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ABSTRACT

Traditionally research is done via the scientific method, which is quantitative; however, qualitative research is seen by some as a better way to study rural education. Advocates of the quantitative viewpoint claim that it is the only way to develop cumulative knowledge. Advocates of the qualitative method reject the "scientific" view as not being enough and as needing subjective understandings. Popp (1975) identifies two types of educational inquiry, epistemic (concerning understanding of phenomena and dealing with questions of what is) and prescriptive (involving questions of action). Epistemic inquiry is rewarded, recognized, and encouraged among the academics, while prescriptive inquiry serves the practitioners. Progress will come when multiple approaches are used. Additional approaches which hold promise for research on rural education include ethnomethodology, case studies, anthropological field method, and policy research. Of all the methods mentioned above, policy research is the most desirable and could have the most impact, for it chooses from among conflicting means for the public good. Dealing directly with the issues confronting the decision makers and supplying timely, appropriate information, geared to various alternatives, appears to be the best approach for research on rural education. (AN)

Session 43.31

WHY STUDY RURAL EDUCATION?

Research on Rural Education

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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INTRODUCTION

What I'm about to say will not be popular with very many of you. For years we all have been "taught" that the 'scientific', 'objective', and 'experimental' approaches were the 'only way to fly'. Hogwash! We have been sold a bill of goods that has had little relevance to the 'real' agendas of those actively involved in rural education and research on rural education. While this is a bit of an oversimplification, I'm trying to get your attention. In this presentation, I hope to show you some of the falacious thinking that has been going on, briefly review some of the philosophical tenents of pro- and antagonists, and suggest some alternative methodologies.

Before you condemn me as another one of those wishy-washy [illegible], let me point-out that I was a product of a very thorough and extremely orthodox research training program. I [illegible] match my statistical, operations research, design, and computer programming skills against those of just about an [illegible] educational researcher on the scene today. It's just that I am getting a bit uncomfortable with my [illegible] [illegible], 1984).

PHILOSOPHIES

Have you ever had the 'pleasure' of doing some sort of research and then being asked by a 'practitioner' to tell them what it means, or how to use the findings? Or better yet, have you ever been asked to conduct some research project to meet the needs of some organization? Have you noticed the tremendous gap between these two worlds? I would maintain that this gap is due, in large measure, to philosophical differences.

On the one hand, the logical positivist researcher seeks to control all possible variables. Many times this means (if you follow current recommendations) to randomize out or otherwise control as much variability as you can humanly accomplish. In addition, we learn very early that only those things that we can operationalize (and quantify!) are worthy of researching. On the other hand, the practitioner leans heavily on personal experience (either his/her own or that of fellow practitioners), and the political 'realities' of the situation. As researchers, we have known for a long time that carpeting in the classroom offers all kinds of advantages, some of which are better learning environments, and lower capital and maintenance costs. The practitioners, however,

have known the political ramifications of installing that 'luxurious carpet'.

Randomizing out all of those 'confounding' variables makes experimental sense - but it makes absolutely no sense when those variables are part and parcel of the 'true' environment. I maintain that this distinction is probably more clear when the issues are re-evaluated in terms of academic versus policy research. We all know what acceptable academic research entails: advancing the frontiers of knowledge; making no unjustifed claims; having narrow goals and methods; and replicability. What about policy research? Here we find ourselves in the most of uncertainty, under the gun to make some sort of decision, and sorely lacking supportive data. No wonder the practitioner looks down on the academic researcher.

LOGICAL POSITIVISM

By far the most prevelant position, logical positivism (also known as logical empiricism, or scientific empiricism) has a relatively short tradition in educational research. Short as it has been, however, it remains 'the' way to view the world. According to Bramwell (1978), the view is similar to the physicist's: maintain an objective view of the world; replicate experiments; subject results to public scrutiny; use carefully defined terms; and logically argue from 'cause' to 'effect'.

Kerlinger (1973) describes four ways of knowing of which the method of science (logical positivism) is argued as being the better way. Stupes (1974) argues that "...we need deep-running theories of the kind that have driven alchemists out of chemistry and astrologers out of astronomy." (p.6).

The quantitative models being advocated here are generally agreed to have been "translated" from the natural sciences. According to Rist (1976):

> In short, efforts are predicated upon a belief in the correctness of the scientific method as it is practiced in the natural sciences. (p.9).

Much of the educational research published in our learned journals can, without too much argument, be classified as basic. Here, I am using Nebel's (1967) definition of basic research:

> ...the activity whose immediate aim is the quantitative formulation of verifiable general laws, and whose ultimate aim is establishment of a system of concepts

> and relations...in which all specific propositions are deducible from a few general principles. (p. 81.)

Further, Ebel argues that basic research findings offer little to the future improvement of educational practice. Three reasons are given:

- -Its record of past performance is very poor
- -The justifiable explanations of that poor performance call attention to serious basic difficulties that are unlikely to be overcome in the foreseeable future
- -The process of education is not a natural phenomenon of the kind that has sometimes rewarded scientific study in astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, and biology. (pp.81-2).

QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

Before trying to resolve what appears to be a basic problem with the current 'correct' view of research, I need to address a different perspective on educational research. This perspective is that of the humanist (and other non quantitative or qualitative approaches). In speaking to a group of social scientists (sociologists), Schlesinger (1962) stated:

> ...as an aid to the understanding of society and men, quantitative social research is admirable and indispensible. As a guide to the significance of problems, it is misleading when it exudes the assumption that only problems susceptible to quantitative solutions are important. (pp.770-1)

Another movement in de-quantifying educational research has been that of the phenomenologists. Basic to this orientation is the rejection (or at least a tempering) of an external human reality. Reality, according to Turner (1978), and based on the earlier works of Husserl and Schutz, is subjective.

> Only by observing people in interaction, rather than in radical abstraction, can the processes whereby actors come to share the same world be discovered. (p. 399).

This is quite similar to Rist's (1976) discussion of the qualitative approach to research methodology wherein the researchers:

> ..seek validity through personalized, intimate understandings of the social phenomenon stressing "close

> in" observations to achieve "factual, reliable, and confirmable" data. '(p.17).

While ethnomethodology is viewed by many as a strange vehicle for understanding, it does offer some promise. For now, suffice it to quote Turner (1978):

> While not all ethnomethodologists would go this far, it is a reasonable conclusion that "order" is not maintained by some society "out there", but by peoples' capacity to convince each other that society is out there. (p.421)

A BRIEF SUMMARY AND A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCLUSION

So far, I have presented (in somewhat overstated terms) two primary philosophical viewpoints regarding research methodology. One, the quantitative, has been depicted as being derived from the natural sciences. Its advocates claim that it's the only way to develop cummulative knowledge. The other, the qualitative, rejects the 'scientific' view as not being enough, and needing understandings based on the subjective.

Obviously, there are deep and serious differences between these two positions. Not only are they different with respect to underlying assumptions, they derrive from two different views of truth, knowledge, and reality. Unfortunately, conversations between advocates of these positions rarely accomplish anything except getting each other upset. In many respects, dialogue between the two is like "talking through each other" (Kuhn, 1974, p. 109.).

While buying into one position or the other may be a very logical outcome of paradigm selection (conscious or unconscious), such an action has the undesirable (from viewpoint) outcome of excluding consideration of other positions. Loyalty also indicates a belief in only the position as the source of all truth. Whatever camp appeals to you, it is severely limited if it considers itself complete.

THE PURPOSES OF RESEARCH

Earlier in this paper, I hinted at two primary functions or purposes of research. Popp (1975) identifies two types of educational inquiry: epistemic, and prescriptive. The first, epistemic, is concerned with our understanding of phenomena, and deals with questions of what is. Second, prescriptive inquiry involves questions of action. Both

involve a paradigm. Epistemic inquiry is that which seems to be rewarded, recognized, and encouraged among the academics. Prescriptive inquiry is that which serves the practitioners. Popp further clarifies the distinction:

> A school principal whose conclusions continually produced new and wider practical problems would be considered as incompetent while his scientific counterpart would be heralded. Successful practice of educational inquiry produces fewer problems thereby making further practical inquiry less and less necessary. Practical inquiry aims at closing off practical inquiry in any particular context, whereas epistemic inquiry seeks wider horizons in which to operate. (p.30).

Advocates of both types of inquiry fault the other for failing to accomplish what they are not designed to do. While many of us here have (and probably will continue to) pursued epistemic research, it is my opinion that the real impact will be in the area of prescriptive (practical) research. It is with this section that I now move into the next section.

METHODOLOGIES FOR RESEARCH ON RURAL EDUCATION

While I have indicated my personal dissatisfaction with aspects of the logical positivism position, I want to emphasize here that it is not my intention to pursuade its total abandonment. For one thing, that would be slightly presumptious of me to think I could have such an impact. Second, it is my firm belief that progress will come about when multiple approaches are used.

Some additional approaches which hold promise for research on rural education include:

- ethnomethodology (as previously discussed.)
- anthropological field method
- case studies
- policy research

I've become somewhat intrigued with the last category, so at the risk of ignoring the others, I would like to concentrate on policy research. First of all, what is policy research? It is a form of inquiry for purposes of intentionally choosing from among conflicting means to public goods. That's a mouthful! Non-choices don't count nor do choices involving non-public concerns. Academic research isn't much help when it comes to policy choices. The policy maker must make choices under considerable uncertainty, time

constraints, and political realities.

Green (1976) maintains that the methods of policy research "...are almost invariably-one is tempted to say 'necessarily'-crude (p.16.). He also states:

> Furthermore, whereas the academic researcher can afford the time necessary to refine his investigation the policy-maker can almost never do that. It is better for the policy-maker to have some information, however crude, at the time he needs it than to have excellent information too late. (p. 5).

What kind of information? Well, as much as its available, technical data - census, historical accounts, even academic research results. In addition, since the act of policy choice is generally performed in a political environment, information regarding the political setting (climate?) may be critical. By definition, policy choice involves alternatives. Each of these alternatives requires a forecast of probable outcome. Typically, these forecasts are made on the basis of the best information available. Some times, this can include outcomes of sophisticated simulations (military war games for example). Other times, "crude" data and guesses have to suffice.

In this view of policy research, choices (or decisions if you prefer) are not always made on a rational basis. The role of the researcher, however, can be instrumental in furnishing technical information, even if the choice is (in Green's words) "...determined by the moral, emotional, and prudential character of men set loose to advocate their views in a political setting." (p. 17.).

CONCLUSION

It seems to me that research on rural education (as well as 'other' education) is bound to have a greater impact if that research is policy research. Dealing directly with the issues confronting our decision (or choice) makers, and supplying timely, appropriate information, geared to the various alternatives, appears to be a better approach. Keep in mind that policy research doesn't preclude the positivist's technology, but, hopefully, I've convinced you that we need to develop a tolerance for other orientations as well.

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