



Foreign African Student Movements as a Critical Vector of Mobility: Critical Ethnography in Education and the Issue of Language

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Abstract

Student mobility has attracted increased attention within the disciplinary gaze of sociology, anthropology and education, among other disciplines. Higher education is in turn recognised as a potentially important driver of socioeconomic growth and human development. International foreign students form one vector amongst the multiple trajectories of migratory movement, and represent foreign 'bodies', who (choose to) become mobile in search of educational opportunities. International student mobility thus emerges as a discernible vector among the several different kinds and typologies of migratory fluxes into the country. While student mobility and circulatory dispersal is also viewed as a driver of sorts for economic growth and sustainability, my interest as an anthropologist is what this mobility and migratory flux may mean in terms of issues of language, belonging and inclusion/exclusion. This paper focuses more narrowly on one category of international student, the foreign African student who comes in search of educational opportunities, as foreign (mobile) bodies bringing with them their linguistic capital. The paper is positioned within critical ethnography and introduces a discussion on anthropology and language capital in higher education. 'Critical ethnography' refers to studies which utilise anthropologically defined methods of researching issues in education. To this end the paper works through ethnographic data collected through participant observation and one on one semi-structured interviews with a small sample group of post graduate masters and doctoral level foreign African students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The starting point for the paper is that the enhanced mobility of students into South African universities is potentially able to speak to an important aspect of human capital investment. However, mobility and migratory vectors of foreign African students into the country are juxtaposed alongside the students' realisation that their foreign bodies and the linguistic competencies embodied by them, represent the appearance of otherness, and on some level, represent regimes of exclusion, as their own linguistic competencies lie outside that of the majority of local African students speaking the local language. Ethnographic data gathered show that particular linguistic performances reinforce the role of language as a situated practice in articulating the foreign students' identities in local contexts, additionally revealing that particular 'pull' factors underpins the interplay between 'distances and proximities, linguistic, geographic, cultural and historical, as well as academic considerations'.

Short Bio

Maheshvari Naidu is a social anthropologist and teaches from a critical feminist perspective. She believes that research can have a vital emancipatory role. She is widely published and has acted as guest editor on national and international journals. A large part of her work articulates from a gender and anthropological perspective. Her research and work in education is likewise positioned primarily from within an ethnographic approach. She believes that 'critical ethnography' in education can be valuable as it affords a qualitative face to issues in higher education.

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RESEARCH SEMINAR