the meantime that averages are very much part of educational reality. The nasty thing about averages is that half of the learners fall below them; if an increasing number of learners fall below the average, the “standards are falling.” We can only escape from this logic by turning to case studies and by demonstrating that case-based work is as rigorously “scientific” as work aimed at setting averages. Hymes’s work offers us numerous arguments for that.

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Note

1. Transcription conventions follow:

|= for latched utterances

(.) for pauses less than one second

(1.5) pauses in seconds, up to 0.5 seconds precise

=: and :: for sound lengthening

or CAPS for emphasis/stress louder than the environment

(between italic brackets) for indicating laughter, stance, other action.

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