

Urban Education Research: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: Significantly due to the institutional separation of theory and practice, the gap between academia and society continues to broaden, arguably pointing towards the failure of traditional educational research and, to an extent, the university's neglect to authenticate alternate epistemologies and methodologies that seek to elicit mobilization, activism, and reform.

The present state of public education within the context of equal access to all poses a great sociological challenge to research. How can alternate epistemologies in urban educational research elicit mobilization and change?

Theoretical Framework

We recognize that mainstream research, based on the integrationist perspective which emphasized consensus, assimilation, and the legitimacy of societal institutions, has obscured and distorted the significant historical role which class conflict and group interests have taken in shaping our existence as a people to the present moment.

Teresa Córdova (as cited in Mora and Diaz, 2003, p. 25)

Epistemologically research seeks to answer questions that are intertwined with societal concerns. Stemming from historical philosophical foundations, research poses questions that concern mankind and are somehow designed to improve the quality of his existence. Given that laws and government have historically been essential components of civilized society, and as such of concern to men, research has and continues to reflect political and economic societal trends. This poses an extremely intricate pattern when discussing the history of research in colony-based civilizations such as America, where the conquering class established their Euro-centered ideals and created a research agenda largely based on their culture and designed to perpetuate these ideals. Stemming from these contentions, it can be argued that societies produced by the colonial system tend to create and follow research protocols that are generally detached from social elements that do not reflect the dominant culture's interests.

Questions of cultural capital become complicated in colony-based societies because cultural value is dictated and propagated by the conquering or dominant class. Historically, Europeans settled in the Americas and sought to force their religion and traditions on the natives. This pattern of cultural homogenization is still alive hundreds of years later and epitomized by the ethnic and cultural make-up of the heads of government, university presidents, and CEO's of major corporations. In essence, our laws, economic capital, and body of knowledge guided by research generally reflect the traditions and interests of the dominant ethni-class.

Being that theory is designed to guide epistemologies and shape processes, one can argue that theorizing in America is highly culturally biased and thus narrow in scope. Specifically, it places value on the ideology and precedents set by the dominant majority. Similarly, theorizing within the context of research is mostly void of the cultural and socio-economic perspectives of minorities, or as Park, Miller, Mary, Budd, and Jackson (1993) explained, specific groups have been traditionally and purposely excluded from becoming active participants in the evaluation of

systems and institutions. On this notion, it is important to recognize that research does address the struggles of the minorities, but generally from a place of assumed superiority and unrecognized privilege. Specifically, research addresses minority issues from a detached quantified perspective that seldom gives a voice to the oppressed but rather pigeon-holds them to the role of “subject”, generally fails to address their position in the context of society (Córdova, 2003) and, thus, fails to address the root of the problem.

Educational research has historically placed value on highly mechanical, contrived studies that arguably oversimplify the human experience into cause and effect variable relationships. These are:

...born out of methodological fundamentalism that returns to a much discredited model of empirical enquiry in which only randomized experiments produce truth (House, 2006, pp. 100-101), such regulatory activities raise fundamental, philosophical epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in academy. (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giradina, 2006, p. 770)

Complicating matters, universities have traditionally recognized this type of research as having value, as evidenced by the fact service (defined as the area where theory and practice unite within the context of community), which is the least important criterion for eventual tenure (Baez, 2000; Blackburn & Lawrence 1995; Centra, 1993; Jarvis, 1991).

The Need for Changing Research Paradigms: Current Issues

With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed into law by President Bush in 2002, many studies have been conducted to determine learning gains or narrowing of the achievement gaps between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) conducted a study to determine if there were any changes in the achievement gap for math and reading. According to study findings in reading, the achievement gaps between White and Black and White and Hispanic fourth-graders in 2005 were not significantly different from those in 1992. In 2005 at the fourth-grade level, Blacks scored on average 29 points lower than Whites (on a 0–500 scale); and Hispanics scored on average 26 points lower than Whites. At eighth grade, there were no significant changes in the White-Black achievement gap between 1992 and 2005 and little change in the White-Hispanic gap, even though the gap in 2005 was slightly lower than that in 2003 (25 points compared with 27 points).

In mathematics, the achievement gap between White and Black fourth graders decreased between 1990 and 2005 (from 32 to 26 points). The White-Hispanic fourth-grade gap increased in the 1990s before decreasing in the first half of the 2000s, but the gap in 2005 (20 points) was not significantly different from findings in 1990. Among eighth graders, a similar trend existed in both the White-Black and White-Hispanic score gaps. In 2005, the White-Black gap was 34 points, and the White-Hispanic gap was 27 points.

According to the National Education Association (2006), the U.S. Department of Commerce data shows that more than one-third of students in today’s public schools are minorities and that by the year 2025, at least half will be. However, only 13% of their teachers are minorities, and more than 40% of schools across America have no teachers of color on staff. White women continue to dominate the teaching profession. As evidence, three out of four public school teachers are female, and 89% are White, whereas only 7% are Black, and 2% are Hispanic.

A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2007) reported on the changes that occurred in the racial and ethnic distribution of public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade between 1972 and 2005. In 2005, 42% of children attending public schools

were reported to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group, which is an increase from 22% in 1972. Additionally, the number of school-age children (ages 5-17) who spoke a language other than English at home has increased from 3.8 million to 10.6 million between 1979 and 2005.

Within the context of urban education, school attrition continues to plague urban communities. The “dropout rates in urban areas range from 40% to 60% and in certain cities dropout rates for some minority groups are as high as 75% to 80%” (McIntyre, 1992, p. 7). Another issue is that urban schools are having difficulty recruiting and maintaining qualified teachers than other schools (Obiakor & Algozzine, 1993; Rousseau & Davenport, 1993).

Alternate Research Epistemologies

Challenging the stronghold of “the lab coat” approach to educational research, where results obtained in contrived scenarios are presumably generalized to the real world, emerging schools of thought seek to authenticate the prestige found in practice and more importantly the role of societal constructs in education, as exemplified by the critical race theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Along with alternate epistemologies, methodology has also evolved and more socially conscious research methods have developed, amongst this participatory action research (Park, Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993). Several scholars have also contributed towards the humanization of educational research, among the classics Junguen Habermass (1998) and Paulo Freire (1970) and the more contemporary leaders include Lisa Delpit (1995), Lilia I. Bartolomé (1994), and Laurence Parker (2007), to name a few.

As a powerful alternate epistemology, CRT gives a voice to minorities on pertinent issues such as public policy, racism, and sexism (Parker, 1998; Moran & Whitford, 1996). CRT offers guiding principles that facilitate navigating through the “centrality of racism in school and university settings” (Parker, 1998, p. 49). Similarly, from a methodological perspective, participatory action research seeks to provide people with a forum in which to become self-advocates and take an active role in determining the quality of their future.

Revolutionary epistemologies and methodology function from a perspective inherently designed to empower as opposed to pacify or enable. More importantly, they validate the individuality of human experience and take an honest approach towards identifying societal constructs that contribute to the marginalization of groups of people.

Guiding Principles for Urban Research

Among the many complexities of conducting research in urban settings is the notion that generally research falls short of resulting in action due to its failure to clearly identify and thus expose where the problem lies. Too often urban settings are viewed as places to conduct research from a deficit-based perspective, meaning places where children are typically associated with learning deficits, schools are viewed as crime-ridden institutions, teachers as inept, and parents as generally not invested in their children’s education. “The newest iterations of this argument are the well publicized books *No Excuses* by the Thernstroms at Harvard (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) and the international version *Culture Matters* (Harrison & Huntington, 2000)” (Dowdy & Wynn, 2005, p. xix).

Contradicting these suggested deficits and operating from the principles of participatory action research, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), as part of The Indicators Project on Education Organizing, provides residents in urban communities with a forum in which to become advocates and decision makers in their neighborhood schools (Mediratta, 2007). As one of five case studies conducted by The Indicators Project designed to depict the impact of community organizing on school reform, the LSNA goes beyond theorizing and actually establishes a system of accountability based on performance indicators. The specific indicators

chosen typify a collaborative approach to decision-making with tenets such as leadership development, community power, and public accountability. “The theory of change” model employed by the LSNA, establishes the neighborhood school as a resource center that operates based on the needs of the community and follows principles set forth by its very own members. The reciprocity that occurs between the school’s and the neighborhood’s culture successfully addresses concerns that are of vital importance to both.

Bob Moses’ Algebra Project is another example of effective, grass-roots mobilization designed to promote and highlight the aptitude of minority students in urban areas and the expertise of the teachers that work with them (Checkley, 2001). From a political angle, this type of conscious action towards change from the masses reflects the type of powerful results that can be obtained when marginalized groups are given the opportunity to become autonomous and mobilize towards emancipation.

These real-life examples of effective, empowering alternatives to traditional research and methodologies, lead to questioning why research on other successful urban-based initiatives is so limited when compared to the extensive data base promoting a deficits-based approach. Albeit unintentionally oftentimes urban researchers have supplied more substance to the already negative pre-conceived notions of how urban schools operate and what urban youth represents (Nygreen, 2006). Highlighting this point, Dowdy’s and Wynn’s (2005) *Racism, Research, and Educational Reform: Voices from the City*, denounces the institutional racism that perpetuates the typically deficient status minorities are given in research.

The complexity of conducting research in urban settings does not originate from the socio-economic constructs traditionally associated with such settings, but rather from the researchers’ limited perspective. As evidence, the general point of reference is that of the traditional scientific method as opposed to a more experiential and practical approach (Gooden, 2002; Oakes, 1986).

Researchers in urban settings must make a conscious and mobilized effort to decrease the number of studies that exclusively expose the results of the socio-political hegemony affecting urban youth and institutions without offering viable action-based solutions to underachievement due to doctrinal disenfranchisement, school attrition, over-representation in special education programs, amongst a myriad of others. Instead researchers must denounce the policies, social institutions, and political agendas that precipitate these factors (Nygreen, 2006).

In order to honor the proposed call towards a practical, active, and solutions based-approach, research in urban settings must effectively point towards the root of the problem, which is not the community, the children, or the schools, but the political constructs affecting them. Accepting this contention implies that education is a political process and any associated change in its practice becomes a political challenge (Apple 1990; Giroux, 1983; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Nygreen, 2006), as such activism must be the key towards mobilization and change.

As suggested earlier, perhaps the greatest challenge to the urban research agenda is identifying the causes of the problems urban schools and students face, not exclusively the problems themselves. For instance, although it is important to inform the public about delinquency and school violence (not exclusive to urban settings), it is inherently more important to expose the processes within the educational system that precipitate and exacerbate these problems. As proposed by Smith (2000), more pertinent topics designed to confront and target existing problematic issues include: the marginalization of minority students in education, the

lack of cultural relevancy reflecting the interests and experiences of minority students, and the type of socio-cultural capital promoted by the educational system.

Research must advocate for social justice via acknowledging that specific political elements actively promote social and economic disparity, and arguably researchers have a moral responsibility to expose these agendas. Choosing to remain neutral to the existing situation is also a political stand. Recognizing and accepting societal struggles from a universal perspective generally creates culturally-relevant researchers that effectively promote learning milieus that value and celebrate cultural diversity (Murrell, 2006).

Contributing towards a potential paradigm shift in special education research also includes understanding and evaluating the results past and current research has precipitated. Although undoubtedly great contributions to the field of education have been made possible by research, it is still imperative to elicit action and change. The current and future emphasis of studies should shift from the evaluation of institutions, programs, and pedagogy and focus on examining the socio-political constructs from which these operate.

Education is not linear, but rather a reciprocal process or relationship where the students and teachers make sense of their environment from within the framework of their own socio-cultural capital. With this in mind, the relationship between education, power, and politics must be scrutinized from the perspective that the bases for healthy interactions or relationships are honesty, trust, equity, and thus justice. Once these prevail, the ultimate goal of education and research will shift from acculturation and indoctrination to empowerment and emancipation.

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