Note From the Field

Chronicles of a Shitty Ethnography

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This *Note from the Field* is an invitation to education ethnographers to see the important role of everyday aspects—such as shit—as we investigate the role of language learning and schooling, as well as the ways in which everyday aspects impede formal education and schooled learning to happen. This *Note* argues that leaving everyday activities outside of our scope of research might hinder us from discovering places where languages are practiced and are typically underexamined by academic work.

Do not be deceived by the title of this note. This is not a reflection about the difficulties of ethnographic research or how an ethnography went from bad to shitty. No. Using shitty in the title is a transparent description of a particular set of experiences during my multi-year ethnographic study in the Yucatan Peninsula as I conducted research in early childhood education (ECE) settings. By now, the careful reader would have understood that working with this age group frames shit in a way that makes sense in the title. These are the ages where children are starting to explore the world and its works. Among these, the works of their bodies and the pleasures that they bring.

To those of us interested in the role of schooling in education, it is important to see how shit gets schooled. And again, not shit as in stuff, but shit as in poop. More so in contexts where there are no toilets in the houses, and where these resting spaces become alien and scary for children (FN. 2018.02.14; 2017.11.17; see also Lea, 2001). *Why, if you can go to a tree or a hole in the ground in your house, do you need to sit down in a chair with water and let your poop go down?* This is not my question, but Mario's, a five-year-old student at Palal-na, the multigrade school where I worked as a co-teacher and researcher. This question was not easy to answer, and I surely did not have an answer for Mario at that time. Whoever has worked with this age group knows that these questions are common explorations for children as they get to know how shit works—this time meaning stuff and poop.

Between May 2017 and August 2018, I conducted an Ethnography of Language Policy and Planning (Hornberger, Anzures Tapia, Hanks, Kvietok Dueñas & Lee, 2018), where I examined how different stakeholders in one Indigenous community in the Yucatan Peninsula responded to language policies and ECE initiatives. In order to do this, I engaged in ethnographic and participatory research in a single-teacher multigrade Indigenous preschool (from age two to six) attended by 28

children. At this research site, I participated in the day-to-day aspects of schooling, complemented by my taking part in early childhood activities with the other four preschools in town, and in informal early childhood educational activities that took place in the community. Overall, this ethnographic and participatory research provided me with a window into the complexities of ECE and helped me bring into relief the personal stories often obscured by a field focused on school readiness, health promotion, and cost-effectiveness (Heckman, 2008).

Among some of the topics that have been obscured in the field, is the role of shit. Unless it is from a physiological and developmental point of view—in terms of sphincter control (e.g., Vermandel, Van Kampen, Van Gorp & Wyndaele, 2008)—or from a psychoanalytic point of view—in terms of anal fixations (e.g., Berzoff, 2008), the topic has been left out from the conversations around schooling. Again, our keen readers might say, "well, is Aldo actually the one here with this little and smelly fixation?" But *oh no*, my dear readers! It is the work of a committed ethnographer to see the salient aspects of our studies as we write and analyze our field notes, pictures, videos, and audio recordings. Based on Wolcott (1999), McCarty (2015) helps us reflect on how a critical ethnographic account in the language policy and planning (LPP) arena is a threefold enterprise—a way of seeing, where we see LPP as a human and cultural process; a way of looking, where we address LPP processes in a systematic ethnographic way; and a way of being, where ethnography is a way of doing social justice—of bringing humanness to LPP.

Nothing can be more human than shit, and as a consequence, it could be considered as a natural path that reminds us about the humanness of ethnographic work in LPP. As Taro Gomi (1993) bluntly describes in his book *Everyone Poops*, all living beings, from adults to children and from ants to camels, defecate. So then, why shouldn't we also see its role in our research when salient? Understanding the role of poop in ECE was not even remotely related to my research interests. My interests were centered on how children were using Yucatec Maya, the language of the region, as well as on the moments when the teacher opened both ideological and implementational spaces (Hornberger, 2005) for Maya to be taught and learned.

Because of different issues that I describe elsewhere (Anzures Tapia, forthcoming), Maya was barely present in the school. However, issues related to how children explored the experience with the toilet were a daily presence. Children were fascinated by the works of the potty, the water that came out from it, and how it flushed. In a school where we did not always have water, flushing the toilet was of extreme importance, and as a consequence, it was a serious issue to be supervised (FN. 2017.10.12). Thus, my teaching work involved supervising children during toilet trips, making sure they did not play with the water, and having them clean themselves and leave the toilet as clean as they could.

As I mentioned before, Palal-na is a single-teacher multigrade school, which meant that the teacher was also the principal and the janitor. This background made my entrance to the school an easy one, since my presence implied help which was in great need. In this way, a big part of my school day was spent cleaning the school—including the toilets. One could then say that my research was not properly teacher-action research, but janitor-action research. During many times of my research I was presented to toilets full of shit. When these were full, many times, the floors would

be full of it too (FN. 2018.01.03; 2017.08.30). Little by little, I started to teach children that if the toilet would not flush, they needed to tell an adult and how it was not healthy to go to an environment that smelled and looked like that. Unfortunately, the teacher did not have the opportunity to teach these self-management skills consistently, not because she did not want to or thought they were not important, but because attending to children of different ages, trying to teach different curricula to them, and at the same time fulfilling her responsibilities as a principal and janitor were all overwhelming.

Dear readers, you might think this is all comical, but it is not. When a teacher spends most of her time around tasks such as cleaning and preparing paperwork, we need to ask how much children are actually learning. At Palal-na, children were, of course, learning something through exploring the school, playing with the soil and playground games, and definitely doing complex calculations as they threw rocks and branches in order to retrieve some *nances* and *guayas* (fruits from the region). However, on many occasions, we would start classes one to one-and-a-half hours late or ended early because the teacher had to complete some paperwork or because we needed to do some cleaning. Therefore, schooling was reduced to a minimum since children also had to have their breaks and lunch time. Even though the school is part of the "*Programa Escuelas de Tiempo Completo*" (Full-time School Program), where families are in charge in collaboration with the teacher of managing the school (SEP, 2018), parents barely came to help the teacher, thus placing the burden on her, the children and me as we had to clean the school (FN. 2018.04.20; 2017.12.06; 12.15).

In some cases, parents asked their own children to not go to the restroom at the school in order for them to not have the responsibility of helping to clean the school. This caused a lot of problems, because the school, which was surrounded by the characteristic jungle of the region, was then full of shit from the children (FN. 2018.05.24; 2017.12.17). It was a mine field. For children, it was easier to shit outside the toilet, in an environment they were familiar with, than in a dirty and smelly toilet (FN. 2017.10.13). And even though their mothers told them not to go to the restroom at the school, children had to pee and poop. For instance, Mimi, always asked me if she could pee and poop on the school grounds, since she did not like the toilet. Besides being dirty, the toilets were in adult size instead of child size, which made it very difficult for them to sustain themselves with their arms while not touching the floor, and besides that, they had to clean themselves with one arm (FN. 2018.02.14; 04.23). Try to do it. It is challenging! In other cases, knowing that they did not have to go to the toilet nor poop at school, some children decided not to do it inside the school, but outside of it. One day, Reina, a three-year-old student, following her grandmother's instructions, decided, as soon as she was picked up, to pull down her pants and poop on the school's outside-stairs. This was at least better than what Patricio did an hour before, where he felt comfortable enough to let himself take a poop inside the classroom (FN. 2017.10.12).

With these accounts, my aim is not to place blame on the parents or the teacher. Even though Elisa at many times blamed the condition of the school on lack of collaboration from parents, overall, it is not productive to place blame on any one individual or institution. Rather, it should be pointed out how various factors came together to produce the absence of instruction, supervision, collaboration, cleaning,

and of course, Maya. Across her years as a teacher at Palal-na, Elisa has tried to position the school as an institution that can offer quality education to children by registering the school in the Full-Time School Program and trying to highlight some of the Program's benefits, such as the improvement in infrastructure and the purchase of pedagogical materials. However, an aspect that she did not consider was the significant burden the Program placed on her and the parents as they needed to manage the school by themselves. This resulted in a paradox which called into question the ideal of a school managed by the community (Mendieta Melgar, Castro, Priego Vázquez & Perales Franco, 2019): the Program gave them money to maintain the school, but since the Program could not guarantee any monetary compensation for their work, parents did not want to help.

Of course, not everything was about shit, but also about schooling, and this, when it happened, was most of the time entertaining for children. As for many of us in our schooling days—or at least for me—the toilet was an escape of boredom (see also Lea, 2001). Many of the students at Palal-na went to the toilet just for the sake of leaving the classroom. I, as the person in charge of supervising every time the children went to the toilet, ruined their fun by not allowing them to play (FN. 2018.02.06; 04.19). For example, on one occasion, the teacher took out some play dough and some worksheets with geometric figures on them. The teacher asked the students to surround the perimeter of the figures with play dough. The students were so immersed in the activity that they stopped going to the toilet for that day, unless they really wanted to go and quickly came back to work with the play dough (FN. 2018.05.16). As the person in charge of the toilet, this was a highlight in my fieldwork since the supervision of these spaces was one of my main activities, and it barely happened on this day.

Lea (1999) has already made us aware of how defecation has been overlooked by the fields of anthropology and sociology, even as there has been an intense focus on the body and how to take care of it during recent decades. She pushes us to think about an anthropology of defecation (Lea, 2001), in order to see shit not as an embarrassing and mysterious task hidden in the dark, but as something that we need to understand as it is talked about and done by people. We have created specific spaces for its treatment, many times, as in the case of Palal-na, still not contextualized to the needs of the population. Just like psychoanalytic frameworks have described, shit is a control mechanism, and there was no difference in what I saw in my fieldwork. Children many times manipulated us by knowing when to go to the toilet and not, how and where to do their necessities and how to fool around with their shit. They controlled us, and parents also controlled them—a case in point is Reina's off-school poop.

With this, I am not pushing ethnographers of LPP to center their attention on poop, nor to subscribe to the anthropology of defecation. However, leaving this important aspect outside of our research might hinder us from discovering places where languages are practiced and are typically underexamined by academic work. For instance, a month before classes ended during the 2018-2019 school year, I accompanied Reina to the toilet. While I was waiting for her outside the toilet, she called me and said, *¡Maestro, no uishee en el piso!*[1] *Uishar* means to pee in Maya, so,

[1] Teacher, I did not pee on the floor!

among the few uses of Maya that could be heard in the classroom and the school. Among the few intentional spaces created during the whole year, this was definitely an important one to record because Reina, with whom I struggled the whole year for her to pee and poop inside the potty, told me that she, finally, did not pee on the floor. As her teacher and janitor, this was a double success. Some Maya and no pee and poop to clean! (FN. 2018.06.05).

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