

The Potential of Field Notes in Educational Research

René Valdés¹

Michelle Mendoza¹

¹Universidad Andrés Bello (UNAB), Santiago – Chile

ABSTRACT – The Potential of Field Notes in Educational Research. Field notes are a key methodological tool, though still under-systematized, for understanding situated school experiences. This theoretical-reflective essay aims to analyze the methodological value of field notes by proposing definitions, possible uses, and concrete forms of analysis. It offers recommendations for their use (reflective, methodological, and analytical), introduces two types of recording (descriptive and personal), and suggests two complementary analytical approaches (one category-based and another emergent, focused on critical events). The text is especially intended to support graduate students and novice researchers working with school communities and qualitative methodologies.

Keywords: Qualitative Research. Field Notes. Educational Research. Schools.

RESUMEN – El Potencial de las Notas de Campo en la Investigación Educativa. Las notas de campo son una herramienta metodológica clave, aunque poco sistematizada, para comprender experiencias escolares situadas. Este ensayo teórico-reflexivo tiene por objetivo analizar el valor metodológico de las notas de campo, proponiendo definiciones, usos posibles y formas concretas de análisis. Se ofrecen recomendaciones sobre sus modos de uso (reflexivos, metodológicos y analíticos), se plantean dos tipos de registro (descriptivo y personal) y se sugieren dos enfoques analíticos complementarios (uno basado en categorías y otro emergente centrado en eventos críticos). El texto busca aportar especialmente a tesis y investigadores/as noveles que trabajan con comunidades escolares y metodologías cualitativas.

Palabras clave: Investigación Cualitativa. Notas de Campo. Investigación Educativa. Escuelas.

Introduction

The field of educational research has undergone a profound transformation in its methodological and theoretical dimensions, marked by a shift from the positivist paradigm to the interpretive and socio-critical paradigms (Miranda & Ortiz, 2020). This change has entailed a re-signification of the way knowledge about the educational domain is produced, prioritizing approaches that recognize the need for a situated, local, and historical understanding of school phenomena (Sánchez, 2019). Within this framework, qualitative methodologies have taken on a central role, as they enable a contextualized approach to the interactions among school actors and the symbolic structures that underlie institutional dynamics (Sisto, 2008; Flick, 2015). For example, in emerging areas of current educational research such as migration, inclusion, and school leadership, literature reviews reveal the predominance of ethnographic approaches, case studies, and other qualitative strategies to better understand the role of schools (Jiménez et al., 2018; Valdés, 2022; Lizama; Cuéllar, 2025; Améstica-Abarca, 2024).

Since schools are complex spaces, imbued with meanings and constantly shifting relationships, methodological tools are required that not only collect data but also interpret and analyze experiences from a situational perspective (Contreras et al., 2016). In this context, fieldnotes emerge as a fundamental resource for the production of knowledge about schooling, as they provide meaningful information on observed dynamics, recorded conversations, and the broader context in which data are gathered (Newbury, 2001; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Punch, 2012). However, despite their widespread and popular use, there remains a gap in the systematization of their application and analysis within educational research (Thompson & Burkholder, 2021). The literature often links fieldnotes exclusively to traditional ethnography, thereby limiting their potential as a transversal tool across different methodological approaches (Díaz de Rada, 2013).

This paper, presented as a theoretical-reflective essay, seeks to contribute to a still scarcely systematized field by offering a consensual definition and description of fieldnotes, along with recommendations, suggested uses, and possibilities for analysis. Its aim is to analyze the methodological value and analytical potential of fieldnotes in educational research, highlighting their contribution to the situated production of knowledge. To this end, theoretical foundations are combined with practical examples drawn from the authors' experience, with the goal of making their utility visible—particularly for students and novice researchers beginning to engage with qualitative methodologies.

We begin from the premise that fieldnotes can transcend their traditional role as a complementary technique, positioning themselves instead as a tool for critical reflection that enables the formulation of new questions and the in-depth analysis of educational practices. Within this framework, the epistemological and ethical implications of their use are discussed, underscoring the importance of reflexive and

situated writing that remains in dialogue with both the contexts and the participants under study.

Uses and Meanings of Fieldnotes in Educational Settings

Fieldnotes can be understood as written records produced by research teams, primarily linked to field observations, which make it possible to document reflections, descriptions, dialogues, and interactions (Bergin, 2018; Campos et al., 2021; Punch, 2012). However, in educational research—and particularly in studies carried out within school contexts—fieldnotes acquire a distinct character, given the nature of schools as social institutions.

According to Díaz de Rada (2013) and Assael and Valdivia (2018), research in school institutions presents specific features that distinguish it from other fields, especially in the way knowledge is produced. It is characterized by a strong propositional and transfer-oriented dimension—aiming to provide suggestions or improvements for the system—by the use of multiple methods to grasp educational phenomena, by a marked ethical commitment, and by the need to account for the social, cultural, and political contexts in which it is embedded. Moreover, it often adopts an interdisciplinary focus and is recognized as a situated practice. In this regard, Bellei (2018) highlights several complexities inherent to educational research, such as difficulties in gaining access to schools and participants, the risk of bias resulting from the public character of schools, the limitations in generalizing results due to their strong contextualization, and the methodological and technical challenges of addressing problems whose definition and boundaries do not always generate consensus.

In this scenario—and considering that, as researchers, we are often school socialized or even teachers studying schools—our capacity for surprise tends to diminish, and it becomes difficult to completely suspend our own subjectivity. Fieldnotes therefore emerge as a particularly pertinent methodological tool to enrich research work, allowing for more nuanced approaches, critical reflection, and the capture of dimensions that other instruments often leave aside.

Unterhitzberger and Lawrence (2022) conceptualize fieldnotes as written records documenting relevant observations about context, interactions, and events related to a given phenomenon, particularly in qualitative and case study research. These notes complement data directly obtained from participants, providing a contextual and descriptive framework that deepens understanding of the phenomena under study. They underscore their utility in capturing social, economic, and political details, as well as for methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of findings. However, they do not provide specific recommendations regarding their use or analysis. For Yin (2016), fieldnotes are written records produced during or immediately after an observation, interview, or other fieldwork experience. These notes may begin as preliminary jottings—brief and fragmentary—that are later expanded into fuller, more coherent versions. Their main purpose is to capture both what happens and what the researcher

perceives, reflects upon, or interprets, so as not to rely solely on memory, which can be limited and prone to distortion.

Similarly, Martínez (2007) emphasizes fieldnotes as essential daily records for organizing, systematizing, and analyzing information obtained during observation. He proposes a detailed and systematic use of fieldnotes to monitor the research process and strengthen the relationship between theory and practice. Moreover, he suggests a three-level structure: description (objective and contextualized), argumentation (linking observations to theory), and interpretation (deep analysis integrating experience and theory). This framework seeks to ensure that fieldnotes function as useful inputs for reporting and for the development of rigorous qualitative research.

While these authors converge on the observational dimension of fieldnotes, Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence (2022) stress their complementary role, and Martínez (2007) underscores their monitoring capacity, thereby approaching a form of meta-analysis of the research process. Yin (2016), in turn, highlights their function in recovering both experiences and preliminary reflections triggered by fieldwork.

Beyond their analytical role, it is also necessary to attend to the conditions under which the writing of fieldnotes takes place. From this perspective, Mayring (2022) argues that, in exploratory studies or under-researched areas, fieldnotes acquire particular value by enabling an initial interpretative approach to the phenomenon under observation. For instance, when studying a school that, due to increased migration, has admitted a growing number of foreign students, the institution faces the challenge of transforming its school practices. In such contexts, fieldnotes can capture novel situations—provided the researcher is capable of managing them appropriately.

This interpretive potential, however, does not unfold in the abstract. As Schindler and Schäfer (2020) point out, the writing of fieldnotes is shaped by the material, temporal, and social conditions of the academic communities in which the researcher is embedded, influencing both the form and timing of their production.

In sum, fieldnotes in educational research constitute empirical records that document observations, interactions, and reflections arising from fieldwork, capturing both what is observed and what is interpreted by the researcher. They are key for monitoring the research process and enriching findings through triangulation. Within school contexts, they acquire particular significance due to the normative and political complexity of educational institutions, positioning themselves as a flexible and dynamic technique for the production of empirical knowledge.

Recommendations on Their Use and Potential

Fieldnotes constitute a valuable tool for gaining in-depth access to social dynamics, contextual specificities, and the documentation of aspects that transcend verbal language (Flick, 2014; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These records are often complemented by other instru-

ments such as theoretical memos and personal journals, and are frequently used as reminders, anecdotal accounts, and as evidence of the methodological decisions that guided the design and adaptation of fieldwork (Miles; Huberman, 1994; Mishra; Gupta, 2024; Montgomery; Bailey, 2007). However, their uses can be broader and more complex, as they also allow researchers to construct preliminary ideas, deepen their interpretations, and support the conclusions of their studies (Hoey, 2024). In this context, we propose a set of uses and potentialities that fieldnotes offer for educational field research. Their uses may be organized both chronologically and functionally within the process of fieldwork: personal and reflexive uses during the initial immersion in the school; methodological uses in decision-making while in the field; and analytical uses during the final, interpretive stages of the findings. This suggests that fieldnotes not only accompany but also guide and sustain the fieldwork process in schools

Personal and Reflexive Applications

Emotional Reflexivity

Fieldnotes should not be understood merely as second-order empirical records, but rather as spaces of subjective elaboration that accompany the process of fieldwork. Immersive experiences in schools have the capacity to generate intense affects that may place the researcher's position under tension. Recording these experiences and emotions makes it possible to recognize how feelings such as anger, gratitude, or suspicion shape the ways in which we observe, interpret, and narrate the data we will later analyze. From this perspective, fieldnotes can function as a critical filter for our positionalities, subjective constructions, and even our initial interpretations. Revisiting fieldnotes from time to time may serve as a useful exercise to prevent our reflections and positionalities from being obscured or distorted in relation to the findings. For instance, documenting the discomfort provoked by indifference experienced in a school may be key to acknowledging the role of the researcher within fieldwork. The same holds true when we tend to idealize those spaces where we were warmly welcomed. A similar dynamic occurs when the researcher records their frustration after witnessing a meeting in which teachers downplay the experiences of neurodivergent students. In such cases, when it comes to analyzing interviews, it becomes crucial to review fieldnotes in order to avoid allowing this discomfort to condition or bias the interpretation of the field experience.

Reconfiguration of the Researcher's Position

Fieldnotes make it possible to reveal the relationship between experience and interpretation by capturing how the researcher's position transforms throughout the course of fieldwork. The systematic tracking of the role assumed by the researcher—whether closer, more distant, involved, or under tension depending on the moment and context—

provides important insights into how these shifts affect both the production of data and the relationships established with the actors involved. This situated dimension does not weaken the validity of the research; on the contrary, it enables the acknowledgment of the historicity of the researcher–field relationship and strengthens the analytical depth of the ethnographic experience. For instance, a researcher may begin fieldwork conducting classroom observations in an external and distant manner, but over the course of several weeks become a point of reference for some students. In her fieldnotes, she reflects on how this shift influences the kind of information she gains access to and the type of trust she is able to build.

Situated Attention

Fieldnotes capture what does not fit into the recorder or the formal consent forms. Interviews and dialogues do not end when the recorder is turned off; on the contrary, it is often precisely at that moment that an interviewee may voice the words we had been waiting for, once the weight of formality dissipates. In some cases, the decision not to record may even be a strategic choice, and it is precisely in these moments that fieldnotes reconfigure the living experience of fieldwork. Moreover, reflecting on the “lies” told in the field also entails an ethical use of fieldnotes. Recording without judgment, listening beyond literal meanings, and writing down what such narratives reveal about the inner world of participants turn fieldnotes into a tool for accessing the unsaid, the denied, or the concealed. For example, after a recorded interview, a teacher quietly comments: *“Don’t write this down, but sometimes we prefer certain children not to come to class.”* The researcher documents this moment in her fieldnotes as an indication of the performative nature of recorded discourse. In such cases, the researcher’s attentiveness becomes revealing of her relationship to the object of study.

Relational Dimension

By documenting tensions and negotiations within school life, fieldnotes make visible the political and relational dimensions of the educational context. Beyond what is verbalized by members of the school community in other data production devices, fieldnotes allow researchers to capture gestures, silences, movements, and proximities inside and outside the classroom—elements that reveal power relations, alliances, and tensions that are difficult to register through interviews or focus groups. Recording these elements, often relegated to the realm of the implicit, strengthens interpretations by integrating non-verbalized but highly significant aspects for understanding the school experience. For example, in a teachers’ lounge, the researcher observes that certain teachers regularly avoid sitting next to the school coexistence coordinator. She records this physical distance as an expression of internal tensions, thereby complementing what remains unspoken in subsequent interviews

Methodological Uses

Strategic Connections

In complex school contexts where inner layers are less accessible, fieldnotes allow researchers to observe how relational strategies unfold (such as relying on the trust of a key figure) to gain access to new sources of information. Fieldnotes thus document not only records and content, but also the relationships, strategies, and negotiations that emerge in the process. Often, the spaces under study become cryptic or closed; researchers may feel that data production does not flow, that the expected voices remain unheard, or that reality itself is somehow vetoed. In such moments, fieldnotes—beyond relieving the material and symbolic weight of the recorder—enable more fluid encounters that can become a device for noting down strategic decisions. For example, a researcher realizes that only through the school counselor can they reach students with the most significant behavioral challenges. This strategy is recorded in the fieldnotes, highlighting the invisible yet central role of certain school actors in the production of data

Methodological Flexibility

The expansion of the empirical field based on participants' own recommendations (such as interviewing an important neighbor or a person who has been part of the school for many years) reflects a methodological openness that would hardly be possible without sensitive school immersion and fieldnotes that record such overflows. These unplanned suggestions constitute findings in themselves, and their documentation illustrates how local actors actively influence the construction of the research object. For example, a parent subtly suggests interviewing a former student who played a key role in past school mobilizations. The researcher records this recommendation and decides to incorporate it, thereby expanding the scope of the study beyond the original plan. Similarly, the decision to extend timelines and adjust schedules becomes a methodological practice consistent with the open and dynamic character of school life. Fieldnotes make it possible to document such decisions, justify them from the situated logic of research, and reveal how knowledge is constructed in movement, in dialogue, and in constant negotiation with the field. For instance, a key activity is postponed three times due to internal problems within the institution. The researcher decides to extend fieldwork and records how this decision resonates with the living logic of the school's organizational structure. In this way, fieldnotes serve as the backbone of the living methodological reasoning of school ethnography.

Methodological Traceability

When fieldnotes are conceived as a reflexive practice—rather than merely a descriptive one—they enable the documentation and interpretation of methodological shifts that emerge in complex school contexts. As noted earlier, when participant observation alone proves

insufficient for reconstructing the historical trajectories of school practices, strategies such as reviewing documents and posters, recording features of the surrounding neighborhood, or asking key participants to provide lists of relevant practices may come into play. These methodological changes are not anecdotal; rather, they represent significant decisions that fieldnotes can capture and justify.

In this sense, fieldnotes allow researchers to trace their own reasoning as subjects who reflect on their practice and make methodological decisions in creative and flexible ways. This traceability—difficult to reconstruct in final reports if not recorded at the time—finds its primary support in fieldnotes. For example, when struggling to obtain meaningful responses in individual interviews with students, a researcher may decide to introduce visual prompts (photographs, images, objects) or to replace interviews with focus groups, even though this was not originally planned. In such cases, fieldnotes make it possible to record and make sense of these emerging decisions

Analytical Uses

Analytical Saturation

The temporal monitoring of research finds in fieldnotes a key resource for assessing theoretical saturation and the coherence of analysis. Comparing accumulated records allows researchers to identify repetitions, tensions, or significant ruptures in the observed school experience. This, in turn, makes it possible to critically determine when the study begins to reach saturation and contributes to defining the closure of fieldwork according to the logic of the phenomenon under investigation. The reflexive use of fieldnotes, together with constant readings, enables the detection of recurring themes across different techniques—such as school relationships, non-verbal language, or school culture—which may indicate that a point of saturation has been reached and, therefore, justify the end of data collection. Alternatively, this process may open the possibility of shifting towards other topics or research objectives. For instance, after multiple visits, the researcher notices that practices aimed at preventing student dropout begin to repeat, as the same records appear across different interviewees. This observation is documented in the fieldnotes as a criterion for closing fieldwork and preparing the analysis with greater theoretical precision

Analytical Device

As anchors for other research techniques, fieldnotes strengthen triangulation and expand the range of meanings in analysis. On the one hand, they allow researchers to confirm, validate, or nuance emerging categories from interviews, focus groups, or other qualitative instruments, thereby enriching the analytical depth by confronting what is said with what is observed. On the other hand, they make it possible to challenge and interrogate meanings that other techniques may have naturalized, fostering a critical and situated understanding of school

reality. In this way, fieldnotes transcend their role as mere records to become a key analytic device that contributes both to the robustness and to the reflexivity of educational research. For example, in interviews, teachers may claim that they actively promote student participation. Yet, field observations reveal that class council meetings are repeatedly canceled by the same teaching staff. This contradiction is analyzed as a key finding of the study

As Evidence and an Analytical Starting Point

Fieldnotes also function effectively as direct evidence in academic articles and research reports. Containing observations, perceptions, and situated descriptions, they can accompany other empirical records (such as interviews or documents) or even sustain analytical claims when other techniques do not provide sufficiently dense information. In ethnographic or qualitative contexts, their value lies in capturing what other methods are unable to register with the same immediacy or contextual richness. Moreover, fieldnotes can serve as a key starting point for data analysis. Beginning the interpretive work by revisiting these notes enables the researcher to frame interpretations, identify initial regularities, establish connections between events, and guide the subsequent reading of interviews, institutional records, or other sources. In this way, fieldnotes orient the analytical process. For example, in a study on student participation, the researcher begins by reviewing notes taken during informal school activities, where it was observed that students often self-manage meeting spaces without adult mediation. This initial observation then allows the researcher to reinterpret interviews that at first seemed to indicate limited participation and to revalue certain school documents that had gone unnoticed, such as posters or communications produced by the students themselves.

The range of uses outlined above demonstrates that fieldnotes constitute a central device for critical, situated, and rigorous educational research. In their articulation of the personal, the relational, the methodological, and the analytical, they represent a core space of inquiry within fieldwork.

Proposal for Fieldnotes

As previously noted, fieldnotes should not be reduced to mere anecdotal records or punctual reminders. On the contrary, their value lies in the diversity of formats and in their capacity to capture both visible and invisible dimensions of fieldwork. Drawing on accumulated experience in educational research, and following some elements of Spradley's (2016) proposal, the authors suggest two main forms of use and organization of fieldnotes: descriptive recording—which includes both thick and subtle notes (see Table 1)—and personal recording—which encompasses emerging reflections and questions (see Table 2). Each of these forms carries specific analytical functions

Descriptive Recording

Thick Descriptions

They refer to detailed and contextualized accounts of situations that cannot be recorded (for example, spontaneous interactions in hallways, gestures, atmospheres, spatial arrangements, significant silences, etc.). These descriptions seek to capture the complexity of the event by considering the verbal, the non-verbal, and the symbolic.

Subtle Descriptions

They are elaborated as a complement to recordings (such as interviews or classes), incorporating elements that the recording does not capture (attitudes, body language, reactions of the environment, interruptions). They are brief but relevant for reconstructing the atmosphere or the scene.

Table 1 – Example of the Organization of a Descriptive Record

Date	Place	Observed Situation	Thick Description (not recordable)	Nuanced Description (recording complement)	Comments
26/06/2025	5th Grade B Classroom	Beginning of the language class	Students enter without greeting the teacher. The teacher does not greet them either and checks her cell phone. The atmosphere is tense, no one speaks..	In the recording, the teacher's voice giving instructions can be heard, but the generalized silence and the students' expressions of discomfort—some not looking at her—are not captured.	Check if this pattern is repeated in other classes. Complex classroom climate.

Source: Author's elaboration.

Personal Record

Thinking Aloud

They refer to reflections, doubts, emotions, intuitions, or associations that arise during or after fieldwork. They make it possible to render visible the researcher's subjectivity, involvement, and potential biases, while also opening up future analytical lines.

Emerging Questions or Ideas

They include methodological tasks pending, possible future decisions, new questions, or adjustments in the research perspective. They function as bridges between the field and theoretical reformulation.

Table 2 – Record for Reflections and Emerging Questions (Points 3 and 4)

Date	Observation Context	Thinking Aloud (reflections/emotions)	Emerging Questions or Ideas
26/06/2025	Interview with the principal	I felt uncomfortable when the principal made an inappropriate joke about students with ASD. Could this reflect an attitude toward diversity?	What type of leadership does the principal defend and sustain in this school?
27/06/2025	Observation during recess	I was struck by the fact that migrant children always play among themselves. Does this also happen in the classroom?	Explore whether there are intercultural coexistence strategies. Perhaps ask the school coexistence team.

Source: Author's elaboration.

Example of the Organization of a Personal Record

Fieldnotes—whether descriptive or personal—aim to capture complexity while also providing a global perspective of fieldwork. This enables a more critical, situated, and reflexive gaze on both the researcher and the school experience under analysis. Thus, leaning toward more descriptive or more subjective perspectives will depend on a set of factors, such as the time allocated to fieldwork, the research objectives, the techniques employed, the context, and, of course, the analytical possibilities of the information produced. The following section outlines possible options for the latter.

Possibilities for the Analysis of Fieldnotes

It is essential to have a clear way of systematizing and analyzing fieldnotes, especially when they have accumulated in large quantities. To this end, we propose—first of all—a preliminary phase devoted to the initial organization of the notes. From this systematization, two complementary analytical approaches can be applied. The first is more structured, based on content analysis and the construction of categories (Vásquez, 1994), which allows for organizing information and generating original results from patterns or regularities. The second approach, more emergent and flexible, focuses on the identification of critical events or the development of analytical memos, and is particularly useful for complementing or deepening findings obtained through other techniques. In this sense, the choice of analytical approach will depend on the interpretive value assigned to the fieldnotes.

Phase Zero: Systematization of Fieldnotes

Before deciding whether to analyze fieldnotes through a traditional content analysis model or through a more emergent and flexible approach, it is necessary to consider a common preliminary stage: the organization and preparation of the fieldnote corpus. In practice, fieldnotes rarely form a single homogeneous document; rather, they are often scattered across multiple formats (e.g., notebooks, digital files, voice recordings, or even text messages), produced at different moments and with varying intentions (descriptive, interpretive, emotional, etc.). This diversity therefore requires an initial systematization that enables the researcher to compile, classify, and contextualize all

the material before beginning the analysis. This process may include the digitization of notebooks; the transcription of audio files; the identification of dates, actors, or observed spaces; and the organization of records according to criteria such as type of note, stage of fieldwork, or activity observed. Providing templates for each of these options exceeds the scope of this text and, strictly speaking, is not the most urgent task, since the schemes for organizing notes largely depend on the intensity with which they are used. For instance, if the researcher relies on audio recordings to capture narrated reflections, it may be advisable to replicate the interview transcription format in order to create concrete data for analysis. Conversely, if subtle complementary notes were used, the most suitable format may be to compile them all into a single document (notebook or digital) for use when necessary.

This preliminary systematization phase is not an isolated step; rather, it plays a fundamental role in the subsequent analytical process. In fact, the organization of fieldnotes provides an overview of the data while also contributing to the construction of a relational and interpretive perspective of the corpus. This initial work facilitates, for example: detecting over- or underrepresented moments in the records; identifying predominant types of notes (e.g., an abundance of *thinking aloud* entries versus a scarcity of *thick descriptions*); recognizing changes in tone or focus across time; and making decisions about how to segment or group material for later stages of reading, coding, and categorization. On this organized basis, and depending on the specific requirements of the study, the more suggestive forms of analysis can then be developed.

Thematic Analysis Phase

Thematic analysis enables fieldnotes to be treated as a primary source through structured procedures that identify patterns, categories, and regularities (Vásquez, 1994). This approach is particularly useful for generating original findings directly from fieldwork, as it facilitates comparison across different sources or stages of the study and is especially appropriate in advanced phases, when the aim is to synthesize results (Krippendorff, 2004). Key aspects include the coding of excerpts (whether open, axial, or thematic), grouping by either emergent or pre-defined categories, the use of qualitative analysis software such as Atlas.ti or NVivo for greater systematization, and triangulation with other instruments such as interviews, documents, or observations. The following section describes its stages, drawing on authors such as Atkinson and Coffey (2003) and Krippendorff (2004).

Initial Exploratory Reading

In this phase, the aim is not to code or label but rather to become familiar with the tone, content, and structure of the corpus. Unlike interviews, fieldnotes contain both contextualized descriptions and subjective elements, which means this reading must be sensitive to the different levels of recording (the observable, the interpretive, and/or the emotional). The researcher may underline relevant excerpts, write

marginal notes, or mark distinctions between types of notes. It is also important to begin identifying informal patterns, such as repetitions, scenes that generate discomfort, recurring silences, or shifts in narrative style. At this stage, the researcher may also notice whether a particular type of note predominates (for example, thinking aloud entries) and what analytical implications such prevalence might have.

Open or Thematic Coding

Once the researcher has become familiar with the material, the next step is to assign codes to significant segments. In fieldnotes, coding should not be limited to what is said, but should also include what is done, felt, or perceived. This may encompass gestures, silences, movements; spatial arrangements and the use of the body; inferred or explicit emotions; the researcher's impressions; and contradictions between what is said and what is done. It is worth noting that at this stage, different types of notes can provide complementary analytical entry points. For example, thick descriptions allow for the detailed coding of actions and interactions; thinking aloud entries foster the researcher's involvement and the formulation of initial hypotheses; and emergent questions or ideas contribute to coding methodological cues that can guide new readings or adjustments in the analysis.

Grouping by Emergent or Predefined Categories

After coding, the codes are grouped into analytical categories, which may emerge inductively (from the material itself) or be deduced from the conceptual framework of the study (for example, when working from a communities of practice model or using the dimensions of the Index for Inclusion to analyze inclusion in a school). These categories should represent relevant phenomena, be broad enough to encompass variation, and remain anchored in the data. However, with fieldnotes it is common for categories to combine descriptive and interpretive dimensions. For instance, a category such as "silent participation" may include gestures, bodily dispositions, and the researcher's reflections on non-verbal interactions between students and teachers in the classroom. In this sense, emergent questions can foster the formulation of categories not initially anticipated in the design of the analysis.

Triangulation with Other Sources

The categories constructed from fieldnotes can be contrasted with other data collection instruments (for example, interviews or documents) in order to validate findings, identify interpretive contradictions, and enrich the understanding of the phenomenon. This triangulation not only reinforces the coherence of the analysis but also broadens its scope. In this process, fieldnotes can provide situational details or forms of non-verbal expression that are not always captured by audiovisual records or explicit discourse. Nuanced descriptions, in particular, make it possible to recover contextual subtleties that enrich the overall interpretation of the phenomenon when integrated with other

sources of information. This form of triangulation strengthens qualitative analysis by enhancing its validity, thereby allowing for greater rigor in the construction of categories.

Interpretative Synthesis by Category

Finally, a synthesis is developed for each analytical category, bringing together: (a) representative excerpts from the fieldnotes (either paraphrased or in narrative style); (b) connections across different moments, actors, or scenes; and (c) links to the theoretical framework or to emergent questions from the study. At this stage, it is crucial to sustain the interpretive density of the analysis without weakening its empirical grounding. Fieldnotes play a central role in this process, as they make it possible to reconstruct processes, trace transformations over time, and integrate the researcher's perspective. At this point, thinking aloud entries help to render visible the researcher's subjective positioning as well as the dilemmas or intuitions that arise in the field; while emergent questions reflect the evolution of the analytical focus, showing how interpretation is reoriented as fieldwork progresses.

Phases of Emergent Analysis

Emergent and flexible analysis—such as the critical events approach or the development of reflexive memos—emphasizes the recovery of significant moments, dilemmas, ruptures, or intuitions that arise during fieldwork. This type of analysis complements and enriches the results obtained through other techniques, is nourished by the unexpected and by the researcher's subjective experience, and is especially valuable in the early stages of a study, as it enables the refinement of research questions, the reformulation of strategies, and the making of methodological decisions. Key aspects include the identification of events or scenes that generate tension, surprise, or doubt; the elaboration of memos or interpretive annotations around those scenes; the connection between the researcher's experience and the theoretical dimensions at play; and the periodic review of the field diary as a space of constant reflexivity. The phases of this type of analysis do not necessarily follow a linear sequence, but may instead be articulated in a cyclical or flexible way, consistent with the reflexive character of the approach.

Sensitive Review of the Corpus

This phase consists of a careful reading of the fieldnotes, with an emphasis on detecting moments of tension, ambiguity, and/or contradiction. In contrast to thematic analysis, the goal is not to code or classify from the outset, but rather to allow oneself to be affected by what has been observed and written. For this purpose, the researcher may highlight passages that, for instance, generate methodological doubts, shifts in perspective, or feelings of discomfort. In this type of reading, thinking aloud entries and emergent questions become particularly valuable, since they often contain the first signals of a phenomenon

that has not yet been named or understood. For example, upon rereading a brief note written after observing a class, the researcher writes: "I do not understand why it made me so uncomfortable when the teacher used diminutives to address the students ('my love,' 'my little one')." This record can become a starting point for exploring forms of affectivity in pedagogical relationships.

Identification and Reconstruction of Critical Scenes

In this phase, those scenes that, due to their affective or interpretive weight, can be considered critical events are selected and reconstructed. These events are not necessarily extreme but rather situations that condense tensions or reveal key structural elements of the phenomenon under study. Drawing on both thick and nuanced descriptions, the researcher reconstructs the scene in detail, integrating the observed elements, the context, and their own positionality within it. Reflexive notes and spontaneous audio recordings may also complement the understanding of what occurred, allowing multiple meanings to emerge. For example, during recess, a parent approaches the school inspector to request that her daughter not spend time with a migrant classmate "because she is a bad influence." The fieldnote recorded includes gestures, tone, and non-verbal expressions. Later, this scene is reconstructed as an expression of exclusionary discourses within the school space.

Elaboration of Interpretive Memos

Based on the selected scenes, analytical memos are written to capture the researcher's initial interpretations, possible associations with theoretical frameworks, the dilemmas raised by the scene, and the emerging hypotheses. At this point, the focus is not on the systematization of data but rather on the exploration of possible meanings. For this purpose, emergent questions or ideas recorded during fieldwork can be revisited as inputs to guide the memo. It is also possible to engage in dialogue with earlier entries in the fieldnote journal, tracing continuities or shifts in the researcher's perspective. For example, in one memo the researcher analyzes a scene in which the head inspector interrupts a class to deliver an improvised talk on the proper use of the school uniform. Although the content seems appropriate, the researcher asks: "What underlying messages does this intervention convey about authority and control? Why is this rule privileged over others?" This reflection leads her to revisit literature on school rituals and discourses of normalization.

Connection with the Theoretical and Methodological Framework

As memos are developed and interpretation deepens, possible connections with theoretical concepts or methodological decisions are explored. This phase involves a dialogue between what is experienced in the field and what is conceptualized in the literature, without forcing

an immediate correspondence. Such an exercise allows for the reformulation of research questions, the revision of objectives, or the adjustment of instruments. In this way, emergent analysis not only produces knowledge but also transforms the research design itself. For example, after analyzing several scenes in which students interrupt the class without clear consequences, the researcher incorporates the concept of teacher authority into the theoretical framework and decides to add an observational category on classroom norm management.

Rereading the Fieldnote Journal as a Space of Reflexivity

Finally, a global rereading of the field diary or notebook is undertaken, this time informed by the perspective gained throughout the process. The aim is to observe how the researcher's gaze has changed, what new meanings have emerged, and which aspects remain open or contested. This reading makes it possible to identify turning points in the research process, record methodological learnings, and value subjectivity as a constitutive part of the knowledge produced. For example, when reviewing her notes from the beginning of fieldwork in a rural primary school, the researcher realizes that her initial descriptions were distant and technical, whereas over time she began to incorporate ethical concerns, affective ties with students, and questions about her role as an observer. As can be seen, the suggested phases of analysis enable the construction of categories, analytical contrasts, meta-analyses of the empirical process, theoretical-methodological connections, and even the systematization of new lines of inquiry. All of this, of course, will depend on the conditions under which the research process was planned and carried out.

Conclusions

The aim of this theoretical-reflexive essay was to analyze the methodological value of fieldnotes by proposing definitions, possible uses, and concrete forms of analysis. Through a review of the literature and, above all, drawing on the authors' experience in various qualitative research projects, it is argued that—in current school research—there is little systematization of definitions, applications, and analytical possibilities of fieldnotes.

This text proposes two types of fieldnote records: the descriptive, which includes *thick descriptions* (of unrecordable situations) and *nuanced descriptions* (as a complement to recordings); and the personal, which captures *thinking aloud* and *emergent questions*. These records serve specific analytical functions and accompany the research process from immersion to the interpretation of results. Their uses vary according to the stage of fieldwork: personal and reflexive (such as emotional management or situated attention), methodological (such as the traceability of decisions), and analytical (such as the assessment of saturation or triangulation). For their analysis, two complementary approaches are proposed: a thematic one, structured into phases such as coding, categorization, and synthesis; and an emergent one, focused on critical events, reflexive memos, and connections with theoretical

frameworks. Fieldnotes, therefore, enable the articulation of the empirical, the subjective, and the analytical, thus strengthening the production of situated, critical, and rigorous knowledge.

The essay is largely grounded in the idea that studying the school is inherently complex, as it is an institution loaded with regulations, power relations, historical practices, and meanings in constant transformation (Bellei, 2018; Contreras et al., 2016; Assael & Valdivia, 2018). In this context, fieldnotes allow the researcher to capture what often escapes other techniques: gestures, silences, contradictions, and subjectivities that shape school life. Their use is key to accessing what is left unsaid and to understanding the daily functioning of the school from a situated perspective. In this sense, fieldnotes are a fundamental tool for those beginning research in schools—such as graduate students or novice researchers—as they make it possible to document both what is observed and the researcher's own positionalities and methodological decisions, fostering a reflexive approach to the research process (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007; Newbury, 2001; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018; Thompson & Burkholder, 2021). Furthermore, they provide useful support for analysis by facilitating triangulation, category development, and the elaboration of richer and more contextualized findings.

Finally, we believe that several open questions remain regarding the use of fieldnotes: What is their relationship with academic writing? Can they be employed in research with quantitative approaches? Do they enable the construction of theory, or do they primarily foster theoretical reflection? How can their quality as empirical evidence be evaluated? Is it possible to document an entire research process exclusively through fieldnotes, particularly in indexed scientific publications? These questions open new lines of inquiry, invite methodological reflection, and promote the always necessary meta-analysis of qualitative research¹.

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René Valdés holds a PhD in Psychology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso (Chile). He is currently a researcher at the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, Universidad Andrés Bello. He has authored more than 80 publications on topics related to inclusive education, school leadership, and the relationship between migration and schooling. He is the author of the book *La Escuela Inclusiva en la Sociedad del Rendimiento* (RIL, 2023) and co-author and coordinator of the book *Dar vuelta la sala de clases* (RIL, 2024).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4242-9748>

E-mail: rene.valdes@unab.cl

Michelle Mendoza holds a PhD in Education, with a specialization in Initial and Continuing Teacher Training and Educational Innovation, from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. She holds a Master's degree in Quality and Improvement of Education from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and a Master's degree in Hispanic Philology from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC, Spain). She also holds a Master's degree in Methods for Social Research from Universidad Diego Portales.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4275-1841>

E-mail: michelle.mendoza@unab.cl

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