

Can We Teach Methods That *Transgress*? Emancipatory Perspectives and the Praxis of Research

Aaliyah Baker
University of Dayton

Research concerned with advancing the goals of social justice can have a profound impact on the use of qualitative methods. The purpose of this research was to examine ways doctoral students challenge, embrace and consider epistemology, impact, and validity in designing qualitative research studies. Doctoral students are at a unique advantage when it comes to exploring epistemological paradigms in emerging research. The nature of shared dialogic spaces allows for uninhibited conversations to occur that access long-standing debates over validity and criticisms of subjectivity in qualitative research. Doctoral students engage in discussions about research and grapple with ontologies, epistemologies, and axiology of research questions. In turn, this strengthens their understanding of the impact of emancipatory perspectives in research.

Keywords: social justice, emancipatory perspectives, liberatory praxis, higher education teaching and learning, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”

—*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks

Qualitative research surrounding perceptions of reality influences human experience. Since qualitative research is grounded in theoretical perspectives and epistemologies that value human experience as knowledge and embrace identity and cultural awareness (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007), qualitative methods in education research can have an endless capacity for abolishing social inequities.

I have experience teaching research methods courses. My goal is to challenge students to become agents of social justice. I encourage students to question the methods we employ and seek solutions that are necessary for combatting injustices. Rigorous and systematic methods that shed light on unjust students experience and advance the eradication of social injustices are a step toward the dream of education as liberation (Freire, 2005). Students ask, ‘what methods should I use to address a set of research questions?’. However, I can appreciate when they also ask ‘how can my research transform the status quo?’ – A question that is situated within an emancipatory perspective.

What started as a process of self-reflection became an inquiry into a process for developing scholars of critical work in education. This study seeks to understand the behavior processes of doctoral students as they develop educational research questions and identify methodological paradigms. I explored participants’ beliefs about

research. I wanted to understand whether the ways students approach methodology can have an impact on achieving equity in education. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are doctoral students' perceptions of qualitative research methods in heavily quantitative fields?
2. What are doctoral students' perceptions of qualitative research courses in relation to the impact and value of emancipatory paradigms in educational research?

I believe that emancipatory perspectives are necessary for educational change – I've built my teaching, service, and scholarship around this. It is important to explore this concept considering the call for critical research that dismantles injustices. I chose to interview participants from the field of language and literacy because of the capacity to gauge a plethora of socially constructed histories and realities. Qualitative studies in language and literacy have been used to investigate schooling experiences within a context of unequal power relations and portray the cultural and linguistic diversity among communities of color (Heath, 2012). It was equally important to explore the attitudes and perceptions of doctoral students in relation to the impact and value of educational research in the field. Specifically as students go on to conduct research in local schools, districts, and communities. My goal is to understand what it takes to teach students to transgress (hooks, 1994).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in the theoretical perspective of transformative learning theory – the nature of exploring and revising previously held beliefs and perspectives (Kang, 2011). Transformative research can be ongoing, which is indicative of its ontological nature; much of the sense-making occurs through a process of collaborative discussion. Certainly, scholars who are committed to achieving educational equity can do so through diverse forms of scholarship. However, suppose the data and knowledge acquired emerges from critical social learning perspectives. In that case, the research is better positioned to improve educational opportunities due to the “process of flowing from philosophical assumptions, to the interpretive lens and on to the procedures involved in studying social or human problems” (Creswell, 2014, p. 44). In order to raise consciousness that challenges hegemony and transforms education, we must position social science research to deal explicitly with the struggles within our own internal convictions of patriarchal capitalism in the context of White supremacy and cultural imperialism (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

Critical consciousness is having knowledge of the past to help inform one of decision-making for the future that will result in the gradual undoing of oppression. Critical consciousness also deals with knowing that perception of reality and experiences alike is a certain kind of possession – as Paulo Freire, Brazilian philosopher, helped us to understand (Freire, 2005). The connection to critical consciousness in this research is concerning emancipatory perspectives and methods that call for challenging past historical oppression. Freire's work focused on empowering individuals to be agents of their own social change. Institutions are now strongly urged to explore their frameworks and practices that run the dangers of excluding or marginalizing individuals. Thus, the institution of research as an academy of human intellect that often centers institutions of higher education, are challenged to include rather than exclude, emancipate rather than disenfranchise. Institutions are now becoming critically aware and reflective of the disheartening reality of their past habits stemming from our work within the institution. In order to change systems of oppression, we have to be willing and able to think differently about the methods we use and the habits we adopt.

In my work as an engaged scholar, I am committed to addressing critical issues in education at large and achieving equity to better position institutions of higher education to improve outcomes and opportunities. I wish to advance institutional commitment that bridges the purpose and frameworks of this thought and action.

We want our students and successors to do this, know how to do this, and to see the importance of doing this. It is the legacy of a nation given the critical reflection of the nation's history. In order to change systems of oppression, we have to think differently and use critical reflection and empowerment both as a method and a habit of mind.

By theorizing and applying critical consciousness in the practice of engaged inquiry, I invite deliberate and courageous praxis-oriented research agendas that push against the margins of oppression. These research agendas might not resemble the comfort nor familiarity of the methods we have become accustomed to.

METHODS

Methodologies situated within social justice frameworks get co-constructed by the facilitation of critical reflection. Grounded theory, through systematic analysis of the data, revealed a theory and explanation for what happens in exploring epistemological paradigms as a professor of education research. Upon IRB approval, data was collected through surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. I employed the use of qualitative techniques such as memo-ing and open coding. Constructing a “discussion around how philosophical ideas are applied in the design and writing of a qualitative study” was necessary. (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, during research discussions I observed how doctoral students engaged in candid discussions about research, grappled with ontologies, epistemologies and the axiology of their research questions, and shared their concerns and challenges to completing the dissertation.

PARTICIPANTS

I implemented a doctoral support discussion group in hopes of fostering rich, dynamic conversations to support the development of student research. Purposeful selection was used (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). The participants were first, second or third-year doctoral students. Participants ranged in age, ethnicity, and career longevity (early, mid, to late career). Participants were invited into the study based on involvement in informal discussion groups in which they shared research aims, progress, and challenges with other members.

The four participants in this study were Linda, Evelyn, Casey and Erin (pseudonyms). Linda is a mid to late career, middle aged, African American female nearing retirement from a speech and language pathologist career. Evelyn, a mid-career, Caucasian female in her mid-thirties, teaches college level courses. Casey is also a mid-career, Caucasian female in her mid to late thirties who teaches college level courses. Erin is an early career, young African American woman in her late twenties who was a high school English teacher in a large, urban school district.

DATA COLLECTION

Informed consent forms were collected from all participants following IRB approval. I conducted brief, informal, and anonymous surveys collecting raw data. More data was collected through interviews, journaling, and recordings over six months. Open-ended conversations and in-depth interviews took place between researcher and participant or in small group settings during informal discussions. The interviews and other correspondence were face-to-face and via electronic mail, video conferencing, and telephone conversations. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data reveals that tension to ground doctoral work in a “methodology of science” elicits a danger of abandoning philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks that make qualitative research *the* most appropriate methodology for exploring social processes (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 49). Pivotal experiences in these doctoral candidates’ studies influenced the potential for self-identifying as qualitative researchers. All four participants reported feelings of doubt when considering a qualitative methodology for their research. For example, Casey was concerned about the practical value and impact her qualitative research could have for her tenure as a university faculty member.

Casey: Talking to people [about their experiences] makes me feel better ethically, but I don’t want people to look at my study and say ‘that it doesn’t count’.

Casey, Transcript, June 30, 2016

Erin’s research pushes against a traditional traditionalist approach to teaching. She reflects upon her work as an inner-city high school teacher in a school district laden with high rates of poverty, crime, and drop-outs. Erin

wants her dissertation research to tell a story of resilience to bridge theory with the lived experiences in her community but isn't sure how it will be received. Linda reported on her identity in the process of determining dissertation research:

Linda: I feel like there is a lot of push back against who I really am. I had fun with my qualitative research prospectus...I loved it, I was in it, it made sense. I enjoy talking with people, theorizing and exploring multiple [ways of seeing]. That's always been who I am. But, my fear is...within my profession...I don't know how valid qualitative research is. My fear is that most people are not interested in it.

Linda, Transcript, June 28, 2016

The manner in which the participants formulated research aims was embedded within qualitative philosophy:

Erin: My biggest question in my research is 'how do we get [marginalized] students to succeed in a dominant society'?

Erin, Transcript, Jul 1, 2016

Linda: I'd like to try to answer the question 'how is language impairment negatively affecting this person in school'?

Linda, Transcript, June 28, 2016

Evelyn: As a result of my research, I hope that the students who are most in need of support would benefit the most.

Evelyn, Transcript, June 29, 2016

Casey: Highlighting a problem can lead to understanding. For example, since authority lies in interpretation of text, perhaps exploring how reading comprehension interacts with a person's ideology [*is* critical pedagogy].

Casey, Transcript, June 30, 2016

However, the complexity of the social and cultural issues highlights the complexity of determining a research methodology that will be both meaningful to the communities they intend to serve and impactful in their respective fields. In turn, I could help these students see the connections to the postmodern theory which exists in their philosophical underpinnings. The in-depth, open-ended, uninhibited dialogic space created in the discussion group allowed for this. This supports particular methodological and pedagogical approaches to teaching.

DISCUSSION

The data revealed that qualitative positioning happens below the surface before the research materializes. Certainly, there are multiple research methodologies that can support the goal of equity in education. Most noticeably, multiple qualitative paradigms exist (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). One might argue that positioning research questions within a methodology that is rooted in interpretive frameworks occurs after having experienced or critically understood injustice. One might *become* a qualitative researcher due to a personally, socially, culturally, and historically rooted epistemological commitment to educational equity.

What was interesting about the participants' responses was that all participants spoke of the need to right various wrongs in education and society. Linda and Erin, the two African American female participants albeit with different life stories, reported on very specific injustices they had experienced. However, I believe one can become a highly effective qualitative researcher who is committed to social justice, without having personally experienced injustices. Freire (2005) wrote:

...every human being, no matter how “ignorant” or submerged in the culture of silence he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogic encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such encounter, the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it (Freire, 2005, p. 32).

Freire’s assertion can explain how one can become an agent of social change by way of understanding that education is an act of freedom and justice and that methodological practices can emerge from critical, anticolonial, antiracist pedagogies (hooks, 1994, p. 10).

The participants came to understand the importance of qualitative research to contextualize, interpret, and understand schooling experiences and educational injustices through multiple lenses, perspectives, and disciplines ranging from literacy, language disorders, special education intervention, hermeneutics, discourse analysis, content analysis, postmodern theory and curriculum and instruction. To that end, this research supports two recommendations for faculty of educational research:

1. Doctoral students must be prepared to understand transformative, postmodern, and de-colonial pedagogy and ethnic studies across disciplines.
2. In order to bring knowledge to action, doctoral students should engage regularly in conversations that challenge them to think about the sustainability, potential and impact of their research.

Qualitative research allows for inquiry into social processes such as language and literacy practices of children in schools and injustices of socially constructed isms. This research suggests the need for emancipatory perspectives in qualitative studies. When qualitative education research is conducted through an emancipatory lens, increasing the potential for liberation, we will continue to make strides toward equity in education.

It is my hope that through critical reflection and respect I can teach students to use the tools necessary to transgress boundaries. Hegemonic practices can be eradicated when the atmosphere of an educational setting fosters a commitment to social justice and change. Clark and Thompson (2016) assert qualitative research is the act of “doing community work” (p. 2).

By understanding the process of developing critical-thinking scholars, professors of educational research like myself can better prepare scholars to conduct high-quality research that benefits the lives of students, schools, and communities. Therefore, this research becomes both a pedagogical and methodological argument and can have practical value for educational change.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1984). *Essays on ideology*. Great Britain: Verso.
- American Educational Research Association. (2006). Standards for reporting on empirical social science research in AERA publications. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 33–40.
- Anfara, V., Brown, K., & Mangione, T. (2002). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 28–38.
- Barnett, D.L. (2008). *Experiences influencing degree completion articulated by doctoral students in educational administration* [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses full-text. ProQuest document ID: 3352034
- Clandinin, D.J., & Connelly, F.M. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N.K. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clandinin, D.J., & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Clark, A., & Thompson, D. (2016). Five tips for writing qualitative research in high-impact journals: Moving from #BMJnoQual. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1), 1–3.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

- Davis, S. (2010). *A study of the impact of a K-12 school district-university doctoral cohort on district leadership capacity* [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses full-text. ProQuest document ID: 3440991
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Gay, G., & Kirkland, K. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory into Practice*, 42(3).
- Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hollingsworth, S., & Dybdahl, M. (2007). Talking to learn: The critical role of conversation in narrative inquiry. In D.J. Clandinin (Ed.), *The handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 147–176). Sage Publications.
- Hook, G. (2015). Plugging in epistemology: A theoretical and methodological maneuver in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(7), 982–995.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97, 47–68.
- Lee, S.J. (2005). *Up against Whiteness: Race, school and immigrant youth*. Teachers College Press.
- Linde, C. (1993). *Life stories: The creation of coherence*. Oxford University Press.
- Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd Ed.). SAGE.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Vintage Books.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 471–486.
- Sleeter, C., & McLaren, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge.