

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AS POLITICAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing linear model for translating educational research into practical policy is founded upon an arbitrary separation of means from ends and an untenable epistemology in which knowledge is divorced from human interests. This paper argues from a critical theory perspective that ideological domination is often enhanced by research which is depoliticised either through the scientism of the positivist tradition, or through the relativism of the interpretive tradition. It is argued that if educational research is to perform an educative role in the enlightenment and emancipation of practitioners, it must be founded upon a constructivist epistemology which is empirical, interpretive and critical.

If educational researchers are to become critically conscious of political issues relating to knowledge, power and action, they must first clear up some common misapprehensions concerning the place of theory in social life. Foremost among these misapprehensions is the belief that social theories are discovered in a context that is quite separate from their context of application. It is this belief, moreover, that allows differential role expectations to become attached to those who participate in various phases of the policy-formation process. Thus it is held that the social scientist's concern is with the production and validation of knowledge, whereas the administrator's concern is to translate that knowledge into political action.

This gives rise to a linear construction of the research enterprise in which there is a sequential and functional separation of conception from execution, theory from practice. It is assumed, in other words, that the task of social scientists is to produce a body of knowledge encompassing various explanatory theories and policy alternatives which administrators may then either ignore or take up and convert into social action. Thus the researcher is taken to be the technical handmaiden of the administrator, giving rise to what Fay (1975) calls "the technological view of politics". Within such a view, it is believed that research can and should be politically neutral.

The central claim of this paper, however, is that educational research, as a form of human work or cultural action, contains within it the dual potentialities for both emancipation and oppression. These potentialities are denied within the neutral, linear model of research because the problematic of theory and practice is construed in dualistic terms which separates epistemology from history. But such a separation is untenable. Following Habermas (1971), it is argued that knowledge cannot be divorced from the human interests which guide both its pursuit and its application. We cannot grasp what this means, however, if we reduce epistemology to a logic of discovery. What it requires is a recognition that knowledge is always partly constituted by the conditions of human social existence under which it is produced. Thus, as a form of praxis, the doing of educational research always occurs at a particular conjuncture of material, cultural and political circumstances. It follows, therefore, that it cannot be neutral in regard to those circumstances.

The claim that educational research should be construed as political practice can be derived from the Habermasian thesis of *knowledge-constitutive interests*. In this thesis, first advanced in his inaugural lecture of 1965 (See Appendix to *Knowledge and Human Interests*) Habermas seeks to establish a philosophical anthropology on the basis of distinctive universal features of human social life. He identifies three such features or dimensions of social existence as being work, interaction and power. Work refers to the ways in which human beings control and manipulate their environment in order to survive and preserve themselves. Interaction, or communicative action refers to the ways in which human social life comes to be shared through consensual norms and mutual understanding. Power refers to the ways in which human agents enter into relations of domination and subordination so that social life itself imposes constraints upon individual action. These conditions provide the experiential and historical ground for three separate, though inter-related, cognitive interests: the technical, practical, and

emancipatory. Each of these cognitive interests, moreover, has become central to different traditions of scientific enquiry and different spheres of social life. Thus, work corresponds to the technical interest which guides the empirical-analytic sciences and is central to the economic sphere of production; interaction corresponds to the practical interest which guides the historical-hermeneutic disciplines and is central to the cultural sphere of social life; power corresponds to the emancipatory interest which guides the critically oriented sciences and is central to the political sphere. Habermas argues that while these three cognitive interests are grounded in different aspects of social life, they are nevertheless inter-related in specific and important ways. Each gives rise to a form of enquiry which has its distinctive mode of reasoning but none on its own can provide the self-understanding and enlightenment which are necessary conditions for emancipatory action. Thus it is the reflective features of critical theories that enable them to embrace, yet go beyond, both technical/instrumental and practical/hermeneutic forms of rationality. It is also this feature that makes possible the critique of ideology and the removal of constraining or dominating forms of self-deception or socially constructed illusion (Schroyer, 1973; Bernstein, 1976; McCarthy, 1978).

This exceedingly brief outline of Habermasian epistemology suggests a basic framework within which the political implications of research practice can be examined. It can be recognized immediately that the two emergent traditions of social science which have been called positivist and interpretivist respectively are guided by the first two of the cognitive interests identified by Habermas: the technical and the practical. Let us now examine some of the political implications of each of these research traditions before considering the possibility of a more critically oriented form of research capable of being guided by an emancipatory political interest.

Educational Research and the Technical Interest

Without doubt, the orthodox approach to educational research has been modelled on the empirical/analytical sciences (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Behind this approach lies an assumption that the scientific method of systematic observation, inductive generalisation, prediction and control, has made it possible to describe and explain the nature of the real world as it exists independently of the subjective thoughts, desires or interests of the observer. This assumption is strongest in the theory of scientific knowledge that is now referred to as *positivism*. The fundamental tenet of this theory is the principle of verifiability which is that the truth of any proposition rests on its correspondence to what exists in the outside world. Truth is correspondence with the facts as verified by experience or observation. Thus, all valid (and certain) knowledge claims are contained within the boundaries of science which, by definition, is the systematic study of observable phenomena capable of explanation by general laws.

The main features of the positivistic view of scientific knowledge can be summarised as follows:

1. Direct observation of perceived things and processes provides the ultimate link between scientific knowledge of the world and the world itself.
2. The reality of the world of which we have knowledge is independent of the observer.
3. There are observational terms which are themselves independent of the observer.
4. The actual practice of science - involving the process of justification, the testing and validation of theories and hypotheses - is a *rational process*.
5. Scientific knowledge is cumulative and progressive.

Within the social sciences, positivism has produced an emphasis upon experimental methods involving large samples, control groups, measurement and quantification. Consequently, the main aim of positivistic policy research is to make available to administrators an information base upon which to decide the 'best means' of achieving certain pre-determined goals. Hence

policy research and social theory are relegated to a totally scientific or instrumental function, described by Fay in the following terms:

A policy science is supposed to be a device for organizing political thought in a rational way, merely a method for clarifying empirical relationships among alternative actions and for sorting out their likely consequences, and a procedure for making 'correct' decisions; as such, it is supposed to be employable by anyone, regardless of his political views, for any end whatsoever, and its results are supposed to be impartial in the sense of not being dependent upon the particular evaluations of the policy scientist for their truth. (Fay, 1975, p. 57)

Such a position, when examined closely, is seen to be founded upon two dichotomies, neither of which holds up under critical scrutiny. The first is a dichotomy between 'facts' and 'values', and the second is a dichotomy between 'means' and 'ends'. Thus it is assumed that administrators can derive their values from one source and ascertain the facts of the situation from another completely independent source, in particular the behavioural or policy scientist. This implies that educational aims or purposes are politically determined and institutionally located in one context while, in another context, the researcher can be considered competent only to recommend the most economical/effective/functional procedures which are instrumental to attaining those already posited goals. Hence we have decisions concerning means identified with the factual side of the fact-value dichotomy and decisions concerning ends identified with the value side. But it is an identification which cannot be sustained logically because it overlooks completely the assumed values in terms of which the 'best' means are to be ascertained. This produces a contradiction, as Fay points out, implicit in the claim that social science can be value-free.

As a result, debates between policy scientists about the most efficient means would still be inherently 'political' in the sense that the choice of standards of what is to count as evidence and proof of some social policy being the 'best' (in this case, the meaning of the criterion of efficiency) would necessarily reflect the values of the disputants. (Fay, 1975, p. 51)

The significance of this dilemma for the administrator is profound. For not only are there institutional values to be articulated and defended through administrative practice, but there are also values that are inherent within the very process of policy formation itself. On the other hand, for the researcher, the significance is equally clear. Even if we can establish a logical distinction between propositions of the kind 'X is the case' and propositions of the kind 'X ought to be the case', we cannot make this distinction in practice without concealing the value assumptions that are always inherent in the methods we use to ascertain the technical facts themselves. For, as Habermas (1971) points out, when the 'facts' of a situation are properly construed they can never be fully isolated from the human interests and values on the basis of which they are inevitably selected and assembled.

So it is that a positivist epistemology has provided the framework in which science and technology have become the most productive forces in advanced industrial societies and most areas of human life, including schooling, have come to be dominated by what Habermas (1970) has called a 'technological consciousness' which provides a background ideology with pervasive legitimating power.

Educational Research and the Practical Interest

While it is clear from any review of educational research over the past fifty years that the technological view has been dominant, there have been growing numbers of researchers in recent years turning to the historical/hermeneutic disciplines for appropriate models of enquiry. This movement has come from an increasing recognition that educational problems are practical problems which are moral rather than technical in nature. They are unique to the contexts required for their solution. Thus, schools and classrooms have been considered as unique settings for ethnographic study (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968; Smith & Keith, 1971) evaluation research has become responsive (Stake, 1975) and illuminative (Hamilton, et.al., 1977) while

child development research has been influenced by the clinical procedures of Piaget and his many followers. Behind all of this research has been an implicit rejection of the positivist dichotomy between observation and interpretation.

The interpretive tradition has remained firmly committed to the epistemological premises that all perception is theory-dependent and that all social action can be understood only in relation to the cultural context in which it occurs and with reference to the human intentions which imbue it with meaning. Berger and Luckman (1966) attempted to explain how shared meanings arise in social life, so that our particular way of viewing the world is constrained for us by the basic symbolic presentations made available to us by the social groups to which we belong. Symbols can represent both the material or 'seeable' cultural objects, and the manifest 'nonseeable' culture comprising beliefs, conventions, norms, as well as subtle nuances of attitude and gesture. Shared knowledge of a particular social reality is only possible within the context of a symbol system, a shared public language which is both derived from and built upon the meanings that adhere to everyday situations. Each person constructs a personal subjective reality from within the range of possibilities made available by the social group.

What this tells us is not only that research is always embedded in a social context, but that it is always accompanied by a dimension of personal knowledge that comes from participation in a culture. Such knowledge is of a non-propositional kind; for culture provides the basic fabric upon which experience is drawn and acquires meaning but it is not understood as a set of shared propositions. Hence the culture of an epistemic community would comprise not only the communicable universalised propositions and information content in which it trades, but also symbolic forms (such as non-verbal gestures, ceremonies and rituals), conventions and rules governing the actions of individuals, and ideological patterns of belief, value and commitment. This personal dimension of knowledge begins with perception - it shapes and determines the way we view the world. For what we see is always interpreted within the context or framework of knowledge that we already possess (Hanson, 1958).

To illustrate the sense in which seeing is a 'theory-laden' undertaking, we might compare a western scientist looking at the sun with a member of a tribe that worships the sun as a god. For the tribesman, the sun would have a central significance within a whole interlocking cultural network of religious rituals, moral beliefs, social practices, artistic traditions, myths and folklore. For the western scientist, it would be nothing but a mass of burning gas. Because 'the sun' does not have the same meaning for each of these people, because they interpret the same experience of 'looking at the sun' within entirely different conceptual frameworks, they *see it as* something entirely different from each other.

Because different disciplines embody different sets of observational categories, the members of these epistemic communities may view the world through very different spectacles. What the behavioural psychologist *observes* in a classroom of children may be very different from what a neo-marxist sociologist would *observe*. They would be looking at the same reality but seeing it as something entirely different. Thus, it is necessary for people engaged in interdisciplinary work to understand each others' observational categories (Petrie, 1976).

This means that all seeing, all perceiving, involves forming hypotheses and using categories. Indeed, language itself functions as a classificatory system for that which is perceived. If we perceive an experience in terms of religious concepts we will focus on different aspects from those we would focus on if we took a scientific view, and these would be different again from those of an aesthetic view. What we *select* from our experience is a direct consequence of the observational categories relevant to our interests.

Now, the implications of this tacit dimension of knowledge for educational research are very far-reaching indeed. For much of what the researcher is seeking to understand and portray cannot be expressed in discursive or propositional terms. He or she must somehow deal with the fact that "we can know more than we can tell" - that there is always what Polanyi (1966) has called a *tacit dimension* to practical knowledge. Included within this tacit dimension are non-scientific commitments which are related more closely to social practice than to theoretical enquiry. It is upon these commitments, moreover, that ideology is grounded. In this sense, ideology is 'profoundly *unconscious*'. In Althusser's (1969, p. 236) words, "it is above all as *structures*" that ideological representations are "perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects (which act functionally on men via a process that escapes them)".

Here we can begin to discern the most serious limitation of interpretive social science, namely its inclination towards conceptual and cultural relativism. From this position, all claims to knowledge are held to be equally true because there can be no criteria external to those claims by which their truth or falsity could be ascertained. Thus, what is true is true only for the individual or group who makes a particular claim and the knowledge that each individual has, or each group shares, is completely relative to the practical interests of that individual or group. The truth of knowledge-claims is held to be equivalent to their legitimation by groups sharing common interests. Consequently, there is no way of recognising ideological distortions within the discourse of those groups. It follows from a relativist account, that there can be no criteria outside existing power relationships for justifying any particular political practices. It is not surprising, therefore, that interpretivist social science tends to support the dominant ideology and sustain the hierarchy of social relations.

Educational Research and the Emancipatory Interest

The notion of educational research as emancipatory political practice arises from a critique of both positivist and relativist epistemologies (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). Thus a critical form of educational research will be one which rejects positivist assumptions about 'objective' categories of social experience without lessening the conviction that all social science should be empirically grounded. It will seek also to develop interpretive contextual categories, recognising that many of the consequential actions people perform are influenced by social conditions and constrained by structures over which they may have very little control. Most importantly, it will be 'built on the explicit recognition that social theory is interconnected with social practice, such that what is to count as truth is partially determined by the specific ways in which scientific theory is supposed to relate to practical action' (Fay, 1975, p. 94).

This kind of critical approach to educational research could be derived from some of the central notions contained in the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, especially his constructivist epistemology for 'cultural action'. Freire argues that human beings constitute their own reality through cultural action which may be directed towards liberation or oppression. Only the former, however, is man's true ontological and historical vocation, while the latter is a distortion of this vocation (Freire, 1972, p. 20).

The distortion of man's ontological vocation is produced by a form of cultural action which absorbs those within it and functions to submerge their consciousness. This produces a domination which can be overcome only by cultural struggle, in which education plays a crucial role. Oppressive education treats men and women as adaptable, manageable beings. In contrast, liberating education is problem-posing and results in acts of cognition rather than transferrals of information. It is a form of cultural action which is dialogical and capable of transforming human consciousness from a condition of alienation to a condition of 'freedom'. Such 'freedom' results from a process of 'conscientization' which enables people to become fully human and to possess 'critical consciousness'. This can be achieved only by taking knowledge beyond the level of mere opinion or belief (*doxa*) to the level of *historical commitment*. But 'conscientization' is more than just the realisation of oppression, it must also be "a permanent critical approach to reality in order to discover it and discover the myths that deceive us and help to maintain the oppressing dehumanizing structures" (Freire, 1976, p. 225).

In similar vein to Habermas, Freire argues that critical awareness is never sufficient in itself because it achieves only enlightenment or liberation of the mind. Such awareness must combine with action (*praxis*) to achieve real social change. In this notion of *praxis* moreover, both reflection and action are unified so that neither can be sacrificed without rendering true human dialogue impossible. Reflection without action is verbalism; action without reflection is activism (Freire, 1972, p. 60). For Habermas, emancipatory praxis can only be achieved under conditions in which self-understanding is the result of undistorted discourse.

There are strong similarities here between Habermas' notion of undistorted discourse, Freire's notion of praxis embodied in dialogue and Gramsci's reconstruction of the relationship between philosophy and common sense (Codd, 1982). Each provides a dialectical (or critical) dimension to the relationship between thought and action which allows us to view the

educational research/practice dichotomy in a new light. This view is made explicit by Freire in one of his letters to Guinea-Bissau, but the choice of words might just as well have been Gramsci's, when he writes that

.... the theory of knowledge that serves a revolutionary objective and is put into practice in education is based upon the claim that knowledge is always a process, and results from the conscious action (practice) of human beings on the objective reality which, in its turn, conditions them. Thus a dynamic and contradictory unity is established between objective reality and the persons acting on it. All reality is dynamic and contradictory in the same way. (Freire, 1978, p. 90)

Thus, educational enquiry cannot be a neutral information collecting process, but it must always be a social practice in which dimensions of productive work, communicative action and moral commitment are all dynamically inter-related. The significance of this constructivist epistemology for both the social scientist and the administrator is indeed profound. For not only are there political values to be articulated and legitimated through the research process, but all research is itself a form of commitment to particular moral values (Fay, 1975, p. 52).

From this point of view, educational research, like any other form of social action, can have either liberating or oppressive effects in relation to the context in which it occurs. Thus, depending on the social context, the researcher will focus on some aspects of a situation to the exclusion of others, direct his/her decisions towards some purposes rather than others, consider some people's interests rather than others. In this sense, educational research can be an inherently political activity in which the central aim is one of action rather than understanding - action moreover which opposes ideological forces rather than sustaining them (Freeman & Jones, 1980).

This concept of 'critical social science' is derived from the philosophical writings of the Frankfurt School (Held, 1979) and it does not pre-suppose any particular theory of social structure or any particular conception of human nature, except the important belief that human beings are agents and that their behaviour is properly described by action concepts. In these terms, a critical theory "is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation" (Geuss, 1981, p. 2). In keeping with Freire's notion of conscientization, a critical theory will have an educative role. Its methods will be both philosophical and empirical, seeking to produce not quasi-causal explanations of social conditions, but knowledge that will "enlighten the social actors so that, coming to see themselves and their social situation in a new way, they themselves can decide to alter the conditions which they find repressive" (Fay, 1975, p. 103).

Conclusion

Much of the recent philosophical debate in educational research has been concerned with contrasting the epistemological assumptions behind the so-called quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Smith, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Eisner, 1983). It has been concerned with examining the logic of educational enquiry rather than the context of educational research practice. By focussing attention on the latter of these concerns, the present paper has attempted to outline an argument suggesting that educational research might be reconstrued as a form of deliberative political action which is derived from a combination of empirical and interpretive modes of enquiry.

What this means in terms of the foregoing discussion is that if educational enquiry is to lead to the emancipation of practice, it must rest upon a theory of knowledge that avoids the false certitude of positivism on the one hand and the untenable doctrines of relativism on the other. Such a constructivist theory of knowledge will recognise the existence of a real world, it will recognise the possibility of distinguishing true from false (distorted or ideological) accounts of social reality, and it will recognise the personal or tacit dimensions of knowledge, the intentionality of human action and the extent to which social and cultural contexts impose limits upon the conception of what is possible.

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