PHILOSOPHICAL METHODS AS FULCRUM OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: A THEORETICAL REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract: As universities continue to be confronted with research productivity there seems to be a micro-political issue regarding the relationship between philosophers of education and educational researchers with educational researchers sidelining philosophers of education. It appears that the zeal for objectivity and reliability has often emphasized truth at the expense of relevancy, value, and perhaps most importantly, understanding. It has blinded the profession to the fact that research methodologies, like the concepts of knowledge in which they are grounded, are human constructions. These methodologies define particular ways of seeing by designating refined procedures for systematically gathering information and organizing thought. Moreover, insofar as such procedures focus attention on specific aspects of experience to the exclusion of others, research methodologies also represent ways of *not* seeing. It is in this regard that this paper argues that the demands of the social sciences methodologies have dominated education research thereby putting philosophical methods on the periphery, hence a justification for leveraging. The pressure to have humanities employ the methodology of the social sciences risks chances of academic hegemony.

1. Introduction

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).

2.0. Research Paradigms in Education

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

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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.

2.1 Quantitative Research

From a philosophical perspective, Principles of 'Parmenides's philosophy permeates the philosophic underpinnings of the quantitative research approach which advocates for the ontology of being instead of the ontology of becoming, by emphasising the immutability of reality (Gray 2004). This reality has an existence in se and per se, unconditioned by human presence. That is what objectivism means. What a researcher has to know lies just aside but distant to the researcher, waiting to be discovered. This is the given reality, a single one, independent of human senses that has to be known (Crotty, 2005). Such an externality to social reality disables the researcher's agency to influence the social phenomena (Bryman, 2004). The distance that a quantitative researcher takes from reality - paradoxical, yet justified - is motivated by the orthodox principle of unbiased research; that is, research findings should be unadulterated. The researcher's exploration is a dispassionate observation of the natural and universal laws regulating and determining individual and social behavior (Cohen et al., 2007). A good understanding of a certain phenomenon is an indispensable pre-condition of change. For example, in the educational research, it is necessary for the researcher to understand how and why the educational system functions, and what role plays the culture upon the educational organization before proposing specific strategies for changing the status quo. It is important that the researcher dissociate himself or herself from the own cultural values in order to understand the social phenomenon as it is. The objective philosophy lies at the root of empiricism which epistemology considers the nature of knowledge as hard, real, capable of being transmitted in tangible forms,

because no knowledge exists beyond what is objectively and immediately observable (Opie, 2004). It is through this objective observation that the truth emerges.

A Critique of quantitative approach

Critics of quantitative approach argue that the traditional approach 'science only' is not invested in problem-solving, so the change agency remains dormant (Robson, 2002). In educational studies, the imperative of objectivity may become a barrier to the agency for the educational change. The rule of entering without preconceptions about the truth grants to the research the validity. However, the researcher is not limited only to tell the findings about reality, but is asked to undertake positive action as well. But, for the positivistic stance the researchers' investment in change action is not justified. The ethical issue laid at the foundation of this passivity relates to the principle of the representation which questions: On behalf of whom should researcher invest into changing the existing rules?

While addressing a critique of such an indifferent approach that considers human behaviour as rule-governed, Cohen (2007) reminds that 'the role of theory is to say how the reality might be changed, so as to be more effective' (p. 22). The research aims at the improvement of the actual social regulation, no matter the methodology used for investigation of the reality. For example, based on the research findings, several conclusions can be drawn with regard to ways inclusive education can be improved. The research is like the puzzle and if the puzzle-solver fails to solve problems, then the failure of existing rules will lead to new ones (Gray, 2004:19).

Baptising the quantitative method as 'value-free', the positivist axiology urges scientists to keep clear distinction between facts and values (Crotty, 2003). Such value absenteeism is difficult to maintain because research usually has an underlying moral agenda (Fraser, 2004). Furthermore, it is not possible to find some point

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from which realities can be viewed free from influence of the observer's standpoint.

Being intrinsic to the researcher's identity, the societal values render the metamorphosis of the researcher from a sensible person into an insensitive agent almost impossible. Moreover, loyalty to the objectivity principle may raise ethical questions for the researcher, especially when injustice and dishonest traditions in education are questioned by the research (Fraser, 2004). The aim of educational research is to unveil the values of the education system, with social justice being one of them. However, the latter, instead of offering equality, perpetuates the traditional class or race disparity. The empiricist epistemology has been criticised from another approach also, that stresses the necessity for knowledge transmission to others (Opie, 2004).

Another feature of the quantitative method is the wish for deductionism. To enter the inquiry process, the quantitative researcher makes use of deductive reasoning, which begins with a universal view of the situation and works back to the particulars (Gray, 2004). An a priori hypothesis is deduced from the theory which provides the concepts that explain the way for data collection (Bryman, 2004). For example, for the study of the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities in regular education, the hypothesis may originate from the inclusive education theory. Investigating the educational system, the research can explore the class structure and analyse how the school culture can impact the power relations in the classroom.

For the sake of objectivity, findings have to be built upon demonstrable facts or observations. As a consequence, descriptive and explanatory methods, such as surveys and experiments, are put in place to capture the reality which should be explained in terms of variables. For an objective reading of reality, the quantitative researcher employs empirical methods to test if a valid premise can be deduced from a valid conclusion (Cohen et al., 2007). In adopting a scientific approach, statistical numerical methods are employed, with the aim of providing an objective scientific knowledge (Burges, H., Sieminski, S., and Arthur, L., 2006). Research strategy is directed toward quantification in order to provide explanations for the findings that can be generalised. This is a nomothetic approach in which findings are presented as objective facts and established truths (Gray, 2004). The truth comes from data that are gathered in statistic ways such as surveys. However, surveys samplings present problems with the population representation (Bell, 2006). How do researchers know that the population under investigation is truly representing the whole population? This question is related to the concern of generalisation of findings for the whole population based in a certain sample.

Another concern for quantitative research is the experiment use which does not lead to the advancement of the knowledge because hypothesis do not relate to facts but to concepts (Raviola, 1986). However, quantitative research is necessary for the investigation of the education as a social institution with structure and functions. By capturing the interaction between social institutions and individuals, quantitative research addresses issues at a macro-social-level. In education research, the quantitative research explores the functions and dysfunctions of the education system, with the aim of improving it.

2.2. Qualitative research

Questioning quantitative ontology and epistemology with regard to the externality of the knower to the known and the usability of a natural science approach to the study of social life, the opponents of quantitative research furiously objected to the objectivist view of social world. The qualitative researchers reject the view that truths' about social world can be established by using natural science methods (Robson, 2004). Both camps were engaged in a fervent competition for hegemony, driving the research community into a dichotomised division, running in a parallel track to reach the same end, without crossing lines. Opposing the view of the social actor as an

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outsider of social world, qualitative researchers, however accept that there is an objective reality with which our mind has to work with to create meanings (Crotty, 2003). Some realism can be detected here because there is a portion of the 'same blood' running in the veins of both research strategies. Although holding different epistemological positions, both constructivism and objectivism are still based upon the ontology of being (Gray, 2004). The constructionist ideas played out in epistemology are perfectly compatible with realism expressed in ontology. Furthermore, to say that the social reality is both meaningful and socially constructed is not to say that it is not real. It is through the interaction between a researcher and social properties that the meaning making is conceived. This argument is supported by research work in which social phenomena and their meaning is continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2004). Not only is there an interaction between the knower and the known, but it is intentional too.

The argument on 'intentionality' implies the presence of an innate agency of the knower to construct the social reality (Crotty, 2003). In social research the meaning is constructed not discovered (Gray, 2004). As long as we live in a socially construed multi-reality, the reality is not a single one, but multifaceted. The subjects construct their own meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. The social realities are socially constructed and they alter each time the actors change (Robson, 2002).

Contrasting the deterministic attitude of objectivism with reality, constructivist researchers have adopted a relativistic approach maintaining that there is no external reality independent of human consciousness. There are only different set of meaning which people attach to the world (Robson, 2002). Through the process of investigation, the research participants have constructed the meaning of inclusion and exclusion, by discussing in their own words what these concepts meant to them in practice.

The qualitative methods allow the immersion of the researcher in the social settings, and facilitate intersubjective understanding between the researcher and the participants. Qualitative methodology calls the research participants to construct the reality with the help of the researchers (Robson, 2004). A triple hermeneutic analysis urges researchers to interpret: the participants' views on social world, the researcher's point of view and the interpretations interpreted in terms of theories (Bryman, 2004).

Qualitative research is a threefold puzzle: the situations are fluid, behaviour evolves over time and individuals are unique and non-generalizable (Cohen et al., 2007). To solve the puzzle, the researcher has to become an intelligent bricoleur in order to approach the object with a radical open-mindset. The research offers the potential for new richer meaning. The research is an invitation for interpretation (Crotty, 2003).

Contrary to the deductive approach of the quantitative research, the qualitative research commences the project with an inductive stance from a particular situation, leading to a theory generated from data. The qualitative research inquires about people's perceptions about the social context. Investigating human affairs, researchers are concerned with the individuals (idios) which makes qualitative research ideographic. Data collection and analysis are carried out to see whether patterns suggest relationship between variables and in order to infer generalizations and even theories (Gray, 2004). Upon completing this stage, researchers go back to collect more data in an iterant process (Bryman, 2004). The axiology of interpretive episteme asks for the researcher to stay close to the object and convey personal values through research.

The constructivist paradigm grants unrestricted freedom to a researcher to express his/her own values. However,

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researcher's values are bound by confirmability requirements that assure research validity and reliability (Bryman, 2004). For the qualitative research, the individuals' values and self-representation is important.

Qualitative methodologies, whose subject matter is people, include: ethnography, case studies, and bibliographical research (Robson, 2002). The techniques used are accounts, participant observation, and personal constructs (Cohen et al., 2007). The main characteristics of qualitative research, such as empathy, contextualization, flexibility and problem-solving, are extensively used in educational studies. Grounded theory is another main feature of qualitative research. However, the main task of research in education is to sensitise the stakeholders' community regarding the need to provide conditions for inclusive access and quality of education. Concerning the validity of qualitative research, at least two criteria are conditional: the trustworthiness and the authenticity (Bryman, 2004).

In qualitative research, there is no true or valid interpretation, but useful interpretation (Crotty, 2003). Furthermore, qualitative research involves honesty in order to guaranty the reliability (Robson, 2002). Indeed, in social research, it is very difficult to prove the truth, which makes the relatability preferred to generalizability (Opie, 2004). The concept of meaning-making is indispensable to educational research. At the very least, the qualitative research can facilitate a mind-set for change. Constructivism accommodates the uniqueness and promotes interaction of unique individualities in a common environment (Child, 1986).

3.0. Philosophical Methods as Fulcrum of Educational Research

Philosophy as a practice of searching for truth and its understanding stands several places in educational research. Research itself having a connotation of searching again, has the import of doubt. Given this orientation, there is nothing like having a new research. In other words, research starts from what is already known,

that puzzles the mind for further investigation. Merita (2014) contents that research inquiry is an endless journey by which researchers set out to discover the truth. No matter what kind of truth contending to pursuit, the researchers pledge allegiance to conditions that qualify the inquiry as a valid research.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) observed that social research is an intentional investigation aiming to explore and to offer solutions for complex social problems. Merita (2014) adds that besides an investigation the contemporary problems, the social research is an organized effort for understanding the social construction of knowledge. In education, the enterprise of research is needed to provide conditions for adapting to the huge challenges of a rapidly changing world, where what works today does not work tomorrow. This way, philosophy and the philosopher finds ground in as far as educational research is concerned.

Amasa and Shumba (2012) discuss that there is a micro-political issue regarding the relationship between philosophers of education and educational researchers with educational researchers sidelining philosophers of education. To this end, both sides tend to miss fruitful exchanges and development of ideas on both sides. As Amasa and Shumba (2012) put it that:

(…) educational researchers have often tended to suffer major disasters by failing to first analyse their concepts while rushing to build a lifetime of research on a weak conceptual foundation. In addition, it is (…) contention that the place of philosophical inquiry is being rendered invisible in discourses of educational research. (Amasa and Shumba, 2012:1)

Stubley (1992) noted that humans have continually sought to expand and open the frontiers of knowledge in an effort to better understand and thereby use to advantage the world in which they live. At the heart of the quest has been an overriding concern for truth and certainty. Early scholars sought truth through reflection

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and logic. Later, the scientific method was developed as a means of ensuring that logical deductions were grounded in propositions which could be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. To know with certainty required objective and reliable measurement devices and the development of stringent research designs which would enable perceptual verification of relationships and generalizations such as cause and effect. The current quantitative-qualitative controversy is an extension of this methodological vigilance, with proponents of both approaches striving to achieve and demonstrate objectivity and reliability within their own context.

According to Oduor (2010), social sciences enjoy great prestige in academia and in society at large. This is understandable, as many thinkers, impressed by the great accomplishments of the natural sciences, endeavour to attain corresponding achievements in studies of human individuals and societies. The tremendous influence of the social sciences is evident in the fact that it has become almost customary for scholars and social activists to demand "facts and figures" whenever a claim is made about an economic, social or political issue. While this approach encourages a considerable amount of objectivity in the endeavour to understand the causes and nature of such problems, it has also resulted in the unwarranted assumption that all disciplines must employ the empirical methodology of the natural and social sciences. Thus traditional distinctions between the humanities and the social sciences are in danger of being blurred, as the humanities such as philosophy, fine art and literature are put under pressure to employ the methodology of the social sciences. The pressure to have humanities employ the methodology of the social sciences risks chances of academic hegemony.

3.1. The Value of Philosophy in Research

According to Amasa and Shumba (2012) the first thing that Philosophy does, or should do, is to develop imagination. It involves creative thinking in that it:

(…) should imagine forms other than those given, (…) should not dogmatically accept any imposition, (…) should create the different, (…) should propose the dissimilar (…) should widen the realm of possibility (…) should rebel against the one-dimensional character of established reality (Russell 1998 as quoted in Amasa and Shumba, 2012).

Inquiry usually starts when problems arise concerning things, which before then had been taken for granted. Thus each time we speak of inquiry, we are expressing our feelings of difficulty or frustration, doubt, formulation of the problem, hypothesis formation, efforts to test hypothesis, discovering of evidence which contradicts the hypothesis, revising the hypothesis to account for contradictory evidence and applying the revised hypothesis to life situation. We often make judgments as products of inquiry. Smith (1983) explains that;

The process of inquiry is not an end in itself; its value lies in the fact that it leads towards the truth. Progress is a vital reinforcement reinforce of the practice of inquiry. If we want a practice to be valued, we must be sure of its association with its intended product. What is essential to the progress of inquiry is what Whitehead termed "scholarly ignorance" (Reed 1992: 150). The very recognition that there is something we do not know, there is something important to be gained by the process is what gives inquiry its existence (Gardner 1996: 106). While many would like to argue that all that philosophy should help us do is to think well, to think better, it is not enough to think well to be a philosopher. It is not enough to be critical with our ideas and beliefs. We have to distrust what is given. We have to remove everything, question what is affirmed, show what is hidden, and discover what is covered.

In effect philosophy makes apparent what is latent. It is more than a critical mode of thinking but rather a critical task and philosophy's critical task is inquiry. Inquiry is interpreted as going beyond information to seek

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understanding; intentionally bringing about significant changes of thought and action through active reflection. The formulation of questions for reflective thought is the special task of philosophical inquiry and the issue is "what is the problem?" which depends on "What is this all about?" and "Without a formulated question there can be no inquiry" (Giarelli and Chambliss 1984). Inquiry mediates between immediate experience and experiment and promotes intelligent development of value. As a result philosophical inquiry can be referred to as a self-corrective practice in which a subject matter is investigated with the goal of exploring and discovering or inventing ways of dealing with what is problematic (Topping and Trickery 2007: 274).

As theory, philosophical inquiry can be said to be a tool which educational researchers engage to work out a theoretical framework that is closely related to their orientation to their field consciously or unconsciously. In this sense, "theory is a 'worldview', a way of looking at and explaining a set of phenomena" (Martusewicz and Reynolds 1994: 5). Referring to education and philosophy, Gutek defines theory as "a grouping or clustering of general ideas or propositions that explain the operations of an institution, such as a school , or a situation , such as teaching and learning "and these ideas are "sufficiently abstract and general that they can be transferred and applied to other situations other than those in which they are directly developed" (Gutek 1988: 250). It is an opinion that originates from trying to establish generalisable patterns from facts, information or practices.

Theorising about the world is part of a social process and therefore, theory itself can be considered a social construction. A social construction/ social process arises out of humankind's desire to explain and/or to change the world. Theory and theorising raise questions of philosophical nature and to become engaged in raising these questions is doing philosophy; hence they both become modes of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical

inquiry involves being nagging; cajoling us into asking more questions about the nature of things, generating doubt and uncertainties (Eisner 1991). We, therefore, question whether is this not what scientific educational researchers do; despite their persuasion; quantitative, qualitative, philosophical/historical or otherwise?

3.2. The Role of Philosophical Inquiry in Research

Questioning is an essential activity of philosophy; the making of open questions and the opening of given questions. It is about formulation and correction of questions; asking questions to answers – always in a provisory and tentative way; questions never totally closed. Philosophy begins with questions, develops itself with questions and would come to an answer if its questions were closed. On many occasions, researchers and practitioners in education are victims of their own practice and reproducing steps over and over again without stopping to think: What does it mean or to reflect on their values and beliefs as educationists. This is the business of philosophy as an activity, and as a way of life (Morris 1999: 4). The central concern for philosophy since ancient times has been how to think critically although the place of philosophical inquiry that through its use of critical thinking remains misconstrued.

At the lowest level, philosophical inquiry offers the tools for examining issues that are often taken for granted in human life. If by research in education is meant a disciplined attempt to address questions and solve problems through the collection and analysis primary data for the purpose of description, explanation, generalization and prediction (Anderson 1990: 4), then it is the clarification of the aims of the research that philosophical inquiry is most helpful. Researchers require the clarification of concepts, analysis and appraisal of arguments, statements and theories and the integration of such understanding with practical issues of the educational process can be legitimate of philosophical inquiry in education. Philosophical inquiry in educational matters is an activity or method "a disciplined, systematic

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way of thinking about a problem leading to the illumination of conceptual meaning and understanding and appraisal of educational policy and practice" (Seshadri 2008: 4). Seen from this perspective, all inquiry into educational matters is the core business of educational researchers, hence the need to engage in the intellectual activity of conceptual analysis and elucidation.

Philosophical inquiry in educational research serves the purpose of analysing a term or a concept, showing its multiple uses and meanings with clarification as its primary aim. It involves arguing for internal and external distinctions that significantly separates dissimilar meanings. Often clear disagreements and misunderstandings in research are rooted in the use of terms/concepts in absolutely different ways. In carrying out any form of research the educational research cannot afford the leisure of being unphilosophical to work with clear concepts in order to shape their research efforts. It is through elucidation of concepts that the conceptual is isolated from fact, value or moral opinion. Any research in education worth its name should as well consider a close examination of the meanings of words with reference to vagueness, ambiguity, emotive overtones. By becoming clear about the varied meanings, it becomes possible to focus better on what actually is problematic. There are times when an unexamined concept may mask research and researchers. Ambiguity always obscures and deceives research from getting close to meaningful reality. Many researchers have often failed to pass the test for their failure to show clarity and precision in key terms thereby proceeding without showing careful and reasoned thinking. From this position, ambiguity is sloppy thinking and no successful educational research deserves its name if its constituent parts are ambiguous.

Philosophising in educational research would include a painful process of slow discovery of truth through asking questions. Through the attitude of austerity and humbleness the educational researcher problematises, describes and interprets the facts, processes and situations at hand. It is against this background that Lipman (1988) came to conclude that philosophical inquiry "……….attempts to clarify and illuminate unsettled, controversial issues that are so generic that no scientific discipline is so equipped to deal with"(Lipman 1988: 91). It is also in the ambit of philosophical inquiry to explore the hidden assumptions underlying a particular view or broader school of thought by investigating the hidden premises, assumptions and prejudices.

In addition, philosophical inquiry makes an immense contribution on educational matters by sympathetically or critically reviewing a specific argument offered elsewhere and detecting logical flaws in previous arguments, slippery uses of key terms. It may also seek to strengthen the argument or to tear it down through objections. This involves engaging in processes of mapping the boundaries of the problem under investigation by the creation of imaginative cases, invented cases, suppositions cases, and counter-factual instances. Whether in the empirical or qualitative domain of research, we find both research perspectives engaging the researcher in the activity of appraising educational statements by interrogating the logical grammar of the sentences to determine their logical status and arguments.

It is therefore deductible that in order to arrive at a relevant and rigorous research philosophical inquiry is implicit theory at all levels of the research. It will examine and reappraise the assumptions of the existing theories by asking questions such as: are they sound? Are they testable or metaphysical, are they acceptable? Research will also involve some justification of the prescriptive conclusions of the available theory in terms of the assumptions and well as testing for consistency of arguments and the internal coherence of prescriptions. It is in this respect that we argue that all that educational researchers do is philosophical inquiry. As Amasa and Shumba (2012) put it:

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(...)we question the alarm and fuss there is about the power struggle between empirical research and other alternate designs of educational research as they are all engage philosophical inquiry as theory that explains their practice. To that end, we argue that to engage in philosophical inquiry in education

4.0. Conclusion

Philosophical inquiry makes an immense contribution to one's capacity to frame hypotheses, do research, and put problems into manageable form. Philosophical thinking strongly emphasizes clear formulation of ideas and problems, selection of relevant data, and objective methods for assessing ideas and proposals. It also emphasizes development of a sense of the new directions

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