



ENTRENCHING REALIST EVALUATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH METHODS IN THE AWAKE OF MIXED METHODOLOGY

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Abstract: The choice of either Quantitative or Qualitative research methods or a mixture of both (Mixed Methods) presents a researcher's construction of the reality he or she purposes to investigate. The central element in mixed methods is the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches on one or more of the levels of epistemology, methodology and methods. This rests on the logic that methods, methodologies and paradigms are strongly linked. This construction of research could perhaps get lessons from Realist evaluation approach. Realist evaluation has its origin; Realism. Realism is a school of philosophy. It was developed to sit between positivism and constructivism. Positivism holds that there is such a thing as the real world, which we can directly observe and about which we can derive facts; while constructivism argues that since all our observations are shaped and filtered through human senses and the human brain, it is not possible to know for certain what the nature of reality is. All evaluation approaches – consciously or unconsciously – reflect deep philosophical assumptions. Research is basically evaluation and therefore this paper draws the implications of Realist Evaluation facets on Educational Research.

Keywords: Education, Realism, Research, Evaluation

Introduction

Mixed Methodologies

Jerome De Lisle (2011) discusses that there is increasing interest in the field of mixed methods research and the diverse ways in which quantitative and qualitative methodologies can be systematically combined. Up to the 1970s, positivism reigned supreme as its adherents tried to elevate this approach to the uppermost epistemic position, such that —doing quantitatively became the gold standard of education research. However, by the end of the 1980s, in what has been called the golden age of qualitative research, the constructivist-interpretive paradigm had become firmly entrenched within several fields, including that of education.

Johnson, et al (2007) observed that debates about singular or universal truths or approaches to viewing the world (Socrates, Plato), versus multiple or relative truths (the Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias), versus balances

or mixtures of the extremes (Aristotle's "golden mean" or principle of balance, moderate skepticism, Cicero, Sextus Empiricus), go back, at least, to ancient Western philosophy, and the spirit of these debates lives today in the different views of the three major approaches to social research. According to Plato, Protagoras said that "man is the measure of all things," and in many ways the history of Western philosophy still is debating Protagoras and the other Sophists. This debate continues to affect how we view knowledge, what we look for, what we expect to find, and how we believe we are to go about finding and justifying "knowledge."

The primary philosophy of mixed research is that of pragmatism. Mixed methods research is, generally speaking, an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research).

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Mixed research, in its recent history in the social and behavioral or human sciences, started with researchers and methodologists who believed qualitative *and* quantitative viewpoints and methods were useful as they addressed their research questions.

Epistemological rationale for mixed methods

Symonds and Gorard (n.d) identifies the following epistemological rationale for mixed methods:

- 1) That all singular methods (i.e. interview, survey) and data types (numerical, audio, visual, word based) can be classified under one of two succinct paradigms (quantitative and qualitative)
 - 2) That elements from each of these two paradigms can coexist in a single Study
 - 3) That a third category is needed to refer to studies which use elements of both paradigms
 - 4) That pragmatism is the philosophical basis for this third category
 - 5) That this third category should be in itself a separate paradigm
 - 6) That direct, normative links exist between paradigms and methodologies/methods and types of data
- Empirical rationale for mixed methods:
- 7) That there should be a special focus on ‘mixing’ when using elements from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms in the same study, as these are inherently different in form
 - 8) That the triangulation of epistemologies/methodologies/methods provides better quality data than a single approach
 - 9) That by this, mixed methods is a very effective method of research

Realist Evaluation

Realist Evaluation is largely pronounced in the works of Gill Westhorp (2014), who espoused that the term ‘realist evaluation’ is drawn from Pawson and Tilley’s seminal work, *Realistic Evaluation* (1997). It is a member of the family of theory-based evaluation approaches. Theory-based evaluation starts by clarifying the ‘programme

theory’ – that is, clarifying how programme activities are understood to cause (or contribute to) outcomes and impacts.

According to Westhorp (2014), Realist evaluation has its origin; Realism. Realism is a school of philosophy. It was developed to sit between positivism and constructivism. Positivism holds that there is such a thing as the real world, which we can directly observe and about which we can derive facts; while constructivism argues that since all our observations are shaped and filtered through human senses and the human brain, it is not possible to know for certain what the nature of reality is. All evaluation approaches – consciously or unconsciously – reflect deep philosophical assumptions

Westhorp (2014) explains that Realist approaches assume that nothing works everywhere or for everyone, and that context really does make a difference to programme outcomes. Consequently, policy-makers and practitioners need to understand how and why programmes work and don’t work in different contexts, so that they are better equipped to make decisions about which programmes or policies to use and how to adapt them to local contexts.

Basic Tenets/Assumptions for Realist Evaluation

A realist research question contains some or all of the elements of “how and why does this work and/or not work, for whom, to what extent, in what respects, in what circumstances and over what duration?” In doing Realist Evaluation, Westhorp (2014) notes that there are five key ideas from realism which have implications for evaluation, including impact evaluation:

- 1) **Realism asserts that both the material and the social worlds are ‘real’, at least in the sense that anything that can have real effects is itself real.** This has two main implications for evaluation and consequently research, in particular educational research. Firstly, it implies that research itself and the variables under investigations, such as programmes and policies are also ‘real’ and can have real effects – positive and negative, intended



and unintended. Secondly, it implies that social institutions and constructs (culture, class, gender, religion, political and economic systems...) will have real effects on whether and how research findings are valid and how programmes (variables) work.

- 2) **Realism acknowledges that all enquiry and observation are shaped and filtered through the human brain and that there is, therefore, no such thing as ‘final’ truth or knowledge.** This implies that research is filtered through human brain and there can be final or conclusive research. Research findings cannot be final or absolute. Nonetheless it argues that it is possible to work towards a closer understanding of the nature of reality. The implication for evaluation (research) is that it is possible to work towards better understanding of whether, how and why research findings are valid and how and why programmes (variables) work, even though we can never reach final certainty or provide definitive ‘proof’.
- 3) **Realism argues that all social systems are open systems.** Their boundaries are porous and flexible: people, ideas, information and resources flow in and out of social systems. Social systems themselves interact and influence each other. Families and schools; the economic system and the political system – each interacts with, affects and is affected by the other. This has three implications for evaluation and by extension social research. Firstly, programmes themselves are open social systems. Evaluating them requires at least a general understanding of systems theory, an understanding of appropriate methods for systems evaluation and an understanding of the specific programme system. Secondly, it is necessary to choose the boundaries of the system(s) that will be included in the evaluation, even though the boundaries do not exist in this clear way in reality.

This could be the basis upon research draws scope and limitations as well as delimitations. Thirdly, those systems will not be static, but will change over time, in complex and interactive ways – regardless of whether a programme or policy is introduced. This means that educational research should be dynamic in terms of its methodology and related approaches.

- 4) **Realism offers a particular understanding of how causation works.** The basic idea is that things that we experience or can observe are caused by ‘deeper’, usually non-observable processes. That is, the causal processes happen at a different level of the system than the observable outcomes. In realist philosophy, the underlying causal process is known as a ‘mechanism’. As Gill (2014) explains, there are two other important things to understand about the idea of mechanisms, which in this regard have implications on educational research.

The first is that they exist as part of a whole system. A trainer only has the power to ‘cause’ change because he or she operates in relation to a student (or group of students), in a training programme, using the spaces, equipment and materials provided, and drawing on the social rules that guide teaching and learning. If any of these elements of the system are removed or changed, the causal process changes too. The second is that mechanisms exist whether or not they are operating at a particular moment. The trainer has the power to teach, and the learner has the power to learn, whether or not they are currently doing so. The implication is that the evaluator needs to identify what resources, opportunities or constraints were in fact provided, and to whom; and what ‘reasoning’ was prompted in response, generating what changes in behaviour, which in turn generate what outcomes.



It is critical to understand the idea of ‘mechanisms’ for realist impact evaluation. First, mechanisms cannot be directly observed simply by observing what programmes do. It is necessary to know what occurred because this provides information about the resources that were provided, but this does not tell us about the responses of intended targets. Information about those responses – who responds in what ways and why - is needed to understand mechanisms. Second, mechanisms are not usually visible but they can be - and in a realist evaluation, are - investigated.

Third, the ‘reasoning’ of intended beneficiaries is socially and culturally conditioned. Men and women, adults and children, people of different cultural groups, religions, classes or economic situations may respond quite differently to exactly the same programme resource, such as training or a loan. Their values and beliefs, norms, cultural roles, previous experiences, and current circumstances will shape their reasoning, their decisions and, therefore, programme outcomes. This leads to patterns of outcomes that can be observed in most programmes. Mechanisms can be intended and unintended; some generating positive outcomes and some generating negative outcomes. The trick for realist evaluation is to work at a useful level of abstraction and to consider the *main* mechanisms generating the *main* patterns of outcomes.

Finally, mechanisms do not only operate at the end point of a programme with the target population. Most programmes have long implementation chains with different decisions being made by different levels of government, or organisations, or levels within organisations, along the way. This means that mechanisms are operating (or not, depending on the context) at all stages along a

programme implementation chain. The implication for evaluation is that it is necessary to decide the points along the implementation chain that will be examined within the evaluation, and to hypothesise the main mechanisms and their outcomes for those points – not necessarily just the final point. Programmes can generate outcomes at many levels of a system – individual community members, organisations, service delivery systems and so on. Where outcomes are to be investigated at multiple levels, understanding of context, mechanism and outcome will be required at multiple levels.

- 5) **Realism provides a specific way of thinking about ‘context’.** The implication for evaluation is that what matters about context is what influences whether mechanisms operate, and which mechanisms operate. Context can influence programme mechanisms in many different ways. The context within which the organisation implementing a programme can influence the way in which, or the extent to which, a programme is implemented, who it targets, who it reaches and so on. However, it can also influence the ways in which intended beneficiaries respond. Responses may differ depending on whether the programme is delivered by government or non-government agencies, for example, if trust in one sector is lower than for the other. Variations within the target population can influence which mechanisms operate (gender, class, caste, culture and so on), which is the basis of the “for whom” question in realist evaluation. Access to resources to implement and opportunities to implement decisions, can also influence reasoning itself, as well as whether or not desired choices can be put into action. A realist evaluation therefore hypothesises which features of context are likely to affect how, and for whom, a programme is



expected to work, and collects data about those features of context. It then also needs data and analytic strategies to examine the interaction between context and mechanism.

Realist Evaluation and Social Research

Merita Poni (2014) noted that the social research is an intentional investigation aiming to explore and to offer solutions for complex social problems (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Besides an investigation of the contemporary problems, the social research is an organized effort for understanding the social construction of the knowledge. In order to be able to invest into a research project, the researcher should understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge and make use of complementary means such as experience, reasoning and research (Robson, 2002). Research enquiry is an endless journey by which researchers set out to discover truth (Cohen et al., 2000). No matter what kind of truth contending to pursuit, the researchers pledge allegiance to conditions that qualify the inquiry as valid research. The research achieves validity criteria when the researcher pays attention to the rules and avoids haphazard accumulation of facts, referred to as naïve empiricism (Bryman, 2004). The enterprise of research is very needed in the field education to provide conditions for adapting to the huge challenges of a rapidly changing world, where what works today may not work tomorrow (Whitty, 2006). These five basic assumptions of realists in the understandings about the nature of reality, what we can know about reality, and how programmes work have implications not only for policy and practice but also for researchers, therefore, for impact evaluation and as of necessity, research:

Because programmes work differently in different contexts and through different change mechanisms, we cannot assume that programmes can be replicated from one context to another or that they will automatically achieve the same outcomes if they are. What is portable, however, are good understandings about ‘what works for whom, in

what contexts, and how’. Realist impact evaluation seeks to inform policy and practice by learning more about ‘what works for whom’, ‘in which contexts particular programmes do and don’t work’, and ‘what mechanisms are triggered by what programmes in what contexts’. These understandings can then inform choices about which programmes to trial in what contexts, how to refine policies and programmes to improve their effectiveness, and how to adapt programmes to new contexts.

In research, the assumptions about programmes as theorized by Realists translate to the choice of methodologies. As Poni writes, except the debate on the role of the research in education, another concern is the methodology of research. Polemics have been evolved over the question: Which methodology provides the best results for the educational research, the quantitative or the qualitative? Expressed in simple word the quantitative research is based in numbers while the qualitative research is based in words. Fortunately, within the researchers’ community, the voices into favor of the use of both methodologies are increasing. The mixing of both methodologies is bringing benefits to the research in social sciences.

Conclusion

It is the contention of this paper, that the emerging trend or call for mixed methods in educational research is the failure to recognize which contexts work for which particular method. Mixed methods approach seems to show no regard for the uniqueness of human experience that saw the emergence of qualitative and quantitative experiences. This way, this paper proposes that educational research be carried out within the five basic tenets of Realist evaluation, which possibly eliminates mixed methodologies:

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