The Problem of Truth in Educational Research: The Case of the Rigoberta Menchú 'Controversy'

John A. Clark
Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

In our descriptions of things, we normally think that truth plays an important part; we value true statements over false ones and we prefer people to be truthful rather than deceitful. If these two facets of truth are important in our everyday lives, they assume even more significance in educational research because of the commitment researchers make to the pursuit of truth. For much of the time, truth is not a pressing problem for educational researchers who just get on with the job. But on occasions we are reminded that the problem of truth is never very far away, especially when a piece of research ignites controversy about its truth and the truthfulness of the author. The Rigoberta Menchú 'Controversy' provides an instance.

Introduction

There is no shortage of works to serve as reminders of the problem of truth. Tierney (2000) reminds us, for example,

> Binjamin Wilkomirski's Fragments (1996) is purportedly a memoir of his living as a child in a concentration camp during the Holocaust, but he has been accused of living in Switzerland during the war as a non-Jewish child.

The Rigoberta Menchú 'controversy' has a similar ring to it.

> Rigoberta Menchú is a Guatemalan woman involved in the Central American people's struggle against the US government and corporations

> and against the indigenous political and military elite allied with the United States. Elisabeth Burgos-Derby, a Venezuelan anthropologist, over the course of 12 days in Paris, 'records' (but the translation is by someone else, an A Wright) Ms Menchú's story, and it is published as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. This book becomes famous, and Menchú receives the Nobel Peace Prize. Later, David Stoll, who is a US anthropologist and who is said to have a political agenda of undermining the reputation of the leftist revolutionary movements in Central America, while doing research in that area, stumbles, according to him, across some discrepancies in Menchú's famous testimonia. He publishes a book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans*, that accuses Menchú of not telling the truth, gives speeches about this, and gets famous or infamous. Menchú has some different responses, admits that some of the story is not literally true about her life, but says that it is a larger story, a representative story about the murder, torture and exploitation that happened in Guatemala and other Central American countries.
> Predictably, Western intellectual, media and political figures immediately fall into a dust-raising conflict about Ms Menchú's story, about Stoll's story, and about the nature and politics of truth and its representation…
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> But much more is to come. Stoll … discovers (?) that Menchú's account does not fit his culture's definition of truth (Scheurich & Foley 2000).

Menchú's testimonial was initially taken to be factually accurate, being the narrative of an eyewitness to the events described. However, when confronted with a discrepancy between what a villager informed Stoll had occurred and what Menchú reported, Stoll began to investigate more carefully whether Menchú's claims were true. He found that many were not, and concluded that she had either lied about or deliberately distorted many of the events portrayed in her story. Some of these were quite trivial: for example, Stoll found that six people were in the Spanish Embassy when it was attacked, not eight as Menchú suggested. But other discrepancies were more significant. Her brother was killed by the military, but not where she said it occurred, and she was not present at his death by burning, as she claimed to be. Her father was involved in a land dispute, but not with non-Indian neighbours as she stated. Rather, Stoll's check of files in the government land claims office revealed that the land dispute was with his in-laws. Menchú describes her childhood experience of working on a coastal plantation, but she was never on plantations. Likewise, contrary to her own account that she was not formally educated and did not speak Spanish, Menchú received a convent education and learned Spanish in Catholic boarding schools. Then there are factual contradictions which may never be resolved. Was the

conflagration at the Spanish Embassy which killed 35 people, including peasant protestors, hostages and Menchú's father, caused by the military with government backing or by revolutionary suicide? (Lincoln 1999, McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana 2000, Tierney 2000).

For Stoll (1999), that there are differences between what really happened and what Menchú says happened is not all that important. Rather, since her story 'is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be' then part of her testimony is false, and this is unacceptable in a narrative which professes to be eyewitness testimony. Although there was considerable scepticism about Stoll's discoveries, independent inquiries and Menchú's own admissions gave credence to his charges. Rebuttal was futile, so 'the argument now revolves around how one judges a text. What is truth, and what is real?' (Tierney 2000, p. 109).

Unlike similar debates, the Rigoberta Menchú case caught the attention of a group of well-known educational researchers who, at a 'Reclaiming Voice' conference in 1999, set out to investigate what the 'controversy' surrounding Rigoberta Menchú was all about. From the conference came an issue of *Qualtitative Studies in Education* (QSE) devoted to the topic, and containing papers by Bill Tierney, Henry Trueba, Yvonna Lincoln, Nelly Stromquist, Patti Lather, and Peter McLaren and Jill Pinkney-Pastrana. Their discussion is wide-ranging; of particular interest is the nature of the Latin American genre of *testimonio* – the testimony of a witness who speaks for a group that is struggling for voice. Thus, a testimonio has political force since it is often by an activist trying to transform history. One of the issues which arises out of a consideration of the testimonio is its truth. The contributors to QSE acknowledge that truth is an important problem to address, with the word 'truth' appearing in the titles of three of the six papers and liberally sprinkled throughout all of them. Their concerns are three-fold: What is truth? How do we apprehend the truth? Ought we always to tell the truth? Unfortunately, rather than engaging in a sustained analysis of these questions their comments are no more than fragments scattered here and there, but enough is said to conclude that their views should not go unchallenged.

Truth

Several of the commentators allude to truth itself and begin to explore, albeit too briefly, its nature. Tierney (2000, p. 103) observes that the debate over Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio 'revolves around the idea of truth' while McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana (2000, p. 179) remark that 'one could…discuss the meaning of truth', but do not go on to do this. However, some of the contributors do provide some tantalising hints about the nature of truth which give some direction to their thinking. Stromquist (2000, p. 100) remarks that 'our reality has different levels. At one point, truth may be

indeterminate', while Tierney (2000, p. 110) notes that 'Either truth exists as a confirmable reality or it does not'. Lather (2000, p. 157, 155) links truth to 'a set of questions regarding representation, adequacy…language, reality, knowledge' but then, referring to Nietzsche, somewhat undoes this by noting that 'there is no help for the debasing of truth in language'. A similar negation is also to be found in Tierney's (2000, p. 111) position when he asks, 'What kind of truth does the reader create in the reading of a text?' but then later admits to 'a bit of misgiving about Brittin's radical relativist approach…where one is lead to believe that truth resides wherever a reader decides it to be. Surely there must be some sense of commonality and understanding across readers'.

Truth is a highly contested concept where a number of rival theories of truth have emerged (Horwich 1994), especially correspondence and coherence, and these two are clearly evident in the remarks of the contributors to QSE. Much hinges on whether there is a real world about which our language is a true representation against an account that takes language to be a creation the truth of which depends on how well it hangs together in a relativist sort of way. The arguments for and against these two theories of truth in educational research continue to be widely debated (e.g. Hammersley 2004, Smith 2004) without resolution. The way forward is not to treat them as mutually exclusive but rather to regard both as necessarily contributing to a better theory of truth. What is to be retained? Realism is required if we are ever to peg some of our empirical statements to that which they are about, which correspondence gives us. Other sentences, classed as true, are tied to those whose truth depends on this empirical connection, hence coherence. To bring them together,

> Correspondence looks to the relation of the true sentence to what it is about, such as the white snow, while coherence looks to the relations of the true sentences to other sentences. Some sentences, to begin with, we accept as true directly on the strength of observation; the essential mechanism here is the conditioning of strings of words to sensory stimulations. Further sentences are rated as true on the strength of systematic connections with the observation sentences. We work out the neatest world system we can that conforms to the record of observations, and we tighten the squeeze by multiplying the observations. Here is the reasonable place to appeal to coherence in a vaguer but richer sense than logical consistency.
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> Coherence and correspondence, properly considered, are not rival theories of truth, but complementary aspects. The coherence aspect has to do with how to arrive at truth, by the best of lights. The correspondence aspect has to do with the relation of truths to what they are about (Quine 1987, pp. 213-4).

If neither the correspondence theory of truth nor the coherence theory of truth will do, what sort of theory of truth might replace them. There is one very good candidate: the disquotational theory of truth.

Sentences are about things. They refer, or denote, so they are about existence, or what exists or is real. So, our expressions, our sentences, our theories designate ontological entities. How, then, are we to specify the semantics, or the truth conditions, for sentences, both in ordinary language and the more complex statements in educational research? Tarski (1944) offered a solution when he set out to make semantics as precise as possible by formulating a definition of truth for sentences. Starting with an open sentence of the kind 'X is tall' he identified the following properties: the name (X), the predicate (is tall) and that which is satisfied (the objects which satisfy the open sentence 'X is tall' – e.g. John, Mary and others). Naming, predicating and satisfying are all semantic relations, relating words to objects: names relate to objects named, predicates relate to the properties of the objects referred to, and open sentences relate to that which satisfy them. So, 'they can all be used to define a concept of truth according to which a sentence is true precisely when the objects described in it are just as the sentence describes them. The key idea is that the things in the world, that is, the way the world is, makes a sentence true' (Orenstein 2002, p. 32). Now to take Tarski's standard example to illustrate:

> 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

To unpack this a little. The quotation marks around the sentence on the left indicate that reference is being made to the named sentence itself. The truth of it is predicated by 'is true', and the satisfying condition that what the sentence says is so if and only if snow is white. For Tarski's theory of truth, two requirements must be met: formal correctness and material adequacy. By formal correctness is meant that a definition of truth must be of the form – 'X' is true if and only if X – which is formally correct if the right hand containing vocabulary matches that to the left. Material adequacy has two conditions: (1) the definition implies only sentences are true because truth is a predicate of sentences; and (2) it be applicable to both natural and formal (i.e. logical) languages.

Now to disquotation. Take the quoted sentence 'Snow is white'. If true, then it can be disquoted, for snow is white. The trick, then, is to find out if the sentence 'Snow is white' is true by investigating that thing called snow to identify its colour. If we find that snow is white then the sentence 'Snow is white' is true, and if true then we can just revert back to talk of white snow. The use of semantic assent, to talk about sentences and their truth, allows us to look to see whether the world is as our sentences say it is. If so, sentences are true; if not, they are false.

Apprehending the Truth

It is one thing to be able to offer an account of truth, it is quite another to establish whether particular claims are true or false. On this, the QSE contributors have some interesting things to say. Taking as his starting point the Rigoberta Menchú testimonia, Tierney (2000, p. 109, 111) notes that it was important that we 'investigate its truth claims once [Stoll] had stumbled upon an initial discrepancy between what Menchú says happened and what a villager inadvertently told Stoll had happened'; we then have to establish the truth through 'our own engagement, questioning, struggles and challenges'. But this is no easy task, and it is here that the commentators are less agreed. Trueba (2000, p.115, 129), for example, is "profoundly sceptical of grasping 'the truth' of any account" because "any theory about how to search for the 'truth' is contingent on the linguistic and cultural interpretations of behaviour". Equally sceptical is Lather (2000, p. 155) who claims that 'the differences between truth and fiction is, finally, undecidable'. On the other hand, Stromquist (2000, p. 150), whilst acknowledging that "no methodological approach ensures a perfect grasp of 'truth'", is nonetheless of the view that while we may have 'multiple accounts…of incidents' we also have 'historical and cultural reasons to accept certain explanations and reject others'. Lincoln (2000) expresses a similar sentiment when she writes:

> Defenders of the Menchú text have argued that there is a major difference between so-called 'historical' truth and 'narrative truth'. Several commentators on the 'Rigoberta controversy' draw a distinction between 'factual veracity per se' and 'writers' perspectives on their lived experience and the experiences of their families and communities', and suggest that both historical and narrative truths each 'are situated and partial' (Linden 1999, p. B3). I have no difficulty with this distinction except *when narrative truth is passed off as historical truth* (p. 133).

Tierney (2000), rightly notes that truth is not to be found in the unquestioning reading of a narrative, Menchú's or anyone else's, but through our own engagement in the challenges which narratives present. We question, we probe, we criticise what the narrative says because we are determined to get to the bottom of it, we want to ascertain whether the narrative is true or, compared to its rivals, is more likely to be true than they. Stromquist (2000) goes further:

> In cases in which a number of eyewitness accounts or several sources exist for a given event and such an event does not produce consensual opinion, then the researcher should present the range of opinions and draw that which is the modal version or the more plausible version given the evidence she/he has been able to amass (p. 141).

Good advice? Up to a point. Modality, or the greatest number or the majority, does not, as Mill (1962) so forcefully pointed out, have a mortgage on the truth. Appeal to 'the more plausible version given the evidence' does, however, provide us with a way forward in trying to establish which account is, or is more likely to be, true. How to achieve this requires a brief excursion into holism.

The argument for holism runs thus. First, interpretations, meanings, narratives, stories and the like are a species of theory and so are reducible to theories; secondly, because all theories are of a kind, being constitutive of a seamless web, they are all subject to a common set of criteria for their adjudication. To begin with the initial claim: our sensory mechanisms are disturbed in their various ways. We account for these by positing things, external to ourselves, which have a causal connection to our sensory activations. So, from our arousals we project out a theoretical framework to account for what caused the disturbances. Or, as Quine (1966) has put it:

> I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas: molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back, emanating concentric air waves. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retina, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil (p. 215).

This theoretical framework, which we cantilever out from sensory experience to account for that experience (and predict future experience), can be likened to a spider's web. At the periphery the web is attached to physical objects – window sill, branch of tree. Likewise with our theory. At the experiential edge are our observation sentences which are tied to objects and are the prime candidates for disquotational truth. Observation sentences give the theoretical structure, as a whole, its empirical content, and are as theoretical as more abstract sentences. The spider's web has strands radiating out from the centre – here correspondingly, do we find logic and mathematics distributed across the whole. The concentric strands of the web, from periphery to centre, are matched by the increasingly abstract and empirically remote statements which we characterise as, for example, ethics, history, physics and the like. Nowhere is any part of our theoretical framework totally disconnected from the rest; conversely, no logical distinctions exist to demarcate one part of our theory from the rest so each merges into the next.

From this brief account of holism, several things follow. If our sensory mechanisms are physical entities then their stimulation must be the effect of prior physical causes. This being so, there is no ontological place for non-physical existence, which tends to rule out minds and mental states and the whole edifice of folk psychology which

invokes intentions, meanings, interpretations and so on. Thus, philosophical naturalism, or eliminative materialism, by denying these properties, collapses the distinction, widely held by many educational researchers, between reasons and causes, science and interpretation, social and physical sciences, and so on. All we have is our ever expanding theory accounting for a material world regardless of whether its origins are natural or social, for at rock bottom the material is the more fundamental category. Given this position, then it follows that our theories, being all of a kind, epistemologically, must be assessed by a common set of criteria which is consistent with the naturalist position advanced here.

Returning to Stromquist, we may now ask whether all of the theories account for the available evidence. If one stands out from the rest in so far as it provides an explanation having greater coverage of the empirical data then the researcher is probably warranted in taking this to be the most plausible, and of the current theories, the most likely to be true. But suppose that there are two or more theories which are empirically equivalent but logically incompatible such that there is a prima facie inability to judge which of the rival theories is warranted to be true. In order to make a rational decision for a measure of closure, rather than leaving the field open, reference must be made to criteria against which competing sets of claims can be judged. Consistent with the disquotational theory of truth and holism, some nine criteria (briefly outlined rather than fully justified) may be applied to theory. These criteria are no mere set of formulaic considerations to be applied in a predetermined and systematic way; they interact in complex ways due to their differential weightings from one occasion to the next. Nor are they limited to science for they apply to all theories regardless of their subject matter within the context of a naturalised account of theorising about the world and our experience of it (Churchland 1989, p. 139, Gibson 1982, p. 160, Orenstein 1977, pp. 53-55, Quine & Ullian 1978, pp. 66-73):

Conservatism

Conservatism: a dominant guiding principle is that of familiarity, or least revision. Where a view conflicts with none of the surrounding theory, then conservatism prevails and the new can be incorporated into the existing scheme. Where the view is irreconcilable with the rest, acceptance of the new would require revision of whatever is in conflict with it. Some eyewitness accounts may cohere better with what is clearly understood about cultural practices than others which jar with current social understanding; so are to be preferred. t is generally prudent to adhere to accepted theory rather than gamble on unusual accounts by applying the 'maxim of minimum mutilation': in Quine's (1990, p.15) picturesque phrase, 'such is the mutilation that the maxim of minimum mutilation is mean to minimize'.

Modesty

Modesty: the principle of modesty works in two ways. Logically, one theory or eyewitness account is more modest than another if the former is implied by the latter but does not imply it. Empirically, the one which is more humdrum is the more modest. Modesty prevails in securing conservatism.

Precision

Precision: while the principle of precision does its work, it stands in a supportive role to other principles. Since many of our everyday views are formulated in ill-defined terms, it is often difficult to specify what sort of evidence would count against them. The more precisely a view can be stated the more easily it can be tested for its truth. One strategy is to sharpen up the terms of the account by either giving precise sense to what was vague or inexact, or redefining what was fuzzy by replacing it with other existing or new terms. This could be undertaken by the researcher with the participants.

Generality

Generality: the principle of generality promotes scope – the more unified is our body of theory the more is brought under its cover. Generalisation beyond the evidence is grounded in two sources – the natural route is by induction, extrapolating from observed cases to all possible cases by forming a general sentence or theory. The other source, hypothetico-deduction, devises a generalization ripe for including instances. It is generality which makes a theory interesting and, if true, of considerable consequence.

Simplicity

Simplicity: the principle of simplicity is paramount if theory, and eyewitness accounts, are to be assessed for their truth. The simplest view is the one which, compared with its rivals, covers as much as or more than they do with a fewer number of assumptions. Of the theories, the one which does not involve metaphysical entities such as gods, spirits and the like, or minds and mental states, is simpler than one which does posit such things, for the former makes fewer assumptions than the latter to explain the same things. Thus does Ockham's razor apply, whereby the posits of folk psychology (propositional attitudes such as wishes and wants, intentions and desires, and so on) are eliminated by the explanations of neurophilosophy (Churchland, 1986).

Parsimony

Parsimony: don't advance further from empirical evidence than is necessary is the principle of parsimony. The fewer theoretical entities posited to account for experience the better. Those theories which posit unobservable entities (gods, intentions) are less parsimonious.

Fecundity

Fecundity: the principle of fecundity gives greater weighting to the view which is the more intellectually fertile. A theory is fertile if it can be extended to encompass new observations or new experience and is to be preferred over one that has limited further development or scope.

Refutation

Refutation: the principle of refutation demands that an account be refutable if it is to serve empirical social science. Not that the hypothesis is refuted, for it may not be and may never be, but rather that it is refutable if some evidence, recognised as such, were to count against it, a point well made by Popper (1959) in his falsificationist theory of science. But the principle of refutation is not quite so straightforward as this because it is tempered by holism – any account, according to the Duhem-Quine thesis, can be held true come what may in the face of recalcitrant evidence if the holder is prepared to make radical revisions elsewhere in the theoretical system (Quine 1964, p. 43). If retaining a point of view comes at the cost of rejecting other widely accepted assumptions then the less we are prepared to sacrifice our existing understanding to save a particular claim then the more refutable is the claim. Equally, a theory which coheres with existing positions has a low level of refutability. So while refutation is a feature of all theories, the extent to which one is prepared to falsify any particular theory will also depend on other factors (i.e. consideration of other criteria).

Robustness

Robustness: the principle of robustness holds for those views which have withstood the force of evidential challenge. This does not mean that such theories are faultless, for they rarely are. There will be gaps to fill, small revisions to make and minor anomalies will arise but these often tend to be put to one side, or ignored, when other principles come into play. But when our theories withstand rigorous scrutiny then they are considered to be robust enough to be accepted, for the time being, as probably true.

Decisions about what weighting to accord the various principles when weighing up competing eyewitness accounts in narrative research cannot make appeal to a simple calculus of relative worth. On any one occasion, not all principles may apply, and when they do their contribution may vary from one occasion to the next. Not infrequently, two or more principles may interact to add complexity to the situation. The simpler the theory the less evidential support required and the greater the scope of unconfirmed coverage. Fecundity relies on simplicity and conservatism since both of these are conducive to enhancing an account's productivity. Considerations of simplicity and conservatism may vary in where the weighting falls: prima facie, we

should go for the account which requires minimum revision, the one which departs least from existing theory. However, as existing views are modified in accordance with the principle of conservatism, a time may come when a much amended view gives way to a radical revision which simplifies the old. While a sophisticated simplification may demand sweeping changes, there are limits and the pull of conservatism will nonetheless be felt for much of our accepted view which will hold steady. Generality conflicts with modesty: modesty seeks the smallest gains while generality the largest, but generality adds to a theory's utility. Yet, if generality is secured at the expense of simplicity, nothing is gained. However, if generality is enhanced without loss of simplicity or if there is further simplifications with generality preserved, then the principles of conservatism and modesty are surrendered (Churchland 1989, p. 147, Quine & Ullian 1978, pp. 74-5).

There is no formula for guiding practice in dealing with questions about which principles apply when considering rival eyewitness accounts in educational research. When should we be conservative in dealing with points of view and the evidence and when, in Kuhn's (1970) terms, should we be revolutionary? If we are forever counselled by the principle of conservatism we will fail to systematize radical revisions which may bring with time greater generality and simplicity. Equally, constant radical revision gives no opportunity to establish a steady body of empirical theory. Arbitration of competing principles becomes a pragmatic process with the 'maximization of simplicity and the minimization of mutilation' (Quine 1990, p. 11) being the maxims first and foremost.

Stromquist (2000) seeks to introduce a further criterion, that plausibility according to the evidence is conditional on the following proviso:

> while qualitative approaches seek to rescue the perception of others, this strategy cannot be used to give equal weight to perpetrators and victims in a situation of violent conflict such as the one in Guatemala. It is preposterous to argue that the voice of the army person is as valuable in setting truth as that of the victimised Indian – not if by truth one means a profound understanding of what leads subjugated people to undertake a struggle that is likely to cost them their lives and the lives of their families (p. 151).

One can only have, at the very least, great sympathy for the plight of those who suffer at the hands of the powerful, whether they be the military, politicians, bureaucrats, teachers or parents. This, surely, is the force of Menchú's narrative. But Stromquist's principle, worthy as it is, will just not do. It is not unknown, perhaps even quite common, for some 'victims' to fabricate, or have fabricated for them, events non-existent. Think, for example, of charges of child abuse, rape and the like which have

turned out to be false. This is not to claim that all narratives of the powerless are fictitious, for probably many are not. Rather, it is to reject the argument that the narrative of the powerless must, as a matter of principle, always be preferred over the narrative of the powerful as the most plausible source of truth. Each must be judged on its merits if justice is to prevail. More often than not the narrative of the powerless will carry the day, but this has to be argued for, not uncritically presupposed. The pursuit of the truth demands nothing less.

Telling the Truth

At the very heart of the QSE discussion of the Rigoberta Menchú 'controversy' is the question about whether those who make stories, their own or others, public ought to tell the truth. There is a measure of consensus on this, summed up nicely by Tierney (2000):

> One ought not state that someone died at the hands of X when it was actually Y. One ought not to say I saw a car accident happen, if one did not. One ought not to accept an ethnography that says 23 students were in the teacher's room when there were actually 37. Certainly, analyses of contradictions between narrative and experience need to be explored and examined in any document. But should truth in a testimonio be defined in the manner that Stoll demands it to be, especially in a post-modern world where such terms are inevitably contested, argued over, and perspectival? (p. 110).

Should those who have narratives to tell be guided by truth or politics? This is an ethical question. Much of the Menchú controversy has centred on her favouring, when it suited her, politics over truth. Several of the educational commentators suggest that it is understandable that the truth is not always told. Stromquist (2000, p. 140) suggests that 'it is difficult to recall with precision the details of events that occur under dangerous and traumatic conditions'; Lather (2000, p. 156) writes of 'the price subjects pay to speak the truth about themselves out of forms of reflexivity, discourses of truth, forms of rationality, and effects of knowledge, we learn how people undertake to speak truthfully within the forms of power exercised and how they are put into play'; while McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana (2000, p. 179) remark that 'perhaps the conditions of extreme stress, fear and the knowledge that giving away certain information, specific names, places, etc. could result in the death of many of her friends, family and co-workers played a role in certain inconsistencies in her account'. Given all of this it is perhaps not surprising that 'Menchú makes clear she will not tell the whole truth. She has her secrets' (Lather 2000, p. 154). These are very compelling reasons for not always telling the truth, but it is hard to see, in Menchú's case, how these bear on the errors

pointed out earlier. At face value, it is not clear how admitting she had received a convent education would lead her to danger; on the other hand, falsely claiming eyewitness veracity of her brother's tortured death surely ran a greater risk of military retribution than would declaring, truly, that she was elsewhere.

With Menchú, truth is overridden by what Lather (2000, p. 154) calls 'truth-effect'. Menchú wants particular outcomes for her people, so she is prepared to lie for a larger political purpose. As McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana (2000, p. 179) assert, 'Given the overwhelming evidence in support of the situation described by Menchú's testimony, how can we allow the 'pearls of contradiction' to negate the social and political analysis of the lived historical conditions represented in her testimonial?' But should truth be the first casualty of politics? If it is, it is but a short road to rejecting telling the truth in favour of propaganda, ideology and manipulation. Lincoln's (2000) opposing view is one that should surely command our support:

> For me, the story would have been equally compelling had Menchú not claimed eyewitness veracity for it. The story would still have been about courage in the face of the oppression of a native people, vulnerability, truth. It simply would have been made more compelling had it been 'true' in a factual sense, rather than a narrative sense, since it was represented as such. In other words, it is far easier to convince me of courage and vulnerability when one has been courageous enough to tell the truth, or at least to represent what one is saying for what it is…This *testimonia*, unfortunately, is perjured testimony (p. 138).

Implications for Educational Research

Tierney (2000, p. 110) is right to remind us that truth is something which is 'contested, argued over and perspectival', although perhaps this is less evident in daily life than it is in the more formal and systematic forms of inquiry. In the classroom, teachers mark children's work to find out whether children have set out, say in mathematics, true rather than false answers to algebraic problems, and neither teachers nor students are all that puzzled by the demand 'tell me the truth' on just those occasions when a child is clearly lying. But even here there are still some little niggles about truth which assume far greater significance in educational research where a commitment to 'pursuit of the truth' (rather than fabricating falsehoods) looms large as a regulatory ideal. There are some, possibly a minority, who continue to deny that truth has a place in educational research: in a recent disagreement between Hammersley (2004), who champions a correspondence theory of truth, and Smith (2004), the latter claimed, wrongly in my view, that since there is no extralinguistic reality then there is nothing to which our linguistic expressions could correspond, hence there is no

such thing as truth but only relativism. The objections to this sort of argument are many, but here are three. One, why would anyone make such a claim unless in some relevant sense the person making the claim held it to be true and was seeking to persuade others of its truth. Two, if there is no extralinguistic reality to which our linguistic expressions in some way connect – no schools, classrooms, teachers, students, learning – then such a stance on truth is unlikely to prove to be all that attractive to educational researchers who, accepting that such things do exist, seek to make a difference to them for the better. Third, in our practices, commonsense and scientific alike, we usually proceed on the assumption that there is a real world, of which we can say, at least some of the time, true things and that people are, at least some of the time, truthful in what they say. There is, then, little to be gained but much to be lost if we dispense with truth.

But our deliberations on truth rarely run smoothly. As one of the anonymous reviewers of the original version of this article remarked: 'Consideration of key philosophical issues in educational research is very important and, I suggest, not common enough in educational writings'. There is surely some truth (!) in this. Educational researchers, in the main, are not strongly philosophically inclined nor would one necessarily expect them to be. Unlike philosophers, educational researchers with an empirical bent are primarily absorbed by the second of the problems of truth I have addressed here, of apprehending the truth. In the course of doing so, they usually have an abiding interest in the third also, telling the truth. But these two only get their purchase if they are built upon a sound apprehension of the nature of truth itself, this being the first of our three problems. And it is here that educational researchers may come unstuck; either they have a rather naïve, commonsense view of truth which is not up to the task required of it in educational research or, if they have delved into the issue, often come away with a less than satisfactory account of truth. It is here that philosophers do have something to offer educational researchers. Philosophers, wisely, usually defer to educational researchers on empirical matters except when philosophical concerns arise in the course of such inquiries; on the other hand, empirical researchers ought to be philosophically literate about the most basic conceptual tools of their trade, and truth is one of them. Here, philosophers can do much to assist empirical researchers reach a deeper understanding about truth by going beyond the hoary binaries of correspondence/coherence, realism/idealism, science/interpretation by drawing off the scholarly debate over truth in the wider philosophical community and bringing new theoretical insights to the attention of educational researchers. This I do here, in an endeavour to change educational researcher's understanding of truth. While it may appeal to some, and be challenged by others, if it serves to provoke educational researchers to reflect more deeply on one of the central tenets of their professional practice then if will have surely served its purpose of helping us to get just that little bit closer to the truth about truth.

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