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Critical reflections on the US debate on quality in education research

... focusing on a critical reading of the current U.S. discourse on “scientifically based education,” and on methodological and epistemological issues in conducting cross-national and cross-cultural research.

Discussants

Professor Sara Delamont

University of Cardiff

Dr Birgit Pepin

University of Manchester

Professor Joe Tobin Morning seminar

Whether the story I tell you turns out to have any resemblance to your country isn't for me to say – maybe that will come up in discussion. I'll be speaking from several perspectives. One, I'm a professor of early childhood education located in a School of Education in the US. Secondly as an anthropologist trained in anthropology who ended up in a School of Ed. I have a perspective that is somewhat different. And thirdly, I'll be telling a story that is based on my experiences on the front lines. I was on two National Committees. The US has the National Academy of Science that appoints committees of experts from different backgrounds to make recommendations to guide US government and one of those is called the Board of International and Comparative Studies in Education and the other the Committee of Research in Education. When you are on these committees, everything ends up being compromised. Everybody has to make compromises for a committee report to be issued.

This is a paper in two halves. The core of the argument in the first half of the paper is to talk about this new discourse of scientific research in education. The committee on Research and Education that I mentioned I was on issued a report on scientific research in education. But the committee didn't start or invent the term. What I will argue is that this notion of scientific research in education is bigger than any one committee. The term scientific research is used a lot by the current Department of

Education in the US. It is associated with Bush politics. But I'm going to argue that it's not necessarily an idea of Bush's or a Republican idea. Instead it is a national discourse, culturally constructed. I'm going to state this discourse as a narrative. It goes something like this: Education in the US is in trouble, students are being educated worse now than they were in the past, teachers are not very good, schools are failing. As a result the achievement scores are falling and as a result of that there is a danger that the US's ability to compete in the international front is being compromised. Why are the schools doing so badly? Teachers are being accused of not teaching well. But why are teachers not teaching well? It's because they are not being trained well in Schools of Education. It's also [said] that the field as a whole is suffering from a lack of a research base; that the way teachers are teaching is based on intuitions, misunderstandings and wrong ideas being given them by professors in education who are overly ideological, insufficiently scientific. What is needed to save us is a revolution or paradigm shift in the way we think about educational research in that we need to bring science to education.

Let me run through some of the arguments against. First that achievement is falling in the US. My colleague David Berliner who wrote a book 'Manufactured Crisis'; I will quickly cite it. He argues that the idea that students are doing badly, that schools are doing badly is a manufactured crisis, a kind of moral panic that serves certain interests. He points out that scores on NAEP the National Assessment on Educational Progress are higher than ever. That there is no objective evidence that scores are falling. There's no evidence that teachers are worse than they were before. Where teachers are struggling is where there is a shortage of some kind to teachers in certain areas especially in maths. Is there evidence that poor quality in education is causing the US to fall economically? As David Berliner puts it – how much richer would our country have to be? What's the goal? The other part of the argument – the notion that colleges of education are bastions of poor quality research...there is a notion that Schools of Ed are less rigorous, less intellectual, less capable than colleagues across other schools. I would argue for a discourse of scientific evidence based research, there is very little evidence based research for the poor quality of research; it's a kind of prejudice. It may be true but it is held in spite of a lack of evidence.

So if the story is not entirely true, how did we end up with this Committee on Scientific Research in Education? Here is my version [of events]. There is something called the National Academy of Sciences, it is very old, in some sense it goes back to Thomas Jefferson. Within it you have different academies for the different sciences. In the late 1990s the NAS appointed a committee on research in education. So these studies usually start with the notion that there is some sort of problem or crises and then the best minds in the country come together to show whether there really is a problem. Because the committee is so diverse you end up with this compromised document. I'm going to argue that we have to read between the lines of Scientific Research in Education to see what's really going on there. The report is available online. It's been widely published, it's been used a lot for teaching. There is also an issue of Educational Researcher the flagship journal that was devoted to critiques of Scientific Research including ones by David Berliner, Fred Ericson and others. There have been rejoinders to the critiques. So I won't try to repeat the whole discussion but talk about my own experiences on the board. I wasn't on the first iteration I was on the second one that issued the follow up report which made recommendations to put into action.

I will read some quotes from the report and from the release of the report. What I'm going to argue is the document apart from being a very intelligent, interesting document is really a document full of anxiety and apology that you have to read between the lines because the text is arguing with itself. If we were to do a deconstruction of it, it would fall apart.

Pat Graham used to be the Dean of Education at Harvard she was not on the committee but she was one of the reviewers and at the press release she was asked to introduce the report. From her remarks she says this:

“You need to read footnote 4, you need to read on page 52 ‘science does not necessarily mean good’. If you do not read this report carefully...you will get a simplistic notion that the report does not in its complexity state that what we have here is the paradigm for the hard sciences that need to be applied to education.”

See how complicated what she's saying? She's saying about this report that she is worried it will be misread and that people will read it and say 'science is the answer' but don't read it that way. Why would you have to issue a report (and in the report itself it has many of these caveats) to say 'don't misunderstand this, we're not saying this.' In the English Department they would say if a text keeps telling you how not to read it, it has within it this misreading. The unsaid or the said but hidden, or the said but repressed or the said but pretend we didn't say it.

I'll go to the next, the beginning argument to the report:

"In this evermore complex world in which educational problems tend to be portrayed with the urgency of national survival, there is (again) an understandable attraction to the rationality and disciplined style of science. Simply put, for some problems citizens, educators, administrators, policy makers want to hear about hard evidence; they want impartiality, they want decisions to rest on reasonable, rigorous, and scientific deliberation."

Again it's curious – it's not quite saying that these educational problems aren't true, but they are portrayed as true. The national survival is at stake but it's widely assumed to be so. The report doesn't want to endorse the idea that the country is falling apart because its education system is weak and yet it uses that argument 'and if it were true' because it starts out saying there is this portrayal we think that it might be so let's move on to show this portrayal is not true. But no, given the portrayal what can we do, it's so overwhelmingly bound to be true we better proceed. Then we get all of these positive terms like 'impartiality', 'rigorous', 'reasonable' in a passive voice. Then it continues:

"This study will review and synthesize recent literature on the science and practice of scientific education research and consider how to support high quality science in a federal education research agency."

How can this agency promote and protect scientific quality? Does it seem unobjectionable? Well yes and no – for me the key frustration on the committee, I kept asking are we saying that the scientific research in education should be better that there is poor quality scientific research? So the science needs to be better science? Are we saying that educational research should become in general more scientific? Are we saying that the ratio of non scientific to scientific should be shifted? The committee say 'we are not saying that.' There's an implication.

There are several places in the report where they are saying ‘by the way we are not saying that science is the only good kind of research; there is historical, philosophical, literary scholarship that should inform education because education is influenced by ideology, values, ideals.’ So the report wants to have it both ways which compromised reports always do. I would say I agree with this last point that if we agree that education is influenced by ideology and value then so are scientific committees.

Pat Graham in her introduction to the report also said this:

“The word science is a complication they don’t have in Russian or German. In Russian or German science has that meaning of scholarly inquiry of the rigorous sort. I think what this report is calling for is rigorous, replicable scholarly inquiry.”

It’s a conflation or confusion with the word science with empirical and rigorous. They say ‘no, we are not saying that science is the only kind of rigorous research’ but they are saying that. Is history a science, is literature a science is philosophy a science? No, I think there are disciplinary differences and you can be rigorous without being scientific and vice versa.

Isn’t it problematic to have a committee on Scientific Research on Education that’s running parallel [to the Bush Administrations calls on Education] that it doesn’t talk about politics at all? Here is the response [of the authors of the report]

“In keeping with the institutional ethos of the national research centres our approach and that of the committee was to examine issues as objectively as possible and frankly, if our findings happen to coincide with the viewpoints of some Federal visions, so be it.”

Do you find that odd – ‘that they happen to coincide’? as if there is no correlational relationship between these two things. What would Foucault say? Is there no larger discourse that makes it more than happenstance that these two things are moving in parallel direction? Again, the response is ‘we are talking mostly about science research, we are not talking about the other kinds of research in education, but we are

after all a NAS.’ The question then is, why is the NAS doing a study on educational research? It sounds logical enough only within the logic. What’s the next report by NAS – how about the science of art or the science of philosophy? How about the science of government? I think the very fact that the NAS is studying education is what I think is problematic. They could have participated in a larger group that included people from other academies – the National Endowment for Humanities, the Social Science Research Council. But for the scientists to take it on is in a way why I agreed to be on it, I thought I better do it rather than sit on the sidelines.

This discourse is so wrought and full of anxiety we find that these very smart people start using sloppy metaphors. So the two metaphors they use is that:

- 1) Education is like the objective scientific world, so that Education should be studied the same way we study rocks, planets or cells
- 2) The medical metaphor.

The metaphor is clear here [number two] but it doesn’t make sense. In what sense is improving education like wiping out a disease or sending someone to the moon? In contrast to physics many areas of education are new domains for scientific study there is much work left to do.

My points on this would be one – there is an idealised view of science that becomes the metaphor. Secondly it’s the wrong sciences that end up in the metaphor. If it is like science I don’t think it is most like physics. What you get is the rise of the psychologists. Into the breach step the people who are most happy to raise their hand and say ‘we consider ourselves scientists.’

So what is wrong with the medical analogy? Three things are wrong with it. The first one is it’s an idealised view of medicine; people that are not doctors think that medicine is a lot more rational and effective than it actually is so you get medicine envy. When you look doctors studying doctors your sociologists in medicine you find that it’s not as wonderful as it all looks [for example] in terms of percentages of prescriptions that are wrong; some people say 70%.

A second confusion is you get a sloppy metaphor thinking – a common thing would be the idea that until the American Medical Association was formed around the turn of the twentieth century American medicine was in shambles, everyone was trained differently, everything could be called medicine. Then this ‘wonderful thing’ – the standardisation of training and then the field moved ahead and made tremendous progress. So this is what School of Ed need to do – we need a national standard, we need common training. Medical medicine is so far ahead of education because education never went through this period. What is wrong with the metaphor? For one thing there is a confusion that doctors are like teachers are like medical researchers. Medical research in fact is not at all standardised in the US as well as anywhere else. Medical research is so like educational research; it is heterogeneous, there is no systematic training for medical research.

The other thing that is wrong with the medical analogy – the medical analogy is used to push random assignments or clinical field trials; this idea that we need to make research in education scientific.

The second half of the talk is one I added after I realised I had a discussant who is interested in comparative research. It is more to do with my experiences on the other Board; the Board of Comparative and International Research. We advised the government on participation and things like TIMSS. We are in an era that calls for more and more scientific research in education and at the same time ironically research in the US is becoming more parochial and provincial. The Board of Comparative and International Research – all the funding was cut just as the committee on scientific research was being formed. Why at this time is comparative research out? It is a domestic science. Comparative research is used in the public sector in league tables; where does the US stand in the table. What’s wrong with the league table approach? Well you know what’s wrong with it – for one it leads to what I call victors justice. If a country is high in education then whatever it is doing in education must be great. So you get this confused thinking – a feeling that we have to catch up, two it leads to a faulty correlational thinking. If a country is high in scores and they teach in a way that is different to the way we teach, then the way they are teaching must be making them higher in their scores. But it could be that it is not the top five scores that have the best education, it could be that it’s the nineteenth country. Maybe Bolivia considering how poor it is actually has the best teachers in the

world and maybe the reasons the scores aren't the very best because they are dealing with other structural problems. The related problem to this is as an anthropologist my frustration was always the decontextualisation effect of factors. Let me give you one clear example that we struggled with. On these tests like TIMS, they don't just test to see how much maths you know, they also find out other things, like achievement motivation. There are questions like 'do you believe if you study hard enough it will make a difference?' So what they find is that Japan, to take one country where I've done maths scores is that Japan is high on maths scores and Japan is high on achievement motivation and Japan is high on some other things as well. They do a lot of lesson study; teachers participate in study groups with other teachers where they talk about lessons and they model them for each other. They also do a lot of patterns of pre-algebra with young children. They also have large class sizes. How would you know which of those factors is associated with achievement? They take their shoes off when they enter the room. The children help sweep the halls. They have class monitors lead the class. But where do you start and stop with this? The problem with correlational thinking – people say it is not causal it is correlational. Here is the recommendation I would give. Before you think that correlational might have a causal power you should see whether this factor is explanatory within the culture. The quick example of this, let's say we think that achievement motivation is the big factor in Japan, not the quality of teaching. Did the Japanese kids with the high achievement motivation scores end up with the highest achievement? If it doesn't work within the culture why take across culture. So that's one problem in general with context and that is where I want to put the rest of my emphasis.

Clifford Geertz an anthropologist has this term the need for 'thick description' (but it strikes me in England thick description doesn't sound terribly positive). Anthropologists believe you can't isolate practice; you have to see it in all of its cultural complexity. Latour argues that there are two kinds of knowledge; contextual and decontextual. A contextual knowledge would be the Hawaiian people's notion of botany or religion. When Christianity came, it is a decontextualised religion; God is everywhere for everybody. Latour argues decontextualised knowledge can compete successfully with contextualised because the contextual ones can't and don't want to 'travel'. Hawaiian religion in the long run couldn't beat Christianity. Hawaiian botany couldn't compete with Manahan botany which has no context – it can take anything

and be classified. It is an arbitrary system with no particular context. So my concern in education is those models in other countries which can be borrowed most easily are those which are either already decontextual, which is what the US is trying to develop – teacher proof curricula, context proof curricular. Or they are actually very highly contextualised which work in their context and you make them work elsewhere by stripping from them their contextual features.

The other problem with cross cultural research is it implies a linear model, go to the country find ‘what works’ and then take them to scale. Problem is first it decontextualises and then it is too linear a model. The researchers identify the models, organised by key features and then disseminate to scale. So it is linear and top down. The problem with international research you will never be able to take something from another country to your country and have it be useful. Instead what I suggest is a less linear model of using cross cultural examples. For me the power of cross cultural examples is they lead to questioning taken for granted assumptions.

Secondly cross cultural research can expand the repertoire of the possible. It gives us an increased menu; it doesn’t tell us what to order but gives us increased possibilities.

Thirdly it works to rehabilitate the disparaged. I think it is very unusual that we take an idea from one country, bring it into our country and have it work because it has nothing to build on, no history, no familiarity. What’s much more effective is if you find things that you are already doing or once did or doing but are ashamed of doing in your own culture and realise that they work in another country and use the example of the other country and bring it back to your country. So rather than copy something Japanese do, I would say isn’t it interesting how they work with large classes. What would be the equivalent model in the US when you are stuck with a large class? So I think you have to find an equivalent in your own cultural repertoire and grow that rather than trying to grow something fully.

I’ve been mostly criticising, I’m going to try and give some positive thoughts and make some increasingly outrageous suggestions. The first big point I called ‘better education through science’. What would be the alternative to this idea of science as the answer? Fred Erickson points out what he calls the social engineering model. My

alternative I've already hinted at is to think of the role of education research as being dialectic that we should think of research as introducing new ideas that shift the debate. So rather than thinking let's come up with answers and implement them, let's come up with evidence that would shift the way we think about the problem.

The second problem I have been talking about is this hierarchical relationship. I think there is a problem with scientific research in education; there is an assumption of a hierarchical relationship of researcher to researched. Practitioners are confused. Let's come up with teacher proof curricular. There's a sense that the researchers identify problems, identify solutions and then find simple ways to make these understandable to practitioners who are not the audience for the scholarship, they are the audience for the training. So here is my alternative model. When your sink breaks we are all smart people, but do we fix our own plumbing? Not well, not often. Usually we call the plumber. When the plumber comes, do we feel inferior? Well in a sense but only in that context. We respect the plumber as a trades person. What if the schools were like us with our inner homes and called researchers when they have problems. If they don't like the researcher they can fire them and hire someone else. They don't see the researcher in an existential sense they just see them as having unique skills. I don't agree that teachers should be the researchers necessarily. I think schools controlling the terms of the research will turn that hierarchical model on its head.

The third point I've been making is to emphasise is this model of research based on science - you want reproducible findings. Another way of saying that is you want researcher proof research. There is an idea that anybody who reads your study can reproduce the study and get the same result. It's not as simple as that in science and even if it were, would it be true for education research? Margaret Reed had a famous essay where she explored the question can anybody be a cultural anthropologist, is a cultural anthropologist born or made? Another way of saying it is, is it more art or science? I would argue that in research we don't want all or most of the educational research to be of the type that anybody could do it following a list of procedures. A lot of the best educational research is based on the skill of the researcher. So educational research is subjective in the way that art is subjective; it's like painting, we wouldn't expect three painters to all paint the same picture. So there is a different paradigm

here. I think education should stand with one foot in the science side and the other in the arts side.

The fourth concern I've raised is utility based research or usable research. I think Schools of Education are under enormous pressure to produce usable research. Most scientists aren't under this pressure. Medicine is in a way. Schools of Ed are created as professional schools so they are practical from the get go unlike other disciplines. The School of Ed is a professional school, so there is an expectation to produce practitioners. Originally they didn't do research, but the old teacher training colleges became sites where professors would do research as well as training teachers. Their research always had a pressure to be practical. I think there is a conundrum here; the more you try to make it useful and practical, the less useful it may turn out to be. How do we reverse that? We really need to try and emphasise non-useful research in education to help educational research end up being more useful by being less linearly tied in a simplistic way to practice. There is always the possibility of some application, but we should keep the application away from our consciousness at all times I think education would be better off in its research. This is a problem because we are already located in Schools of Ed, so one answer is more research in education by researchers from outside the Schools of Ed. Which I like and don't like; it carries the assumption that School of Ed professors are crap so you have to get some proper researchers in there. People in education who are seen as literary specialists are seen as ideological, whereas scientists are seen as being above ideology. Education is a topic not a discipline.

Here is my most controversial point, what I call progressivism. Anthropologists are famous for believing in cultural relativism, cultural anthropologists would say it is foolish to say that one culture is better than another because you have to judge each culture by its own standards. Cultures are different, you need each pattern. I do believe in cultural relativism and think it is a useful epistemological position not just an ethical one. Epistemologically it is good to look at any culture without any preconceived assumptions about what's good or meaningful. If we believe in cultural anthropology, here is where I am stuck as an anthropologist. If one culture really can't be thought of as better than another because there is no external criteria by which to make this judgement, how can one era be better than another. Isn't the idea of

progress really just another version of cultural superiority across time? The idea of progress is so deep it is hard to shake it. I don't think there are any more grounds for saying that education is getting better and better than there is for saying one culture has better education than another.

As an anthropologist, we don't traditionally use the word education. What do anthropologists study in lieu of education historically? Socialisation? So every culture has a need to reproduce the culture to transmit cultural values. So when we developed cultural anthropology there was a branch that built on the tradition of studying socialisation, so we studied education. From an anthropological position we would say every culture is educated. Cultures do pass on their cultures and do it in various ways. So what does it mean to say cultures are educating better? Does it mean transmitting current beliefs to everybody more completely? It doesn't hold water, so progressivism has to go. Can we live without it? Can we teach people to be teachers without the feeling that things are getting better and better? I think we have to – I don't think there is objective evidence that things are getting better and better. If so, what would that mean? Instead of 20% of kids doing well enough to get into Cambridge and Oxford 100% could? So you would close every other school in the country and rename then Cambridge and Oxford? Where would this go – what's the goal? What would the greatest education in the world mean?

Last point, I wanted to mention about cultural relativism. I think the new issue in education that I'm dealing with in my own research is cultural variation within a nation. This gets really complicated; when I say I respect each country as having a cultural educational system, cultural systems exist within larger nations. I think the real struggle within the anthropology of education is to figure out how you can hear the voices and perspectives of people of various cultural backgrounds whose kids are going to the same schools. I'll stop on that note and look forward to comments.

Discussant: Birgit Pepin

I come from a different perspective in some ways. I think Sara as well as Joe have the anthropological perspective and my education was the other way round. I come from the pure sciences, turned anthropologist or ethnographer and maybe that will explain my interpretations of what Joe said. My plan is to comment on three aspects of Joe's talk.

1. Understanding of science;
2. Naïve views;
3. Parochialism / comparative views.

As I explained before I was trained as a physicist, I was a teacher in mathematics and an educational researcher using ethnography.

'Understanding of the Sciences'

I think it is interesting that as educational researchers we seem to spend much time proving that our research is rigorous and scientific, when in the pure sciences there is less neurosis. I will give you an example. If you do a PhD in physics, there is no research training usually. They don't train you necessarily on whether you want to call it quantitative or qualitative.

The other thing that interests me is the other side that actually from the sciences I find, maybe because they spend less time thinking how to be more rigorous, they seem to have more space to think. They think beyond methodological debate, quality of research. They take a different position; they take a wider view, sometimes across disciplines. Kappra's thinking on complexity sciences, complexity thinking, network thinking, systems thinking which I think we have not sufficiently used in our approach to quality of research.

'Naïve views'

The second comment is on the idealised, naïve views. I think a lot of it, Joe mentioned linearity. In many ways we always talk as if things happen linearly. When we think of teaching and learning does it happen linearly? Well, it doesn't, we know that it doesn't. but when we research it, we think it happens linearly. When we think in terms of quality or progress, we always have this linearity models. But life doesn't happen linearly. Relating to how we explore phenomena in the classroom for example, or quality in research, why do we spend so much time identifying practices

or characteristics of effective teachers rather than exploring relationships? And that is the thing about complexity thinking. For me we are not into phenomena any more, we are not into factors, but we are actually into relationships between factors or characteristics. To what extent can we talk about linear relationships when we study educational phenomena such as teaching or learning? It was interesting that Joe talked about *wissenschaft*, the German word for science. When you go to Germany, the educational sciences

when you translate them they have different words for different things. The translation for science is not science as we would perceive the pure science but *wissenschaft* means the 'production of knowledge'. So we are on a different road when we talk about science in Germany or France.

'Parochialism/comparative views'

The next part was the parochialism and comparative views. I regard myself as a comparativist. In the States [during an ARE conference] multiculturalism was regarded as comparative and international in some ways. It was not regarded as necessary to compare from country to country or culture to culture.

We have learned with league tables that it is not comparing but it is the underlying things that are happening. When we think about quality in research and quality in teaching you cannot look at the league tables but we have to look at how these results were produced.

Summary

In summary I think we have to shift away from a dyad to a more relationship /triad approach – that will help us be more 'scientific'. I think we need to think afresh and complexity thinking can help us there. I think we look too much at quick fixes; it just produces a million errors. The answer is there are no quick fixes.

Discussant 2: Sara Delamont

I'm going to say two things about Joe's ideas one is I'm not at all a good person to be acting as discussant because I agree with so many of them. And many of you who have been in Britain for a long time will know that many of the things he is saying are very similar to the arguments that Paul Atkinson and I have been advocating in our onrushing discourse about fighting familiarity and the real importance of educational research, trying to force one to stand back and stop and think. I'm going to take one good example. One lovely piece of anthropology was done in northern California more than twenty years ago now by Margaret Gibson about the reception in local high schools of a group of recent immigrants from the Punjab from Sikh families. She showed a wonderful incomprehension between cultures. The Punjabi Sikh families, if their children were good enough at academic studies to go to university expected them to do mountains of homework even in the last year of high school when all of the Californian locals regard as kickback time. The ones thought not clever enough to go to college, the Punjabi families expected them to do lots of homework in the hope that they might get better. They did not want their children to have paid jobs, they didn't want them to have driving licenses and cars, they did not want them having a typical American social life. That was very unpopular with the rest of the peer group, the other adolescents thought these teenagers were really peculiar, but so did the teachers because the teachers saw that example as a lack of maturity and a lack of being American. So a group of people who stayed in and did their homework were seen as deeply un-American, deeply deviant, deeply badly adjusted, psychologically disturbed, too dependent on their parents. Because normality was, you got out at school at three o'clock, you went to a paid job thirty hours a week to keep your car on the road, to buy fashionable clothes, to buy lots of CDs, drinking lots of beer, smoking a lot of marijuana of being a teenager. The parents of the Anglo-kids, the school teachers in the high school and the Anglo-adolescents in the high school all thought these kids were deviant because their families kept them in and made them do their homework. Now what tells us about American high school? That it takes an outsider looking at an ethnic group who happen to have a different set of values.

I think there is something very interesting about this scientific research discourse coming out of Washington at a time when (see 'The Republican War on Science' Chris Mooney) here we have a Bush government which has actually been undermining the scientific base of science. Let's not go into the sociological critiques

of science. If we just take science in its own terms, it's being undermined. If you are pro-abortion you are no longer sitting on any committees, you are getting thrown off things. You have a country that won't fund stem cell research because of a religious perspective and yet they are saying that educational research should be scientific. We've got something very weird going on here. We have political and religious intervention in science and yet somehow that is the model we are supposed to take across.

The simplistic reading, not reading between the lines, not the detailed contextual stuff we have seen about what the call of scientific educational research being read as an attack on all qualitative research, one of the things that has come in as a response to that is a special issue of a journal of Qualitative Studies in Education and the only non-Americans asked to contribute to that issue were Paul Atkinson. We have written a paper called 'In the Roiling Smoke' arguing one or two things about the fact that an attack on qualitative research in America does not mean that qualitative research in the rest of the world is in crisis. The reviewers got the referees' reports and they were all fascinating because they all said 'gosh I didn't realise it wasn't the same in the rest of the world.'

I think there were two points that were made very clearly in that paper. One was that it would be very dangerous to assume that because qualitative research was being attacked and not funded in the US at the moment, it doesn't look like that elsewhere. We have, for example, in Britain a social science research council which mandates that every doctoral student funded by it (and therefore of course most of the doctoral students in most of the disciplines) has training in qualitative research – even in disciplines where they don't want it and don't like it. The European Science Foundation has funded a massive programme across Europe in qualitative research to match their quant one.

The other point I will just make briefly, even if we look at America, we've got ideology and government tax dollars coming out of Washington, but America is a capitalist society; we might want to look at a different indicator. The publishers are robustly capitalist; they don't start new journals - they don't publish books if nobody is buying them. What is the best selling major book - well it's obviously Jenden and

Linkin - million copies of the first edition, onto its third edition in a decade. Where are the publishers putting their efforts? They are starting new qual journals. Where are the methods books that are selling like hot cakes off publishers lists? They are qual. I think it's quite important not just to look at the rhetoric of what's coming out of Washington, although I think it's very important and very useful today to have an interestingly, literature-ly textual reading of that, but I think we want to look at the market. Where are the publishers putting their oomph? The people running Taylor and Francis are not notorious for being stupid capitalists. What have they just started? A new journal called 'Ethnography in Education'. Nobody is launching a new journal for quant.

The main message of mine and Paul Atkinson's paper 'In the Roiling Smoke' is, as and when there is a political attack, the best response is to put your head down and do really good work, because the political attacks come and go, politicians lose interest, they move on, the searchlight moves on to some other moral panic. The central motif to this paper is, if we look at the discourse about social research in 1958, it wasn't particularly in favour of thick description, but the book that was done in that period, that has outlasted everyone else was 'Boys in White'.

Discussion

Martyn Hammersley

It's something I want to ask Joe. It seems to me, looking at it very crudely, that you can see two models of education in research. so you have an instrumental model and your alternative is a dialectic model and that applies to teaching as well as research. I wonder if you can say a bit more about that because I'm not sure how easy it would be to argue for that in this current climate.

Joe Tobin

I think this idea of this instrumental model is bigger than Washington and is not primarily a Republican thing, it's a national discourse and it cuts across education. Some people connect it with neo-liberalism. My speculation would be that this

instrumental notion of research, qualitative work / quantitative is a kind of discourse of our times. I think within their own terms there's an inconsistency, because if they believe in the instrumental model that should be evidence based but I don't think there is any evidence that an instrumental model works. I would say to them it seems to me that you are the ones that want to do a wild-do experiment with no evidence. You're suggesting that we turn over our educational planning to this linear instrumental model but there are all these countries that are seemingly doing better than us and no of them seem to be guided by science. It's not like the Japanese system is scientifically based. Their educational research structure is much smaller; they don't have all of this. This instrumental approach is interesting but I would argue an out-of-control experiment without controls. The dialectic approach isn't just something I believe in, I just think it's how it works. I don't think any country can avoid this dialectic approach because the instrumental one doesn't work, you cannot make practitioners do it.

John Furlong

You mentioned a discourse of literary based approaches to educational research and I'm interested in how they work. You talked about the hierarchical relationship in the scientific approach but I'm fascinated by how other approaches position themselves as forms of knowledge in relation to different sorts of uses and wondered if you can elaborate? How does knowledge position people differently?

Joe Tobin

One way I thought about going with this is to explore within these different models to look at different notions of what is knowledge, what is evidence, what is argument but also the relationship between

the researcher to the researched. I think working within a cultural anthropology approach, it's not only quantitative / qualitative and I think that's the most interesting one. I think there is something fundamentally incommensurate in these approaches.

There is a way to put quantitative and qualitative together quite easily, I think it's more problematic what you are raising but I can't really answer it yet. Fundamental differences in what constitutes evidence.

David ?

I just want to check an impression that I have got now that I may have got wrong. You were separating out plumbers from householders, do I infer from that, that you see practice and research as very different activities that you would prefer to see separate?

Joe Tobin

I think that's a good criticism. I guess my intuitive reaction to that would be a lot of my colleagues see the solution as what they call action research or teacher research. I guess I was being purposefully provocative because in my experience I've looked in schools for a long time and I'm not as optimistic about teacher research as most of my colleagues. So I was introducing the notion of rather than teacher as researcher teacher as the one who commissions and controls the use of research. There will be some of us who do both.

Karl Wall

How do we study relationships in a way that answers some of the criteria needs but at the same time take account of the multiplicity of factors?

Joe Tobin

I use an approach I call multi-vocal video-cued ethnography. Basically I make a video of a pre-school class and show it to lots of people; the teachers, the parents, the kids. So you start having lots of stakeholders and that is one way of getting at what I think you are talking about – this notion of multiplicity. I think one thing research can try and do is to reproduce some of the complexity of these relationships rather than reducing them by isolating voices and factors. The problem with research as you say

is that it is so interrelated, so complex already that in research inevitably we do something artificial, we slow it down. I think we should not be afraid of not only multiple voices but multiple conclusions.

Mary James

I wonder if you feel there is any real substance to the 'moral panic' or if it's just fleeting? Progress....

Joe Tobin

The question of the substance of the moral panic...my colleagues and I who are on the other side who don't believe that schools are failing (this is David Berliner's Manufactured Crisis argument). We have our own version of the panic, we are panicky about education, I appreciate Sara's optimism to hunker down and let it pass. The real panic is as Gene Glass puts it the country is no longer willing to invest in the education of the poor, in education for all. So he says that the real problem isn't that schools are failing it is societies who have lost its willingness to give comprehensive education and that the people who have money want to withdraw it and privatise it. So there are all kinds of panics here. I don't mean to say don't worry about anything. I don't think what I'm saying is pessimistic to not believe in progress. Do we think that every generation's families are happier and happier and better and better? That parents are better and better? That cooking is better and better? I think there are a lot of things we assume don't get better and better but that doesn't mean that it's bad. I think progress is pessimistic. I think even better than the notion of progress is a satisfaction with the life we have and one of the things I learned from my training in cultural anthropology is there is an appreciation of cultures as the way they are. Don't wish they could be different. If this is true, then why isn't it true for appreciating the present? On the other hand you are right, there is a paradox as a participant in the culture, it is important that I be engaged in making life as good as I can make it. I think it's not the product but the process of improvement that's a good one. I think we can hold on to both those ideas at once. This idea that we are behind where we should be leads to very destructive effects on education. If you believe in progress you have a train schedule situation, then it's 'oh my gosh' we should be ten years further along.

Medicine is a field that does believe in progress, yet when I go to the doctor I feel like I get worse treatment than I did the year before. So it's not that things don't change, but to call that change progress takes a bigger perspective. It's great to try and change but there is no guarantee that changes will be for the better. To go to Sara's point it is encouraging that educational textbooks sell so well but I think it will be much less positive to give a market approach to textbooks for children. Because while researchers are reading one kind of books, the books selling to the State of California or the books the State of Texas will buy have to have certain approaches. I fear a future where certain companies will produce textbooks which are equivalent to drug companies making drugs and certain people will do clinical trials where certain ones will be chosen and then if you don't use those you can be sued like doctors can be sued.
