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ABSTRACT

The growing interest in the anthropological approach to educational research raises some issues about the nature of educational anthropology and traditional educational research. The nature of these two methods of inquiry is different in that anthropology demands that the researcher use the field as the bases for theoretical, methodological, and even operational development. In traditional educational research, the researcher begins with an existing theory; analysis of data follows a pattern that was part of the original design based on the already existing theory. Educational administration is an applied profession. It has a unique field of social action that can be identified and subjected to observation and analysis. The use of field research techniques, which characterize the anthropological approach, is particularly important as a means of first establishing and then validating a theory of educational administration practice. (Author/DS)

Field Research and Educational Administration

by
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Over the last decade there has been a steadily increasing interest among educators in research paradigms from the social sciences. To a considerable extent, this interest rose out of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which pushed education, and consequently the research which informs it, into a concern with socio-cultural as well as individual differences. To some extent it is a result of dissatisfaction among the clients of educational research who tend to see traditional educational research paradigms as abstractions from the reality of the everyday life of schools.

This interest also results, however, from the growing sophistication of educational researchers themselves as they begin to explore methodologies other than those which developed during education's long and often incestuous relationship with psychology. Within the field of evaluation, for example, there has been a marked shift from a fixed focus on the attempt to assess what individuals learn to a new and still indistinct focus on how and what the program teaches. Early evaluation designs relied heavily on pre- and post-testing of students for evaluative data. The design was as rational as it was simplistic: if the goal of the program was to familiarize students with a specific skill or body of information then the best means of determining the success or failure of the program was to test the students to see if they had or had not acquired the skill or the information. That may tell you something about the student but it says nothing about the teacher or the program.

Then, in the 1960s, educational consumerism became a prominent force and the older evaluation designs no longer sufficed. Billions of dollars poured into education programs for the inner city. One result was that a clamorous clientele in the schools, in the community and in the Congress began asking questions about the social, economic and even the political consequences of the new programs. Ghetto parents alleged that standard tests were culturally biased: government sponsors of programs developed a strong interest in how these billions were being spent.

One of the results of this new set of concerns has been the growing interest in what has frequently been called "the anthropological approach" in educational research. While research in educational administration has always been more closely attuned to the social sciences than most other areas of educational research because of our concern with management in educational organizations, there is a newly developing interest in anthropology here as well. My concern is that the demands which are likely to be placed on the relatively recent sub-discipline of education anthropology by educators are major

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ones and in many cases include expectations of problem solution and educational utility which are unrealistic, given the current level of development of anthropological involvement in educational research. The relative recency of an organized interest in education by anthropologists has not allowed sufficient time for systematic development of theory and methods among the growing numbers of anthropologists whose primary field of research interest is in the educational system.

But equally important is the problem presented by the differences in research style which characterize the quantitative research modes which have been the bases of most educational research and the somewhat different climate which surrounds the qualitative style of research in anthropology.

In large measure, this results from the nature of anthropological inquiry itself which is holistic, situational, descriptive, and generally designed to result in a statement of system characteristics rather than of the inevitable association of the elements within the system. Eventually we produce a typology of systems, and any generalizations which can inform practice are dependent upon the analyst's or practitioner's ability to identify his operational system with one of the model system types.

Educational administrators have been socialized in schools of education to a tradition of educational research which was narrowly deductive and purported to present inter-relationships among elements of a system conceptually independent of any given situation. As a result, they have come to expect statements of law-like regularities from research. Such statements do not emerge from ethnographic field studies, and techniques and standards of application and operational utility for qualitative data are only slowly beginning to develop. Thus it is not just a question of introducing anthropological methods or perspectives into educational research, it is also necessary to prepare educational administration students as well as educational researchers to understand that anthropological field research, its interpretation and validation operate within a different but equally reliable climate. I would like to focus on this point as well as on the potential uses of field methods in the study of educational administration in this brief paper.

First, let me indicate that I do not use the term "the anthropological approach" to describe my own research interests in the study of educational administration. My interest has always been in the application of research methods and analytic schemes which can lead to the development of a theory of practice in educational administration which grows out of an understanding and inspection of the educational system itself. Thus, while field work techniques are used broadly in anthropology (as well as in sociology), in both cases they are related to a conceptual framework that grows out of a body of theory which may or may not have some validity and power in the practical business of administering educational organizations. It is in the source of theory-building concepts and in the question of how theory should be generated that I see field research as differing from other modes of social research.

All research technologies share certain steps which are indispensible to inquiry in empirical science:

(1) the possession of some prior picture or conceptual scheme of the world under study;
(2) the asking of questions of the empirical world and the conversion of the question into researchable problems;
(3) the determination of the data to be sought to supply answers to those questions and the means to be employed in getting those data;
(4) the systematic search for the relations between the data;
(5) a system of interpretation of the findings;
(6) the use of concepts to organize group data and establish patterns of relationships and to provide summations of the interpretation of the findings.

In the conventional logico-deductive scheme which organizes most quantitative research designs, the researcher characteristically begins with an existing theory which (s)he uses to set up an articulated problem in advance of the inquiry. The next step is to convert the problem into dependent and independent variables. Having done this (s)he then proceeds to develop strategies and instruments, attempting to control and uncover relationships between (and among) the naturally occurring variables through the design. Analytic processes are generally performed after the data are in and usually follow a pattern which was part of the original design. Once the research steps are complete, the researcher then returns to the theory to interpret the results and modifies that theory as a result of his/her new findings.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with this approach so long as the researcher is already aware of the important variables in the problem (s)he is studying. But in applied professional fields such as educational administration, there is some question as to whether the prior picture of the world from which we derive questions, frame hypotheses and identify variables is, in fact, representative of the empirical world of practice we are proposing to improve through research.

Many of the concepts and much of the theory we have adopted and adapted from the behavioral and social disciplines was first developed in the study of business or government organizations which may or may not be analogues of schooling organizations. Similarly, the meaning and function of the concepts may or may not be the same in education. Those of us who propose the use of field methods in the study of educating organizations start from the assumption that the test of the empirical world begins in the empirical world itself since operational reality exists there. Thus, field research has as its preferred style immersion in the field under study but always with a healthy and central respect for theory and methods. In field research, the emphasis, however, is on allowing the design of the research to remain somewhat flexible and subject to change throughout the work. This is principally due to an approach which sees the substance of the field as emerging rather than fixed and finite. Field researchers tend to be methodological pragmatists, seeing each method's capabilities and limitations and learning through on-site experience which is used to obtain adequate answers to posed questions. It is this approach which gives the impression of a lack of rigor in field research.

In most research, the rigor is equated with fixed adherence to a rigid and pre-planned set of methods. But methods are, after all, merely instruments designed to identify and analyze the obdurate character of the empirical world and as such, their value exists only in their suitability in enabling this task to be done. Allowing skepticism or even new data to dictate changes in fixed procedures can be a *very* rigorous procedure, since it is done in an attempt to be absolutely faithful to the fixed reality.

There is also an important difference in the way in which most field researchers view the relationship between theory and research. While we agree that the development of theory should always involve a process of research validation, we tend to see theory as emerging from (rather than imposed on) the social field under study so that theory is sometimes developed in (not before) the process of research. As a result, concepts and categories often emerge during the course of field research rather than in the planning stages of the research. This does not mean that the field researcher goes into the field "as a camera" and records all that is to be seen. That is, of course, impossible. One always goes into the field looking for something and using prior knowledge and experience as a guide. The important point here, however, is the use of the **field** as the basis for theoretical, methodological and even operational development rather than dependence on abstracted models or existing theorectical positions.

My approach in a number of field studies in education and in criminal justice systems, for example, has been to look at the social field under study as a system of implicit rules learned and shared by the members of the social system and used by them in perceiving the objective world--that is selecting certain things as significant, ignoring other things, and making socially and culturally acceptable decisions about their own behavior. The fieldworker's role is to learn the code by examining the "native's" application of the rules. Imagine for example, someone wanting to learn to play the game of bridge. One way is to read or to ask someone about how to play. This works effectively if, in fact, there is a codified set of rules. Another way would be by watching people play bridge and learning the rules of how the game is played by watching it in action. Field research strategy is analogous to this latter approach.

The use of field research techniques in the study of educational administration is particularly important as a means of first establishing and continuously validating a theory of practice which informs both research (the development of knowledge) and practice (the use of knowledge). First, I see educational administration as an applied *professional* (or, as Herbert Simon once described it, an *artificial*) field, and so I insist that our research should have at least the clear potential for eventually making decisions by practitioners more informed. Secondly, I assume that education is a unique and complex field which cannot be studied as an analogue of business or industry or government; further, it has a unique field of social action which can be identified and subjected to observation and analysis with as much rigor as any other social field. The complexity of that field also means that no single research style, no solutions borrowed from other professional areas, nor any revolutionary new theories from the social or behavioral sciences are going to supply definitive answers to the complex problems of practice unless we as educational administrators understand our own social field.

From this flows the need to recognize that answers provided by educational research, regardless of the methodology, are usually going to be as complex and ambiguous as the questions raised by practitioners. In order to truly understand and reduce those questions to manageability, it is necessary that we as researchers first learn to see the world as practitioners do in order to understand the meanings of objects in their social field and to be able to identify the objects of central concern. It is at this level that I think field research methods provide a unique utility to applied professional fields such as educational administration.

Nothing that I have said should be construed to suggest that field research methodology is a substitute for other methodological approaches to social data in the study of educational administration. Rather what I have tried to suggest is that the continuing debate between those who maintain that a "hard-headed" view of education required turning to the social and behavioral sciences for theory which will inform practice and those "soft-hearted" romantics who insist that scientific comprehension destroys the rich variety of qualitatively-colored experience through its preference for mere quantitativeness is an insoluble and useless argument.

In my experience, any social action program whether in education, social welfare, or the criminal justice system is doomed to failure unless it grows out of and reinforces some consistent body of theory. In my view, a theory of practice is neither the vindication of theories derived in isolation from actual practice nor the continuation of the folklore-based common sense of practice. Rather it is the result of a continuing dialogue between discipline-based concepts and theory and emergent theory grounded in existential exposure to the world of practice in a fashion which improves both the techniques of practice and the knowledge base in the disciplines.