Using multicultural and ethnographic approaches in educational research: The Indonesian-Malaysian border

An invited guest editorial

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IIER's invitation to me, a relatively junior researcher in Indonesia, to contribute to a guest editorial was a pleasant surprise. I have been represented in IIER three times, as a lead author (Dewantara, et al., 2023) and twice as a co-author (Prasetiyo et al., 2020; Sulistyarini et al., 2022), in a short period of four years. The invitation has prompted me address the question, "How did I, as a relatively junior researcher, arrive at the article title, 'Using multicultural and ethnographic approaches in educational research'?". Atkinson & McBeath (2023) in IIER Editorial 33(3) predicted that "we may see increased attention to researching links between indigenous education and the topics of identity (or self-identity or social identity), and efficacy (or self efficacy)". Educational topics related to culture, anthropology, interculturality, and identity have become more frequently represented in IIER, such as Castañeda-Trujillo et al. (2023); Fatgehipon (2023); and Vargas-Arteaga et al. (2024).

I also invited my colleague Professor Dasim Budimansyah to be involved in this guest editorial; he is my research partner and has directed my field research for the past five years. He is the only professor in Indonesia who is an expert in the sociology of civic education. At the same time, I focused on studying the anthropology of education and civics. As a researcher who was still relatively junior, my journey toward "Using multicultural and ethnographic approaches in education and research" is the result of lived experience and deep reflection on the issues I faced in the field.

This journey began when I became involved in research in the Indonesia-Malaysia border area in October 2019. My anxiety arose when I saw the concerning conditions of education there, especially how students in the border area faced very different challenges compared to students in other areas. The research I conducted for five years, from 2019 to 2024, showed me how complex and unique the problems of education on the border are. In a study entitled "National Identity on the Border," we examined the Entikong area, invoking a conceptual view of transnational identity and society taken from previous research I conducted. In the Entikong region, Efriani et al. (2020) and Martono et al. (2021) reported on the conditions of the Bidayuh ethnic cross-border community in Sontas and Tebedu Indonesia, which illustrated the involvement of local communities in two countries but still maintaining strong kinship ties. This involvement included using the Indonesian language by students in public spaces and using the rupiah as the country's currency, demonstrating a form of local nationalism in Entikong that is inseparable from

government intervention through the Entikong Cross Border Post (PLBN) in Sanggau, West Kalimantan.

During my research, I realised that traditional approaches in education and research are often insufficient to understand the realities of students on the border. They live in two different countries and have solid kinship ties. Their identities are formed due to the effects of colonialisation and decolonisation of citizenship without considering the issues of kinship and ethnicity. Education in formal schools in both countries also seems only to consider the concept of state nationalism. It does not pay attention to how these kinship ties were formed before the formation of the Indonesian and Malaysian nation states. This challenge is not only related to access to education but also to how they understand and navigate their own identities. I found a multicultural and ethnographic approach critical to understanding this situation better. A multicultural approach helped me see how these students interacted with the various cultures around them (Casmana et al., 2023), while an ethnographic approach allowed me to explore their experiences in more personal and detailed ways. Both provide a more holistic perspective and are sensitive to the local context, essential to addressing education issues on the border. This experience inspired me to write a review in IIER emphasising the importance of multicultural and ethnographic approaches in education and research. I want to share my findings and reflections with the academic community to show that these approaches are relevant and essential in complex contexts like borders. This autoethnographic review is my contribution as a researcher who, although still a junior, wants to give a voice to those often overlooked in discussions about education and research.

Why do I use the ethnographic method in education studies? This question is typical among my colleagues in Indonesia who are also involved in the world of education because, in general, education studies rarely use this approach. Anthropologists and ethnographers are more usually thos engaged in the ethnographic approach to obtain emic data. However, I use ethnography partly because of the work entitled *How to read ethnography*. In this work, Blasco and Wardle (2007) combined first- and third-person perspectives in ethnographic and autoethnographic research, allowing researchers to interact with research subjects in depth and reflectively. A first-person perspective places researchers as active and emic participants. Researchers become part of the community they are studying, feel the experience, and share their reflections directly. This creates a narrative rich in subjective experience, which is often closely related to autoethnography, where researchers reveal their relationships with research subjects, such as Sun (2024) who in IIER told her story of teaching EFL for 16 years. This research serves as a mirror for researchers to understand the influence of their culture, feelings, and position in the studied context. In a third person perspective, researchers serve as more objective observers, putting a distance between themselves and the research subjects. In this perspective, researchers analyse ethnographic data to achieve a broader and more systematic understanding of the community or culture they are studying (Fatmawati & Dewantara, 2022; Olendo et al., 2022). This allows researchers to provide more structured and analytical insights that are less influenced by their personal experiences.

By combining these two perspectives, Blasco and Wardle's approach will enable researchers to blend the subjectivity of personal experience with critical and objective analysis, resulting in more prosperous and more comprehensive work in ethnography and autoethnography. Researchers can explore how their identities and experiences influence their research, while maintaining analytical distance to provide deeper and broader insights into the studied topic.

This autoethnography began with my concern about the condition of education in the Indonesia-Malaysia border region, especially in Entikong, West Kalimantan. In October 2019, my research team and I began a journey from Pontianak to Entikong, a journey that not only covered physical distance but also opened our eyes to the worrying reality of education in this border region. The journey was entire of challenges, from damaged road conditions to seemingly endless road repair projects. This poor infrastructure is not just a physical obstacle but reflects a lack of attention to the border region, including in terms of education. Students in this region have to face difficult realities such as the case of the Dayak sub-tribe of the Bidayuh group who live in Sungkung II, Entikong District, Indonesia, a dangerous and long journey to school, and very minimal educational facilities.

Arriving in Entikong, we found that the schools there were in less than ideal-conditions. Old and damaged school buildings, a lack of teachers, and minimal facilities were familiar sights. In addition, the curriculum applied was often irrelevant to the needs and local conditions of students living in border areas. They were taught the same content as students in big cities, even though they lived in a very different reality, such as civic education material, which focused only on national identity and nationalism and was oriented towards the political level of citizenship without considering cultural and kinship ties. I have explained this broader concept for the nation state in IIER 33(2) (Dewantara et al., 2023).

> Forming a "nation-state" requires three interconnected components: state and nation, citizenship connected to a multi-ethnic and racial society, and ethnic-cultural identity related to citizen identity. According to Ernest François Eugène Douwes Dekker, a Dutch nationalist, what is meant by an Indonesian is a person who holds an oath of allegiance to Indonesia, lives in Indonesia and is dedicated to the Indonesian state. Dekker's view is not the background for a person to have an identity as an Indonesian citizen based on ethnicity and race (Dewantara et al., 2023).

Dekker's views (Tempo Team, 2013) emphasised a realisation that in Indonesia, many tribes, races, and ethnicities form one ethnic group, such as immigrants from China (Hoon, 2016), Melanesian ethnic groups in Papua, and Arab Semitic immigrants. Indonesian national identity is inseparable from the culture and racial and ethnic differences in each ethnic group, which can be divided into interrelated political and cultural identities. Indonesian national identity is formed from both relationships and cannot be separated. At the cultural level, these relationships include nationality (ethnicity/racial and ethno-cultural identity). At the political level, they include state, citizenship, and civic identity/culture.

Another major issue was the lack of support for teachers in border areas. These teachers are often left to fend for themselves without adequate support from the central or local government. They face significant challenges, from poor living conditions to obtaining appropriate teaching materials. In this situation, it is not surprising that the quality of education they provide also affects their students (Sulistyarini et al., 2021).

During our five-year research project, we have tried to dig deeper into issues related to the experiences of transnational students and the polemics of border education that seem to be sidelined. We also reviewed previous research (Dewantara, et al., 2023; Martono et al., 2022) and found that border education issues are not just policy issues but also include broader challenges related to culture, identity, and students' right to get a decent education. One of our significant findings is that the approaches to address border education issues are often too uniform and insensitive to local needs. Border students need a more inclusive and contextual approach to education that considers the realities of their daily lives. Multicultural and ethnographic approaches are critical in this context to understand and respond to their unique challenges.

I hope that more people, especially researchers, educators, and policymakers, will join the same journey to address the challenges faced in education in remote areas such as the Indonesia-Malaysia Border. I envision the emergence of a collective movement committed to implementing a more in-depth multicultural and ethnographic approach, such as multi-site ethnography and autoethnography, which can understand and provide honest and original emic data depth. This movement will help advance the goals of inclusive and relevant education by describing the actual realities.

As one illustration of this vision, I would like to describe an article in planning that focuses on educational issues in "identity, multiculturalism, and transnationalism". The planned article will explore how schools and education in border areas can play a crucial role in supporting students in navigating their complex identities, influenced by culture, colonialism, decolonialism, and transnational political influences. I argue that schools are not only places of formal learning but also arenas where students can understand and reflect on their identities. Multicultural education should connect local cultural roots with national identity and, at the same time, play a role in facing the challenges of transnationalism in various parts of the world. I hope to open a more comprehensive dialogue about the critical role of schools in preserving culture, strengthening identity, and understanding citizenship in this era of globalisation, especially in areas that are geographically and culturally on the border.

I believe that if more parties are involved in this kind of research and effort, we can build an education system that is not only inclusive and relevant but also strong in facing global challenges. I hope that researchers and authors of IIER articles will continue to participate productively in the evolution of new themes in identity, multiculturalism, and transnationalism, taking into account the complexity of identity, cross-cultural influences, and the importance of preserving local cultures. I also hope that more researchers and anthropologists will use ethnography to dissect education issues worldwide. With more researchers involved in and contributing to this methodology, I expect that IIER and like-

minded journals will further strengthen their positions as platforms that advance critical and innovative discussions on global education issues, especially those relevant to the challenges of multiculturalism and transnationalism.

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