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# Overcoming the methodological nationalism paradigm in educational research? Reflections based on the research in international schools

SUPERAR O PARADIGMA DO NACIONALISMO METODOLÓGICO EM INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE EDUCAÇÃO? REFLEXÕES BASEADAS EM INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE ESCOLAS INTERNACIONAIS

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## ABSTRACT

The research in international education and especially in international schools provides new challenges for education research that uses the paradigm of methodological nationalism. Traditional analytical tools which use the nation-state as a reference point have proved to be inadequate to analyse educational transnational contexts. As a reaction to that we will reflect on the concept of transnational education spaces and on a reconstructive qualitative methodology. This is based on research into international schools in the region of Lisbon. Finally, we will outline some general challenges for research in transnational education phenomena.

**Keywords:** Methodological nationalism. International schools. Transnational education space. Reconstructive qualitative research.

## RESUMO

A investigação sobre educação internacional e, especificamente, escolas internacionais proporciona novos desafios para uma pesquisa em educação que se baseia no paradigma de um nacionalismo metodológico. Ferramentas analíticas tradicionais que utilizam o Estado-nação como ponto de referência têm-se demonstrado inadequadas para analisar contextos educativos transnacionais. Como reação a isso, vamos refletir sobre o conceito de espaço transnacional de educação e sobre uma metodologia qualitativa reconstrutiva. Esta reflexão baseia-se num estudo realizado em escolas internacionais da região de Lisboa. Por fim, vamos traçar alguns desafios gerais para a

investigação de fenómenos educativos transnacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Nacionalismo Metodológico. Escolas Internacionais. Espaço Educativo Transnacional. Pesquisa Qualitativa Reconstitutiva.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE EXPANDING AND HETEROGENEOUS FIELD OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

International schools have been expanding and diversifying at a global level, especially during the last decades. International education is in demand not only by global mobile families, but increasingly by autochthonous non-mobile populations. Dill (2013: 1) observes in this context “one of the fastest growing educational reform movements today”.

The most prominent examples are the IB World Schools, which are regulated by the International Baccalaureate® (IB), the number of which has grown to more than 5000 schools in 158 countries (IB, 2020). There are also other models of international schools, such as the European Schools, the UNESCO Associated Schools, the Cambridge International Schools, bilingual schools, etc. They have grown rapidly in number, especially in economically strong regions and in “global cities” (SASSEN, 2005). The growing heterogeneity of the school

population demanding international diplomas has also created new, in part hybrid models of international schools, which are also expanding to the public educational system. Public schools increasingly offer international curricula and diplomas alongside their national ones, mostly in countries like the USA and Canada.

Despite the increasing number and complexity of international schools worldwide, more public awareness, and the fact that research in this area is predominantly in the Anglophone space (e.g., BATES, 2010; HAYDEN & THOMPSON, 2011; HAYDEN et al., 2015), there is still a general research deficit on international schools, especially at the micro level, i.e. the social actors of these schools (SCHIPPLING, 2018).

This situation can be partly explained by a lack of analytical tools for researching in the complex field of international education, as Resnik (2012: 292) confirms: “[...] there is a feeling that something else is happening, and the analytic tools we possess are too narrow or imprecise to grasp the complex nature of sociology of international education”.

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In order to carry out research in international schools, which can be seen as ‘transnational spaces of education’ (HAYDEN, 2011; HORNBERG, 2014; KEßLER et al., 2015), the traditional analytical research tools, based on the nation-state paradigm, have to be rethought and need an adequate “apparatus of concepts and analysis” (ADICK, 2005: 246; also RESNIK, 2012; SCHIPPLING & KEßLER, 2021).

The article proposes a conceptual and methodological reflection based on an ongoing research project on international schools in the region of Lisbon (e.g., SCHIPPLING & ABRANTES, 2018; SCHIPPLING et al., 2020). Taking a critical approach to the methodological nationalism paradigm, we will discuss (1) the concept of transnational education space and (2) the potential of reconstructive qualitative empirical methods for analysing transnational phenomena in education. Finally, we will present some challenges for the research in these phenomena.

### **OVERCOMING THE PARADIGM OF METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM: THE CONCEPT OF TRANSNATIONAL SPACES OF EDUCATION**

The methodological nationalism paradigm – which equates society with nation-state societies – still dominates research in social sciences but it has become the object of criticism, as it is not adequate to analyse the “cosmopolitan condition” of contemporary society (e.g., BECK, 2007; BECK & GRANDE, 2010; AMELINA et al., 2012).

Research in education is still determined by the ‘nation-state paradigm’; the nation-state has been its reference, since it dominates formal education to a large extent (ADICK, 2005: 244-245). The need to go beyond this paradigm is mostly expressed by comparative research in education, where traditional analytic tools have proved inadequate to analyse the complex reality of the interlinked local, regional, national and transnational dimensions in education (e.g., ADICK, 2005; DALE & ROBERTSON, 2009; SCHIPPLING, 2018; HUMMRICH & PFAFF, 2018; KEßLER & SZAKÁCS-BEHLING, 2020).

The methodological nationalism paradigm is based on the assumption that national societies are “natural reference units” for research in social phenomena. In contrast, transnationalism as a

“[...] research programme [...] mainly focuses on those social phenomena and social relationships which extend above several local units in different national societies, which are relatively stable and

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which contain comparatively dense interactions.” (PRIES, 2010: 10)

In the context of his research about work migration from Mexico to the USA in the 1990s, Pries (1996) developed the concept of “transnational social space”. The concept of space here does not only imply its traditional physical meaning of location, but primarily designates relationships between social actors which are relatively stable and cross national borders. It is a concept of space that includes different territories related to implied social relations (also FAIST, 2000: 14). In this context, PRIES (2008: 4) defines “transnational social spaces” “in a narrow sense” as “nation states and national societies spanning interaction frameworks in the dimensions of (1) intensive and stable social practices, (2) systems of symbols, and (3) artefacts”.

Ulrich Beck (2000) in his reflections about “What is Globalization?” picks up the concept of “transnational social space” by Pries (1996, 2010) and states: “[...] the approach centred in transnational social spaces maintains that something new is emerging: social contexts of life and action to which Here-and-There or Both-And applies” (BECK, 2000: 28).

The concept of transnational social space focuses on the transnational social practices of actors. If these practices are very stable and intense, even when the

people involved are not geographically close (digital spaces), in such a way that they are part of everyday life, they can be called “transnational social spaces”.<sup>1</sup> An example would be a transnational family, whose members are spread across the globe and have lasting close relations in their daily practices (e.g., DUCU et al., 2018). These shared practices constitute, in this case, a transnational social space.

In educational settings there are some approaches that take the concept of “transnational social space” (PRIES, 1996, 2010; BECK, 2000) and develop it into the concept of “transnational space of education” (e.g., ADICK, 2005; HAYDEN, 2011; SCHIPPLING, 2018). Adick (2005: 262-266) attributes the following features to this concept:

- transnational education spaces can arise “bottom up”, which means from the practices of social actors, or “top-down”, which means from transnational providers of education;
- they are spaces that are based on already existing transnational convergences and they bring about more convergences;

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<sup>1</sup> Pries (2010: 29-31) elaborated two more levels of transnational phenomena, which are less intense and stable than “transnational social spaces”, namely “transnational relations” and “transnational networks”.

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- transnational education spaces are characterized through cross-border processes of education;
- they are non-governmental spaces, which means that they are not state-controlled, but private.

When the concept of transnational education space is applied to research in international schools, one must question if and under which conditions these schools can be regarded as transnational spaces of education.

As international schools are regulated by transnational educational organizations, such as the International Baccalaureate® (IB) or the Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE), transnational education spaces can be constituted “top-down”, for example, by introducing curricula or diplomas, provided by these organizations. On the other hand, transnational spaces can come “bottom-up”, from the common practices, symbols or artefacts of the social actors, in this case, the school members.

The emerging question is: how to research transnational education spaces? Taking up the example of research in international schools we will present some methodological reflections that focus on reconstructive qualitative social research.

## OVERCOMING THE METHODOLOGICAL NATIONALISM PARADIGM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON RECONSTRUCTIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Transnationalism as a “research programme” (KHAGRAM & LEVITT, 2004; PRIES, 2010; HUMMRICH & PFAFF, 2018; SCHIPPLING & KEßLER, 2021) needs to overcome the methodological nationalism paradigm. It brings the traditional spatial units of reference in social research into question, which can no longer be considered “coherent and contiguous geographical ‘containers’” (PRIES, 2008: 6). Khagram and Levitt (2004: 26) confirm this: “The local, regional, national, and global are not automatic, taken-for-granted social arenas, but rather categories that must be investigated as constructed and contested social facts”.

This change of perspective requires new theoretical and methodological analytic tools (e.g., ADICK, 2005; RESNIK, 2012; SCHIPPLING, 2018; KEßLER & SZAKÁCS-BEHLING, 2020). Keßler and Szakács-Behling (2020: 183) propose a “methodological turn in education” which means “transnationaliz[ing] our research practices”. They point out that:

“Using a transnational lens does not preclude the observations of national phenomena but allows these to be investigated in their constructedness and

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interconnections with other frames of experience as well as to enrich our understanding of social experience beyond unilateral perspectives.” (KEßLER & SZAKÁCS-BEHLING, 2020: 187)

In order to develop a research stance characterized by openness and a sense of deconstruction that enables the acceptance of strangeness, it is necessary to have this analytical attitude. This reconstructive qualitative research aims to reach an understanding of strangeness that is methodologically controlled (e.g., SÖFFNER & HITZLER, 1994; WELLER, 2005; BOHNSACK, 2010).

Reconstructive qualitative research, especially the documentary interpretation method (e.g., BOHNSACK, 2010; BOHNSACK et al., 2010), is based on elements of the sociology of knowledge of Karl Mannheim (1964, 1980) and of the ethnomethodological approach of Harold Garfinkel (1967).

The concept of “conjunctive space of experience” (MANNHEIM, 1980: 220) focuses on collectively shared knowledge of social actors. This knowledge is an implicit knowledge that Mannheim (1964: 100) designates as “atheoretical” knowledge. It is expressed in routine-based and habitual actions and can also be understood as “tacit knowledge” (POLANYI, 1966). Conjunctive spaces of experience are created through the connection between social actors, for

example, generation, gender, milieu or ethnicity (e.g., BOHNSACK, 2005, 2010). Based on these categories, social actors can have “common layers of experience” and a “common socialization history” (BOHNSACK, 2005: 119) which is expressed in a “consonance of habitus” (BOHNSACK, 2010: 62).

The “conjunctive space of experience” can span local units and national borders if there is a dense collective social connection between the individuals through “common layers of experience”. In this case, these spaces also can be seen as “transnational education spaces”. Keßler (2020: 191-192) points out: “I understand the transnational education space as a ‘*conjunctive space of experience*’ [...] and I mean by this the collective context of the genesis of the knowledge that directs action”.

Against this backdrop, a reconstructive qualitative empirical approach that aims to reconstruct this conjunctive knowledge of social actors created in common transnational social spaces is a solid way to analyse transnational education contexts, such as international schools. This means that a reconstructive empirical methodology can provide fertile analytic tools to carry out research that goes beyond the methodological nationalism paradigm. In fact, Scheunpflug, Krogull and Franz (2016: 20) underline that “the



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potential of these approaches is far from exhausted”.

### CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCHING TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION CONTEXTS

The research in international education challenges the education research dominated by the nation-state paradigm and needs new analytical research tools.

Against this backdrop, Adick (2005: 246) asks:

“But what if this ‘world model’ of educational systems, determined by nation-states, is challenged by ‘transnational’ education practices and institutions, that are ‘beyond’, ‘above’, ‘besides’ or ‘across’ national ones?”

With the example of the research in international schools, we have shown the potential of the concept of transnational education space as an analytic tool, and also the potential of the reconstructive qualitative research approach to go beyond the methodological nationalism paradigm in educational research.

As the reflection on research in transnational education contexts is only in its initial stages, we outline three specific challenges:

1) School and the national education system can be understood as

products of the establishment of the nation-state and a means for its legitimation (e.g., DEWEY, 1916; FULLER & RUBINSON, 1992). This conceptualization of school and the education system is brought into question and must be rethought; a research perspective must be adopted that aims to understand the complex amalgam of local, regional, national, international, supranational and transnational dimensions in education.

2) Transnational education contexts appear in different segments of the education system and they are related to different discourses. In the segment of international schools, transnational contexts are understood as a “motor of social and global mobility and also content innovation”, while schools in problematic social areas, for example, are seen as an “obstacle for education” (PFAFF, 2018: 162). We need an interdisciplinary research approach that brings together these hitherto disjointed research lines and also enables us to reveal dimensions of social and educational inequality (e.g., SCHIPPLING & KEßLER, 2021)

3) In order to carry out such research, which deconstructs the

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nation-state paradigm, a great deal of work is required to develop theoretical and methodological/methodical analytic tools. We are only starting to “transnationalize our research practices” (KEßLER & SZAKÁCS-BEHLING, 2020: 183) and this article tries to play its part.

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