Whose Research? Whose Reality? The Identity Politics of Education Science

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Abstract

John Schostak argues that qualitative research methods give voice to the experiences and interests of under-represented groups in society, and therefore have greater emancipatory potential than quantitative methods. He highlights the political significance of the link between positivist-influenced ideas of what counts as valid educational research and the exclusion of qualitative studies from major government-funded programmes. Greater socio-political justice is a worthy aim shared by many educational researchers, and for this reason the chapter makes a valuable contribution. This response examines the links drawn by Schostak between debates at the philosophical and political levels, finds some to be overstated, and argues that social science research invariably reflects the perspectives and ethos of the researcher. In this sense, the emancipatory potential of educational research depends more on its scholarly orientation, or academic identity, than on the empirical methods it employs.

Keywords

Critical theory • Identity politics • Kaupapa Māori research • Relativism • Universalism

John Schostak's chapter on representation in educational research explores a series of binary oppositions or tensions in education, at different symbolic and socio-political levels, along with their links, overlaps and real-world consequences, for education researchers as well as for the communities and education systems where they live and work. His discussion centres on "representation" in the political sense, which is closely related to the notion of "voice" in social science research methodology. This discussion is important because "representing research in education is a fundamentally political act" (p. 6XXX). This response to Schostak's chapter starts from the understanding that effectively *every* act in education is fundamentally political.

Whose agendas are reflected in educational research? This question is sharpened by considering the fact that most educational research, and education in general, is funded from public or taxpayer money, which is politically feasible since disputes as to the value of the individual benefits that derive from success in education are rarely heard. All citizens pay for schools, and systems such as research that support schooling, yet it has been proved beyond doubt that the socio-economic benefits of school success devolve overwhelmingly to the children of the elite families in the particular community or social context (Scantlebury et al. 2002; Thrupp 1999).

Schostak suggests that educational research either reinforces central government policy, or empowers and emancipates "individuals to initiate creative forms of social organization" (p. 490). This bifurcation of purpose, he argues, arises from an "ambiguity" between existing socio-political institutions (e.g. education systems) and those which, as he puts it, "people themselves [are] instituting, or bringing about" (*ibid*). This political tension is reflected in schools in the familiar dichotomy between their social reproduction function and the classical educational ideal of liberty through reason.

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In the chapter's introduction, Schostak describes an underlying theoretical binary in relation to the methodologies, strategies or paradigms of educational research. This binary is manifested in the "struggle" between quantitative and qualitative research, which "seems like an impasse: either there is the detailed complexity of the 'case' and no generalisation; or, the broad generalisation from samples but no richness" (p. 492). Citing Kuhn's delineation of alternative paradigms of science, Schostak connects this debate to the larger "science wars" that have accompanied changes and resultant loss of stability in the world of Western philosophy during the last 50 years or so, not least owing to the contribution of Kuhn himself. By way of example, Schostak lists paired sites of this struggle, including "between quantitative or qualitative approaches, or between structural and post-structural or between modern and post-modern" (fn. 1, p. 490).

Here Schostak invokes the philosophical sense of representation, as in our ability to accurately represent reality. Adherence to belief in a unified, knowable reality that can be adequately represented by science, including educational research, contrasts with the view that "there is no unifying principle or law covering all things with certainty – any apparent universal can always be broken down or deconstructed to show that it has been historically produced" (p. 490). Schostak aligns the former view, which might be termed universalism, with a positivist philosophy of science and a tendency to regard research employing quantitative or statistically-based methods as more scientifically valid or truth-producing than other forms. This is a crucial observation in light of recent large, internationally influential programmes of government-funded educational research in the US[1] and UK aimed at school effectiveness and improvement, in which only quantitative studies have been included.

Schostak omits to clarify, however, that positivism is regarded by contemporary philosophy of science as outdated and ideological, as a distorted representation of the nature of science (Chalmers 1999; Putnam 2004). Further, his description of the opposing view goes to the opposite extreme – that of radical relativism – in a way that conflates the various levels at which words such as "reality" and "truth" can be understood. It is unhelpful to present the philosophical problem of representation in such extreme terms because it sets up a "straw" or false binary. Schostak does acknowledge the limitation of his binary model when he points out that quantitative methods also have emancipatory potential: "Quantitative research designs, nevertheless, provide a powerful framework for critical analysis and understanding of social and educational phenomena" (p. 491).

To engage in academic debate – indeed, to accept the very concept of language as a shared system of meaning – is to adhere, to at least some degree, to a belief in a knowable reality and our ability to represent it. This position moves towards a more nuanced view of relativism as a critique, or modification, rather than an outright rejection of universalism (Herrnstein Smith 2005). Rather than a binary choice between mutually exclusive opposites, both views on the philosophical problem of representation may then contribute to underpinning our understandings and investigations of complex social phenomena such as education or identity politics.

Rather than proclaiming these philosophical tensions as binaries that underlie our praxis as educational researchers and scholars, philosophical work in educational research might be better envisaged as characterising the boundaries (Rudolph 2010) of these positions I have labelled above as "universalism" and "relativism" – by which I mean exploring areas of shared agreement, and disagreement, between the groups represented in a democratic pluralist polity, in what Schostak terms the Public Space. Boundaries are not themselves either oppressive or emancipatory. In the interests of students and social justice, some boundaries must be broken down, while others need to be protected. Many such boundaries are useful in producing new forms of identity, and knowledge: this is one way to understand the phrase "knowledge economy" (Gilbert 2005). The next section fleshes out these philosophical "boundary tasks" by returning to the question of political representation in education and educational research.

A major argument in Schostak's chapter is that qualitative methodologies are able to give voice to the experiences of otherwise under-represented sociopolitical groups in a way that quantitative methodologies do not, and therefore can help empower the non-elite in society who cannot participate in democracy unless their views are heard. Describing quantitative methods as "reducing the experiences of people to measurable facts alone" (p. 489) links this argument to the larger debates in the philosophy of science described above, in which the term "reductionism" refers to this propensity in positivist philosophies of science.

Schostak's chapter therefore makes an important contribution to the education policy debate, where decisions to exclude all but quantitative studies from current and future government funding must be vigorously challenged, and their underlying socio-political elitism exposed. Indeed, he pinpoints the very reason why qualitative methodologies have emerged in education and related domains of social science. Complex objects of study such as children, learning, culture and language are woefully inadequately described by numbers.

Commentators of the stature of Schostak are thus important champions in this "battle" (p. 491) against a distorted form of positivism which, as he notes, "haunts academic and scientific discourses" (p. 489) – including, one might add, those halls of government where spending decisions about education are

[1] Examples include the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and *Foundations for Success: The Final Report of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel* (2008).

made. It is important to recognise how this philosophical debate about knowledge, part of the "science wars" referred to above, influences the domain of public policy. The long-standing debate or anxiety about whether or not educational research is scientific is linked to the claim mentioned above that quantitative research is "more scientific" than qualitative research. While the philosophical discussion continues, this shady assertion acts to mask anti-democratic influences on the purse of the contemporary nation-state, enabled by those who represent the interests of societal elites. Schostak's chapter includes educational research in a wider view of social policy in the interests of enhanced political representation for non-elite sectors of society.

And yet... the chapter is itself written in the invisible academic voice so deeply implicated in the universalist philosophy that masks the claims made by the West over the symbolic realms of reason and the academy. The chapter does not make completely clear the author's own stance on the political issues he discusses. In this sense the identity of the scholar, and the scholarship, remains undisclosed. No doubt in the interests of balance, the chapter attempts to fairly represent both sides of the political debates in education. Yet even to give credence (voice, ink, representation) to the idea that "the globalised market ... along with some form of democracy" can "perform the role" of a "uniting Law" that is "the final historical form of global order" (p. 493) would appear to undermine the expressed concern to "represent those elements of the social that are defined as being invisible or mere noise by those in power" (p. 492). Indigenous scholars have shown that the globalised market is the emerging contemporary form of imperialist Western capitalism (Stewart-Harawira 2005). In this way the chapter illustrates the principle that critical theory must be socially located in order to realise its emancipatory aims (Young 1989). This brings me to consider the identity politics of educational research.

The adoption of a particular identity or voice as an educational researcher and scholar is a strategy for doing better science, in recognition of the limitations of traditional research paradigms, as discussed above. In this regard it is important to remember that in educational theory, and in critical theory, the boundary is blurred between paradigm and methodology, theory and practice. This blurring is seen in the notion of "praxis" as well as in the emergence of "standpoint epistemologies" (Harding 1998). My own research identity, for example, offers allegiance to the tradition of Kaupapa Māori research, a local Aotearoa New Zealand form of critical methodology that has emerged in recent decades amongst Māori academics, in response to the "dominant detrimental stories" about Māori that have been told by Western educational research (Smith 1999).

Kaupapa Māori research aligns with other critical research traditions such as indigenous, feminist and postcolonial social science. These traditions share a historical origin that includes a critical examination of how the notion of the "other" in research reproduces the existing disparities in societal power of the historically researched group, as a basis for emergence. In other words, an emancipatory stance is built into each of these traditions by virtue of its reason for being (Ladson-Billings 2000). In this way, critical educational research methodologies are defined by identifying their political stance or "scholarly orientation" (Locke 2004, p. 2) rather than their empirical methods. A Kaupapa Māori research perspective asks whose knowledge, language and culture are represented in education as part of the methodology, while employing all applicable research methods to carry out the resulting investigations of interest. These research questions represent examples of what in Schostak's chapter remain unspecified as "multiple views" and "disagreements".

Educational researchers who work to increase social justice must engage with the "messiness" (p. 492) of voicing their own ethical location in relation to the ethical questions represented in their work, and in so doing become "situated researchers" (Hermes 1998) or, in Foucault's terms, "specific intellectuals" (Rabinow and Rose 2003). The emancipatory potential of educational research rests primarily on its identity, understood as the perspectives it represents, rather than on its empirical methods.

Note on Contributor

Ko Whakarārā te maunga, ko Matauri te moana, ko Ngāti Kura te hapū, ko Ngāpuhi-nui-tonu te iwi.

Georgina Marjorie Stewart graduated with an MSc in Chemistry from the University of Auckland in 1982 and an EdD from the University of Waikato in 2007. From 1992 to 2004 she held teaching and management positions in Māori-medium and English-medium schools in Auckland and Whangarei. She now lectures in Māori Education at the University of Auckland. Her research explores the intersections between science, identity and education.

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