

C'mon, Tell Me. . . . Does School Ethnography Really Matter?

Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth. Stacey J. Lee. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005. 152 pp., \$21.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8077-4574-X.

Cultural Identity in Kindergarten: A Study of Asian Indian Children in New Jersey. Susan Laird Mody. New York: Routledge, 2005. 235 pp., \$80.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-415-97208-6.

Reviewed by
Keffrelyn D. Brown

What constitutes “worthwhile” education research? Any observer of the debates surrounding education research recognizes the scrutiny faced by qualitative methods. In 2001 the U.S. federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Notwithstanding the bill’s focus on increasing teacher and school accountability by tying federal funding to student academic achievement outcomes across all student populations, NCLB also proposed that schools use federal funding to support only those teaching methods and programs that bear evidence-based results (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002). To ensure that school personnel would know exactly what kind of research qualifies as “scientific,” in 2003 the U.S. Department of Education published a “user friendly guide” outlining how to evaluate whether an educational intervention (e.g., practice, strategy, curriculum, or program) is backed by evidence of effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2003). In addition to multiple Web-based sites that provide examples and descriptions of potential interventions that schools

might use, the guide also points out that studies employing a random controlled experimental design (i.e., one group of students receives an intervention program and another group does not) have the greatest chance of meeting the criteria set for showing “strong” evidence.

This discussion illustrates how high a premium the federal government places on education research that focuses on “what works,” with the hope that effective interventions will travel into other school and classroom settings. Indeed, the guide assumes that an intervention judged successful by research methods employing a random controlled experimental design will have a higher likelihood of implementation in similar educational settings.

Education researchers from qualitative and quantitative backgrounds have challenged what they view as a tightening noose around what counts as “scientific” (or worthwhile) research (e.g., see the November 2002 issue of *Educational Researcher* and the February and April 2004 issues of *Qualitative Inquiry* for further discussion). Concerned that the kinds of inquiries that depend on qualitative methods face marginalization in the education research community, these researchers illuminate the role that context and meaning necessarily play in the work of schools. One might ask, To what extent do context and meaning play a role in education research? And if they do, how then should researchers address these issues in school environments?

Does Context Matter in Education Research?

The National Research Council’s 2002 publication *Scientific Research in Education* covered three types of education research question, two of which require an understanding of context: (1) What is happening? and (2) Why or how is it happening? To understand “what happened” requires

rich description of the setting and events in which some intended (or unintended) outcome occurred; and to understand “why or how it happened” requires examining the situation or context that aided in facilitation of the intended (or unintended) outcome. The National Research Council’s report offers various examples of studies that align with these kinds of inquiries. Although these include some of a more quantitative nature, the report, not surprisingly, points out that case study or ethnographic research describing localized educational settings is “particularly important when good information about the group or setting is nonexistent or scant” (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, p. 105). The report also highlights what it views as a vitally important, yet underfunded, kind of research that is situated in context: implementation research, or a “genre of research that examines the ways that the structural elements of school settings interact with efforts to improve instruction” (p. 125).

These recommendations suggest that in spite of the current brouhaha on locating what kinds of programs work best for students, there remains a need to examine *why* and *how* certain things work (or do not work) in the context of schooling. Certainly, the recognition that situated contexts, identities, and meanings operate and exist within any teaching and learning environment implies that it is not adequate, or maybe even possible, to simply *locate* and *implement* an effective program or method. We should not forget that education research remains a complex undertaking because of its reliance on context and interactions (Berliner, 2002).

The two books reviewed here recognize the important role that context plays in the schooling process. In *Up Against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth*, Stacey J. Lee (2005) explores how first- and second-generation Hmong American youth create

their identities in the context of race, schools, and schooling. Drawing from a multi-sited ethnographic research design, Lee collected data across three kinds of sites—high schools (Grades 9–12), local Hmong community events, and Internet sites—situated in the midsized Wisconsin city that she calls Lakeview. Susan Laird Mody's (2005) *Cultural Identity in Kindergarten: A Study of Asian Indian Children in New Jersey* examines the social world of kindergarten in two different school sites where Asian Indian children constituted a large portion of the students. Using a phenomenological lens and a comparative perspective, Mody examines how Asian Indian children actively constructed their identities in these classes, located in two school districts but in the same suburban city in central New Jersey. What makes both of these studies special is how each describes the experiences of cultural groups that have found themselves either misrepresented or ignored in education research.

Up Against Whiteness

Up Against Whiteness adds to Lee's existing body of research on the educational experiences of Asian American youth (e.g., see her 1996 book *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*). In *Up Against Whiteness* Lee responds to existing literature on cultural identities of immigrant youth, with a particular emphasis on the role that race plays in the schooling and assimilation process. Many assimilation theories suggest that immigrant youth who adopt an oppositional culture typically pick up cultural tastes and mannerisms associated with urban youth of color (i.e., hip-hop). Although this is one form of Americanization and assimilation, theorists position it as undesirable and highly problematic because of its presumed danger (Zhou, 1997) and assumed relationship to lower academic success (Ogbu, 1987). Consequently, some researchers argue that the key to "successful" assimilation into mainstream culture is the development of a strong ethnic identity and relationships with one's larger ethnic community. Ethnic networks offer economic support as well as reinforcing parental authority in immigrant families (Lee, p. 9). These processes are instances of "selective acculturation" (p. 10). Lee's study addresses issues related to theories of segmented as-

similation, specifically the notion of selective acculturation, and is unique in that it focuses on how school culture, rather than individual student traits, cultural dispositions, or parents, encourage the development of oppositional identities.

Lee begins by acknowledging the dearth of existing literature on segmented assimilation that examines the way that race both "informs immigrant encounters with social institutions and shapes immigrant identities" (p. 10). Showing how the culture at University High School (UHS; school name is fictional) operates in a racialized context that privileges White, middle-class students and other "specific expressions of Whiteness and White culture," while "mark[ing] Hmong American students as racialized outsiders" (p. 24), is foundational to the picture that Lee presents about Hmong American youth experiences in school.

What stands out about the racialized culture at UHS is the seemingly invisible way that race operates. Lee notes that both Lakeview residents and UHS staff often dismissed the possibility that racism existed at the school because of "the presence of a racially diverse student population and the absence of overt conflict" (p. 24). Lee insightfully argues that by identifying racism as consisting only of extreme and/or overt acts of hostility, UHS personnel were able to shield themselves and the school culture from charges of racism. This, however, did not belie the fact that overt racialized practices and values were evident at the school.

For example, it was not uncommon for UHS teachers and staff to refer Hmong students to the English as a Second Language (ESL) program in spite of the students' ability to speak fluent English. In concert with one of UHS's ESL teachers, Lee argues that this practice stigmatized students, sending the message that there was something wrong and abnormal about being a Hmong-speaking student in a mainstream classroom. Moreover, by attempting to move English-proficient Hmong students out of general education classes and into ESL, the school staff ensured that the mainstream school culture remained unchanged.

Lee also offers the example of UHS's "Fine Arts Week" and "Diversity Days," illustrating how staff drew distinct boundaries around what constituted talent and what did not. Lee writes, "Students who

performed during Fine Arts Week were described as being 'super talented,' and students who performed during Diversity Days were seen as performing 'interesting' or 'traditional' arts" (p. 31). For Lee, the failure of UHS staff to recognize as talented the Hmong American students who practiced traditional Hmong dancing or singing on Diversity Days is one way in which the attributes associated with American, White, middle-class values got positioned as normative at the school.

These examples highlight how UHS culture operated in a racialized binary, whereby the students, parents, practices, beliefs, and values associated with White, mainstream perspectives were positioned as good and desirable, and the individuals and practices falling outside those perspectives were characterized as undesirable, "less than," or simply "bad." It makes sense that students would use this racialized lens to construct their own cultural identities. This is evident in how students understood what it meant to be an American. For instance, Lee suggests that while the Hmong youth thought it was possible to pick up an "Americanized" identity, it was virtually impossible for them to become American, as they assumed that only White people qualified as American.

Citing identity formation research, Lee found that Hmong youth often made identity distinctions between themselves and other Hmong youth at the school. "At UHS Americanized [Hmong] youth and traditional [Hmong] youth defined themselves against each other. What it meant to belong to one group was largely based on not being like the other group . . . it seems that the social borders between the groups were rarely crossed at school" (p. 53). Supported by images gathered from popular media, Lee shows how Hmong American youth filtered their own cultural identities of "Americanized" and "traditional" through the racialized culture at UHS. "Traditional" students were generally those who had recently arrived in the United States (e.g., in elementary or middle school), were more conservative in their dress, and were in the ESL program. An "Americanized" Hmong youth was often a second-generation immigrant and positioned by traditional youth, UHS staff, and Hmong parents as having problems in school. These youth frequently adopted an oppositional identity toward school, wore baggy clothes, and enjoyed

hip-hop music. These traits were generally associated with Black, urban youth—the primary group situated in the racialized Black–White binary. Americanized Hmong youth were characterized by staff as “bad” and, in the case of the male students, as dangerous because of their possible “gang affiliations” (pp. 69–70).

It is not surprising that traditional and Americanized Hmong students did not associate, believing that each was a liability to the other. This was not difficult because a culturally supportive ESL program generally sheltered traditional students, while the Americanized students were left to fend for themselves (usually unsuccessfully) in the larger general education program. Yet, in spite of this division, Lee also found that both traditional and Americanized Hmong American youth retained some aspects of their ethnic cultural identity.

While thoroughly grounded in theory and rich in data, Lee (2005) skillfully presents her data and analysis in a straightforward, succinct way. However, I wanted to know more about the process that staff and Hmong students used to categorize one another and other groups at UHS. For example, while staff and traditional Hmong students positioned their Americanized Hmong peers as problematic and deviant because of their identification with urban youth culture, did White students also adopt this culture? If so, how were they viewed by staff and traditional Hmong youth? How did these students fit within the pervasive culture of Whiteness at UHS? In addition, did Lee find Hmong students who did not fall into either the traditional or the Americanized category?

The extent to which Lee’s ethnographic approach illuminates the complex relationships between UHS culture, faculty, and students is clearly evident to the reader. What is less clear, however, is how Lee accounts for those students—both Hmong and White—who do not easily fall into the generalized cultural categories of traditional, Americanized, or White. At one level, this critique might simply point to one of the limitations of using categories to report research findings: Neither everyone nor everything can ever completely fit within a bounded, discrete grouping. Yet, because Lee focuses primarily on Hmong students who adopted either a traditional or an Americanized identity, and does not discuss

White students whose identities deviated from the normative culture of Whiteness at UHS, it is not clear whether such students existed at UHS or if Lee chose not to report them. Although this gap is not an inevitable by-product of the ethnographic methods used by Lee, if illuminated it might strengthen Lee’s analysis of the racialized UHS culture.

Lee, however, does present evidence that challenges existing literature on selective acculturation, pointing out that selective acculturation theory “underestimates the racial and economic barriers that low-income youth of color face” (p. 125). Lee’s study illustrates that the cultural and social capital provided by the larger immigrant community cannot completely protect immigrant youth from the kinds of racial inequality found in social institutions (e.g., schools). Concomitantly, when immigrant students adopt oppositional identities, they do so as “a legitimate critique of the inequality that they face” and have not “entirely assimilated and lost their ethnic cultures” (p. 125), as some selective acculturation theories suggest.

Cultural Identity in Kindergarten

Mody’s *Cultural Identity in Kindergarten* also fills an existing gap in the education literature with its focus on the schooling experiences of Asian Indian students. Mody examines young Asian Indian learners to illustrate how children’s play operates as a form of “human discursive consciousness” that makes it possible to explore young children’s identity and cultural meaning in the classroom (p. 4). In this comparative study, Mody collected data in two different kindergarten sites where Asian Indian children made up one third of the classroom population. Mody notes that although both school sites had students from middle-class and working-class families, the Asian Indian kindergarten students who participated in the study at the Stony Brook School (school names are fictional) were defined by staff as “the poor ones” (p. 6). Conversely, students participating in the study at the Fair Bridge School were identified as middle class. Mody also collected data at a Swaminarayan temple that was identified by staff in both schools as “a common source for their understanding of Indian cultural identity” (p. 6). Mody drew from the temple, as well as from ex-

isting research on Indian culture and her own 20-year experience of living and raising biracial children (White and Parsi) in three parts of India, to decipher the cultural meanings exhibited in the children’s play and work discourses.

Recognizing both the dearth and the limitations of existing research about Asian Indian students in the United States, Mody states that these students “are little known and little studied” (p. 1). She argues that they often become hidden, subsumed in research studies that focus on the larger “Pan-Asian” category, or else are uncritically assigned the “model minority” label. Drawing from Lee’s (1996) work on “model minority” stereotypes, Mody notes the problem with that label:

The [model minority] label coerces an expectation of identity performance for young Indian students, who may be as diverse in their social and educational needs and strengths as members of any group, while ascribing for all school students, especially those belonging to other “minority” groups, a stereotypical expectation of quiet submission to local versions of academic authority, which may or may not be adequately serving community interests. (p. 2)

Mody believes that this label inhibits the promise of existing “diversity discourse[s] in American schools” that assume “all students may develop fully and expressively, coming to know one another as real, familiar persons and learning a respect for difference that nurtures the health of American democracy” (p. 2). Mody states that if this assumption is absent, immigrant Indian students cannot view schools as “safe and supportive place[s] . . . where complexly pluralizing cultural identities can be recognized and not feared” (p. 2).

More than Lee in *Up Against Whiteness*, Mody examines how classroom contexts shape the interactions between young Asian Indian children and their peers. Her comparative design allows the reader to see the ways in which different classroom contexts shape how, to what degree, and to whom Asian Indian kindergartners display their cultural selves. Interestingly, Mody also found that although the two classroom contexts shaped “different opportunities for social interaction and self-expression,” in both classrooms “friendships and peer discourse

practices developed most strongly within cultural boundaries” (p. 199).

For example, Mody describes the kindergarten classroom at Stony Brook as teacher directed, highly ritualized, and less tolerant of shared social interactions between the students. She explains how the Stony Brook teachers created inviting classroom environments (e.g., with bookshelves, stuffed animals, mobiles, and other materials) that were off-limits to students without teacher permission. Competition was common among students and was reinforced by the requirement that students erect “private offices” around their desks during work time to ensure that they would not copy from each other.

Opportunities for play were tightly constricted; as Mody notes, “the chance to play seemed like a carrot dangled before the children’s noses as they worked in their private offices” (p. 65). Mody found that during both formal and informal social settings, “Indian children tended to play with Indian children, Chinese with Chinese, and white with white” (p. 65). And Mody noticed that, when Indian children interacted with other Indian children, they mirrored a peer-network, familial interaction style that differed from the interaction patterns of the non-Indian students.

In contrast, Mody suggests that the kindergarten teacher at Fair Bridge created a classroom environment that promoted sharing and helping between students, was nonroutinized, and supported students in taking academic and social risks. Each student held a specific responsibility in the class, and all were expected to maintain the room environment. Although the teacher assigned student seating, she also actively encouraged students to interact with and listen to one another. Mody notes that students were often told by the teacher to “open up” and connect with other students so as to not feel socially isolated (p. 97).

In this classroom, students finished work at their own pace and engaged in self-initiated work activities. In one instance, Mody noticed how Indian children, sitting at different tables, drew illustrations of people that looked very different from the drawings done by their non-Indian peers. Mody found that the Indian children’s illustrations emphasized a kind of aesthetic gaze characteristic of Indian folk art that included “carefully drawn wide-open eyes and

thick curving eyebrows” (p. 119), while very few of the illustrations drawn by non-Indian children even included eyebrows.

However, even in Fair Bridge, Mody saw students align themselves with or against others in ways that reflected familially grounded cultural systems. These differences made it difficult, at times, for students across cultural groups to understand and want to work with each other, implying that “even in a context like Fair Bridge, where educators provided ample opportunity for children to mix as friends, friendships did not readily develop across cultural boundaries” (pp. 204–205).

Audiences interested in early childhood school experiences will find the data and analysis presented in Mody’s (2005) study particularly rich and thoughtful. One weakness in the book, however, appears early in the first chapter, where Mody (2005) theorizes her cultural identity construct using a wide bag of interdisciplinary theories and philosophies. The result is a bit choppy and, at times, proves cumbersome for the reader to navigate. A more streamlined presentation of only the most compelling frameworks that guided the study would have enhanced this section and added to the overall thoroughness of the book.

The reader is able, however, to ascertain the importance that Mody places on phenomenological theories when outlining the cultural identity construct central to the study. Mody suggests that identity emerges in relation to larger social and contextual forces. She states:

Identities develop within given symbolic universes, where people produce world-views and psychologies. In families, neighborhoods and increasingly through the globally disseminated media of popular culture, children experience a primary process of socialization in which the world is labeled for them by significant others and in which a “generalized other” (this was Meads’ term), a sense of how social life is *supposed* to be, is “crystallized” in consciousness. The world of primary socialization is not experienced as one of many worlds but as “the world,” *the* unquestioned reality in which our most powerful emotional patterns are shaped. Later, processes of secondary socialization like schooling and job contexts enable role-specific selves to adapt to new realities without necessarily transforming the “home” reality. (p. 14)

For Mody, it is necessary that schools recognize how vital a role the children’s home and cultural environment plays in their lives. Although classroom contexts—most specifically the decisions made by schools and teachers about classroom routines, curriculum, and organization—influence how student identity emerges, this process always occurs within the student’s larger cultural and familial frame. What Mody’s study makes clear is that students understand themselves and others through larger cultural frames that they bring with them to school. How these identities are enacted in classroom contexts is, in large part, related to how teachers and schools organize the learning environment. For Mody, this study challenges existing theories suggesting that children move away from their family routines at an early age (e.g., see Corsaro, 1992). It “points to a need to include in the cultural identity constructs used in educational research an emphasis on family relational styles” (Mody, p. 215).

One of the most provocative findings of Mody’s study is that, despite the differences in classroom and school environment, Asian Indian students (and their non-Indian peers) still found it difficult to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. This occurred apparently because of a confluence of factors (e.g., teacher decision making, classroom or school culture, student experiences or socialization) that failed to integrate into the classroom context the distinct cultural–familial patterns of Asian Indian students. Such a situation would not be surprising at a school like Stony Brook, which did not have a strong commitment to cross-cultural diversity and community. However, in the case of Fair Bridge, school staff and classroom teachers actively promoted a friendly, inclusive environment. How, then, does Mody account for these differences?

Although Mody’s data provide a window on the classroom practices that framed and ultimately helped to limit peer relations across cultural boundaries, it does not shed much light on why completely different classroom and school contexts produced similar outcomes. Reading the study, I wanted to know more about this process. I sensed that something more may have been occurring in the school sites, beyond just a lack of understanding about the “cultural–relational intersections between school and family sites” (p. 214) or even

what Mody believes may be the inability of secular public school discourse to facilitate issues of friendship and morality (p. 216). To what extent did larger socio-historical discourses of normality and what Lee termed “Whiteness” perhaps unwittingly frame the interactions of teachers and students in the Fair Bridge School? Did children (and even the teacher) respond to each other in ways that mirrored normalizing social practices sanctioned in larger societal contexts?

Mody notes that discourses of normality were prevalent in the daily talk and practice of teachers at Stony Brook, particularly in relation to issues of language diversity and notions of who and what constituted “us”—the real “Americans” (p. 46). This, however, was not the case at Fair Bridge, where school officials seemingly advocated the creation of community and inclusive peer relations. I acknowledge what Mody views as a salient problem across both school sites—the lack of attention paid to integrating cultural–familial relations in the kindergarten learning environment. Yet I still wonder how this gap fit within the discourse of family and community advocated by Fair Bridge School officials. In other words, what made it possible for such an oversight to occur in the first place? Did larger societal discourses of normality somehow thwart the ability of teachers and students to move beyond their own cultural frames of reference? Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswered. They should be pursued in future studies focused on the intersection between culture, identity, and school-based and family cultures.

What Can Ethnographic Research Tell Us about Schools?

Both *Up Against Whiteness* and *Cultural Identity in Kindergarten* skillfully illustrate how ethnography clarifies the nuanced, contextualized processes that operate in schools and classrooms—particularly those inhabited by students of color. Although individually these studies tackle two different academic and social life trajectories, they converge in their focus on culture, identity, and schooling for immigrant students. By providing a window on the school and classroom contexts of immigrant students of color, they help readers to recognize how culture and identity become implicated in the learning process. And while Lee’s work,

to a far greater extent than Mody’s, focuses on large societal discourses of normalcy and race, Mody’s findings foreshadow what might happen when a rhetoric of racial harmony and community goes unrealized in the school and classroom environment.

Collectively, Lee and Mody both offer convincing arguments that what schools and teachers do (and fail to do) exerts an impact on the identity of young children and adolescents in school. In particular, negative influences often go unrecognized by school officials, who fail to protect students against harmful effects of school and classroom environments. What seems clear from each of these studies is that it is simply not enough to acknowledge the cultural and familial frames of reference that students bring with them to school. Schools must attempt to infuse these perspectives into both the social and the academic fabric, while remaining ever vigilant to protect against the ways that larger social discourses of “us” and “them” may serve to isolate and marginalize students. Thus the findings from these studies are of value for teachers and school systems working to improve the learning opportunities for all students (not just Hmong American students and those of Asian Indian descent) who fall outside of mainstream U.S. society—students who historically have faced, and continue to experience, inequitable treatment in U.S. schools.

To this extent, the kinds of questions answered by qualitative methods such as ethnography both enrich and make more complex any knowledge base that is used to identify “what works” in education. For example, what factors would a teacher or administrator need to consider when selecting an educational intervention to improve the learning outcomes of the students studied in these books? Is it possible to make a good decision in either case without understanding the unique school and classroom contexts that influence student learning?

Lee described UHS as noted for its academic excellence (e.g., for its wide range of academic courses and above-average mean SAT and ACT scores). Despite this, UHS “fall[s] short of being a good school for most Hmong American youth, and other low-income students of color” (Lee, p. 126). Lee’s finding that the racialized culture at UHS facilitated the adoption of oppositional identities by Hmong American youth

points out just the kind of contextual factor that is likely to undermine successful implementation of any intervention designed to address these youth’s academic challenges. Likewise, it seems that any attempt to meet the needs of the Asian Indian children in Mody’s study would need to acknowledge how classroom context and organization frame, albeit selectively, much of the interaction between students. The work of Lee and Mody provides information that we need to engage in thoughtful, effective educational work. And while there remains a place for research focused on locating effective interventions, there is no less a need to ask questions that ethnographic research answers best.

During a speech made after receiving the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association in 1974, Lee Cronbach stated the following about science and the role of the social scientist:

The experimental strategy dominant in psychology since 1950 has only limited ability to detect interactions. . . . The two scientific disciplines, experimental control and systematic correlation, answer formal questions stated in advance. Intensive local observation goes beyond discipline to an open-eyed, open-minded appreciation of the surprises nature deposits in the investigative net. Social scientists are rightly proud of the discipline we draw from the natural science side of our ancestry. Scientific discipline is what we uniquely add to the time-honored ways of studying men. Too narrow an identification with science, however, has fixed our eyes upon an inappropriate goal. . . . [The social scientist] shares with the humanistic scholar and the artist in the effort to gain insight into contemporary relationships and to realign the culture’s view of man with present realities. To know man as he is is no mean aspiration. (quoted in Spindler, 1982)

So, yes, school ethnography research continues to matter, if not for any other reason than to shed light on the complex web that frames the everyday work of people in schools. Indeed, without such illumination, we stand to forget just how complicated the teaching and learning process really is.

NOTE

I would like to acknowledge Anthony Brown and Carl Grant for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on this review. I would also like

to thank Gloria Ladson-Billings for her suggestion that I look at George Spindler's (1982) *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling: Educational Anthropology in Action*. Over the years, this book has assisted in my understanding of educational ethnography in more ways than I ever could have imagined.

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AUTHOR

KEFFRELYN D. BROWN is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 225 North Mills, Madison, WI 53706; kdbrown2@wisc.edu. Her research interests include multicultural education, urban education, teacher education, curriculum theory, and qualitative methods.

Manuscript received August 23, 2005

Revisions received September 26 and

October 9, 2005

Accepted October 12, 2005

Call for Nominations for Editorship *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (January 2007–December 2009)

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