The history of qualitative research in education

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Over the past century, there has been a huge amount of qualitative research concerned with educational institutions and processes, carried out in many countries. Indeed, education has been a leading field in the development and application of qualitative approaches. In this chapter I will outline the history of this body of work, sketching the range of topics investigated, the diverse forms that qualitative inquiry has taken, and some of the disputes to which these have given rise.[1]

Before starting on this, however, it is important to note that rather different histories could be written, depending upon how the words "qualitative" and "education" are interpreted; and, also, according to which countries are covered. I will adopt a relatively broad conception of what counts as qualitative research: as involving the collection of data that are not pre-structured in terms of researcher-defined categories, so that analytic interpretations must be developed during the course of inquiry on the basis of the data. These data may take the form of open-ended fieldnotes, and/or audio- or video-recordings, produced by the researcher via observation or interviews, as well as already available or elicited documentary material (text, audio, and/or visual, still and moving) (Hammersley, 2013a). I will also employ a relatively wide conception of what would count as *educational* research. This can vary in terms of its substantive focus, since education takes place not just in schools and in further and higher education institutions but in other settings too—such as homes, workplaces, and recreational facilities—as well as in networks of various kinds, online as well as offline. The focus may also vary, of course, according to whether it is on teachers, on learning processes, on the motivations and orientations of students, on the role of technologies in facilitating learning or working against it, and so on. As we shall see, what counts as *educational* research has also been a matter of dispute in methodological and theoretical terms, for instance according to whether it simply provides education-relevant knowledge or must be geared *directly* to bringing about educational improvement or change.

While adopting a relatively liberal approach in these terms, I will limit myself to English-language qualitative research, and primarily to that produced in the UK or the US There is little good justification for these restrictions, my only excuses are the limits to my expertize and the space available.[2] Even within these limits, given the sheer amount of qualitative research that has been produced, coverage will necessarily be highly selective, designed primarily to give a sense of the range of types of work that emerged at different times; so, what is offered here is certainly not a fully comprehensive account. At the same time, it should provide a reasonably representative picture.

Today, qualitative research in education covers an extremely broad range of topics, takes a very wide variety of forms, and operates on the basis of a diverse range of fundamental assumptions about its purposes, about the nature of the phenomena being investigated, and about how they can best be understood. As we shall see, while the starting point was not some single coherent conception of what constituted qualitative educational inquiry, the proliferation of different approaches and the depth of disagreements has increased sharply over time. In large part, then, this account is a history of that process.

The early history of qualitative research in education

There are, of course, no absolute starting points in history. Qualitative research in education could be traced back at least to the child study movement in the 19th century (see, for example, Preyer and Brown, 1888), including Charles Darwin's "A biography of an infant", based on observations of one of his own children (see Hellal and Lorch, 2010). A little later, we could refer to Waller's (1932) *The Sociology of Teaching*, which drew on his father's experience as a school superintendent, his own experience teaching in a military academy, as well as case materials provided by teachers (see Everhart, 1989; Willower and Boyd, 1989). However, it was not until the 1950s that we find the beginnings of any sustained tradition of qualitative research in education, and so that is where I will begin.

[1]For general accounts of the history of educational research, see de Landsheere (1988) and Lagemann (2000). For accounts of the development of ethnography in the field of education, see Woods (1984) and Hammersley (2018).
[2]Some sense of developments in other parts of the world can be gained from Milstein and Clemente (2018), Egger and Unterweger (2018), and Modiba and Stewart (2018). These articles focus specifically on educational ethnography in, respectively, Latin America, Germany and Switzerland, and Africa.

This arose at a time when the dominant kinds of quantitative work in the field of education, and elsewhere, were coming under increasing criticism for failing to meet the rigorous standards they had set themselves and for frequently producing inconsistent or trivial results. Some argued that this stemmed from a fundamental mismatch between the, broadly positivist, philosophy of science that underpinned this work and the very nature of human social life (see, for instance, Bruyn, 1966; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). But also, around this time, there were growing doubts within the philosophy of science about whether positivism offered an accurate picture even of natural science, the most significant example being the revisionist account of the development of scientific knowledge provided by Thomas Kuhn (1962).

In the United States, an important initial development was ethnographic investigations by anthropologists of the relationship between schools and local North American indigenous communities (Spindler, 1955; Dumont and Wax, 1971; Wax et al., 1971; Erickson, 1977; McDermott, 2008).[3] This approach was later extended to investigate schooling in other types of local community (Wylie, 1964; Warren, 1967), distinctive forms of religion-based schooling (Peshkin, 1978), the role of key actors within a school (Wolcott, 1984), and educational inequalities within urban communities (Ogbu, 1974). Around the same time, in the field of sociology, drawing on the tradition of the Chicago School, Howard S. Becker (1951, 1952a,b, 1953) carried out a study of schoolteachers which significantly informed later work, such as that of Lortie (1975, 2009). Adopting a very different focus, Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) applied labeling theory and ethnomethodology in studying the role that counsellors played in shaping students' careers in a US school (see also Erickson and Shultz, 1981a). Cicourel followed this up later with a study of the role of language in educational decision-making and testing processes (Cicourel et al., 1974). Outside of anthropology and sociology there were some other pioneering qualitative studies of schools in the US, such as those of Jackson (1968) and Smith and Geoffrey (1968). The first was one of a number of studies that set out to document the reality of life in (American) schools, as against prescriptive accounts. The second was a much more methodologically deliberate study carried out by an observer initially trained in psychology but alienated from some of the main trends within that discipline, collaborating with the practicing teacher whose classroom he was studying. A little later Rist (1973), Cusick (1973, 1983) and Everhart (1983) provided further participant observation studies in schools.

In the UK, the origins of qualitative research are usually traced back to the work of Lacey (1966, 1970), Hargreaves (1967), and Lambart (1976, 1982), which was influenced by both anthropology and sociology, and focused on the differentiation of pupils—in the form of streaming and setting (tracking)—and the consequences of this. And others followed up with similar studies: Ball (1981), Abraham (1995). Later, Hargreaves adopted a rather different approach, applying labeling theory and ethnomethodological ideas in investigating *Deviance in Classrooms* (Hargreaves et al., 1975; Hargreaves, 1976). This reflected a significant shift in orientation within the field in the UK in the early 1970s and there was a considerable expansion in the amount of qualitative research carried out at that time (see Delamont et al., 1993). This included what was labeled "the new sociology of education" (Young, 1971; Sharp and Green, 1976); the development of ethnographic work drawing on symbolic interactionism and social constructionism (Delamont, 1976; Hammersley, 1974, 1976; Stubbs and Delamont, 1976; Woods, 1979; Woods and Hammersley, 1977; Hargreaves and Woods, 1984; Hammersley and Woods, 1984); the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, notably Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977); and the emergence of qualitative approaches in the field of educational evaluation, such as Parlett and Hamilton's (1972, 1977) "illuminative evaluation", and various forms of "case study" (Stake, 1995; Walker, 1978; MacDonald, 1974).

From the 1970s onwards, in both the US and the UK, there was also work by linguists, sociolinguists, and conversation analysts focused on describing the structure and process of classroom discourse (for instance, Cazden et al., 1972; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Stubbs, 1975, 1976; Payne, 1976; Mehan, 1979; McHoul, 1978; Green and Wallat, 1981, Green 1983), as well as investigating the relationship between language use at home and at school (for instance Brice Heath, 1982, 1983; Philips, 1983). Indeed, around this time there was considerable interplay between linguistics, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and sociology within the field of education. And this is an area where work has continued to develop, for example resulting more recently in the emergence of linguistic ethnography (Rampton, 2006; Maybin, 2006; Copland and Creese, 2015).

While much qualitative research in the 1970s and 80s focused on documenting what was happening in schools and classrooms, there were other sorts of work too. For example, there was some historical investigation of how various school subjects had become established in the curriculum, and how they had changed over time (Goodson and Ball, 1984; Cooper, 1985). Another new development was life history investigations of teachers' careers, showing the effects of external events and personal change over time, and documenting variation in career patterns, notably those related to gender (see Sikes et al., 1985).

From the 1960s onward, there were also some pioneering studies in the field of higher education, notably Becker et al.'s *Boys in White* (1961), a study of a medical school, and *Making the Grade* (1968), an investigation of the experiences and perspectives of undergraduate students in a US university. Meanwhile, Olesen and Whittaker (1968) carried out a similar study of the education of nurses. These investigations stimulated later work, such as Atkinson's (1997) investigation of medical students' experience of clinical training. There was also the pioneering work of Miller and Parlett (1974) on students' orientations toward assessment and examinations. And, in the 1970s, phenomenological approaches to student learning were developed in the field of higher education, under the heading of "phenomenography" (Marton, 1981; Gibbs et al., 1982). There were also a few studies of informal educational processes (see Becker, 1972; Geer, 1972, and other articles in the same issue of the American Behavioral Scientist; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

[3]Long before this some anthropologists had given attention to educational processes, a famous example being Mead's (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*. For an account of the history of anthropological work on education, see Mills (2012).

During the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st, qualitative research expanded hugely, covering many aspects of education. Initially, at least, much of it focused on publicly-funded schooling, and a great deal of it on the secondary level, but even early on there were exceptions. For example, there was the work of Pollard and others on primary schools, some of this taking the form of longitudinal ethnography (see Berlak and Berlak, 1981; Pollard, 1985, 1996, 1999); see also Andy Hargreaves' (1986) research on middle schools. There were studies of the teaching of particular subjects in primary school, notably science (Driver, 1983; Driver et al., 1985; Traianou, 2006). There were also some studies of elite private schools (Delamont, 1973; Howard, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011) as well as of vocational training courses (Bates, 1990; Bates and Riseborough, 1993). In addition, there were a few investigations of teaching and learning outside of school or college settings, for instance Alim's (2011) investigation of Hip Hop practice, Atkinson et al.'s (2013) research on operatic masterclasses, and Delamont et al.'s (2017) account of the teaching and learning of the Brazilian martial art Capoeira.

Perhaps not surprisingly, over time, there was increasing diversity in approach, even within particular disciplinary fields (see, for instance, Eisenhart's, 2018 discussion of the anthropology of education). Key aspects of this were the emergence of critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989; Carspecken, 1996; Beach and Vigo-Arrazola, 2020), and the development of participatory forms of inquiry, notably in the field of Childhood Studies (see, for instance, Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019). Both of these were influenced by the development of feminist ideas about social research methodology (see Fonow and Cook, 1991), and other theoretical and methodological developments.

A central theme in much work in the sociology of education, and in "critical ethnography", was the role of schooling in reproducing social inequalities. Initially, the focus was on working-class underachievement, and this continued to be a major topic (see, for instance, Dubberley, 1988; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Weis, 1990, 2004; Weis and Fine, 2000). However, from the 1980s, feminist researchers began to use qualitative methods to investigate the differential treatment of girls and boys in schools, and its effects (see, for example, Deem, 1980; Delamont, 1980).[4] This was often conceptualized as curricular and pedagogical discrimination against girls. For example, Clarricoates (1980) explored how primary teachers' gendered expectations shaped their treatment of children in the classroom. Coming from a rather different angle, and drawing on the techniques of sociolinguistics, French and French (1984) investigated the processes by which boys—or, rather, *some* boys—in primary schools gained greater attention from teachers than did girls. There was also exploration of the perspectives and strategies employed by female students to manage the conflicting expectations they faced and achieve their goals (see, for instance, Measor, 1983), and this led to a considerable amount of work looking at how different versions of femininity were constructed in school contexts and beyond (Renold, 2001) as well as research on girls' friendships (Hey, 1997; Gordon et al., 2001; George, 2007) and how they construct gender identities (Francis, 1998). Later there was also investigation of hegemonic and subordinated forms of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Renold, 1995; Skelton, 1996, 2001; Kenway et al., 2006; Swain, 2006).[5] In addition, some attention started to be given to the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender students in schools and colleges (see, for instance, Youdell, 2009).

In the UK, the move away from an almost exclusive focus on social class also led to investigations of the experiences of ethnic minority children in schools. As in the case of feminist research, this was often carried out within the framework of an explicit political orientation, this time an anti-racism which viewed official multiculturalism as an ideological cover for continued prejudice and discrimination, especially of an institutional kind. Much research set out to document discrimination against African Caribbean and South Asian students (Wright, 1967; Gillborn, 1990). In the US similar studies developed under the heading of Critical Race Studies (see Lynn and Parker, 2006). There was also investigation of the perspectives and strategies employed by minority ethnic students. For example, Fuller (1980) studied the ways in which a group of African-Caribbean girls adapted to their situation in school, seeking academic success while minimizing their conformity to the demands of teachers. Mac an Ghaill (1988) examined the relations between students from different ethnic groups and teachers in a boys' secondary school and in a sixth form college. In the process, he documented the stereotypes on which teachers operated and the range of adaptations adopted by students, these influenced not just by ethnicity but also by gender. This early work stimulated a whole range of later studies exploring the experiences and perspectives of ethnic minority children in UK schools (see, for example, Haw, 1998; Bhatti, 1999), as well as at how these influenced subsequent careers (Saeed, 2021).

During the final decades of the 20th century, and into this century, another major focus for qualitative research in education was the nature and effects of education policies. In a unique investigation Ball (1990) studied the policymaking process by interviewing politicians and officials who had been involved in formulating and implementing key legislation in the UK, and he and others carried out a series of studies of UK policies and their impact (for instance Gewirtz et al., 1995; Ball et al., 2000; Maguire et al., 2001; Perryman et al., 2011, 2017). A considerable body of work investigated the adaptations of schools and teachers to new policy initiatives and their implications for the nature of teaching and learning (Woods et al., 1997; Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Much of this research was concerned with the constraints that various national-level reforms imposed on more progressive forms of education, and the extent to which they worsened existing inequalities. There was also investigation of the impact of school inspections (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998) and of the effects of stress on teachers generated by rolling waves of new policy initiatives (Troman and Woods, 2001).

[4]It is also worth mentioning that most previous ethnographic work had been located in secondary schools, whereas feminists gave as much if not more attention to primary schools.
[5]For useful collections illustrating the nature of the work that was done subsequently, see Walker and Barton (1983), Woods and Hammersley (1993), Skelton and Francis (2003).

While I have tried to cover the areas in which qualitative research was most concentrated, there were many other topics investigated, from research on the changing role of technology in schools (see, for examples, Littleton, 2010) to the character of educational testing (see, for instance, Cooper and Dunne, 2000). But equally important has been the proliferation of new theoretical and methodological approaches, and this will be my focus in the next section.

Differences in orientation among qualitative researchers

There have been various attempts to conceptualize the increasing diversity in approach among qualitative researchers in education. These operate at different levels, or address it from different angles, and there is also variation according to which country is focused on. At a relatively specific level, Jacob (1987) and Delamont et al. (1993) sketched the various approaches to be found in the United States and the UK, respectively, in the period up to the late 1980s. Subsequently, many other kinds of work differentiated at this relatively specific level have been added, such as Activity Theory (Roth et al., 2012), Autoethnography (Goode, 2019), the use of Focus Group Methodology (Williams and Katz, 2001), visual methods (Prosser, 2007), and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Cooper and Glaesser, 2012).

At a deeper, more philosophical, level, distinctions were often drawn between broad "paradigms", such as "positivist/post-positivist", "critical", and "interpretive" (see Eisner and Peshkin, 1990; Guba, 1990; see also Hammersley, 1992; Piper and Stronach, 2004). The term "paradigm" was taken from Kuhn's (1962) work on the history of natural science, but interpreted in a broad way as referring to a set of fundamental assumptions—about the world and how to understand it, as well as about the proper purpose or intended product of research—that could underpin social scientific work. The post-positivist paradigm was portrayed as retaining a commitment to the model of natural science, though interpreting this in a different and more flexible way than positivism. The "critical" approach treats research as properly engaged in challenging the socio-political status quo, focusing on social inequalities, whether in terms of social class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ability/disability. The interpretivist paradigm places emphasis on the task of understanding the perspectives of the various actors involved in the education process and how these shape their actions. While these broad differences in orientation continue to be relevant today, further differentiation within and beyond them has rendered the field even more complicated. This complexity is nicely illustrated by the fact that influential categories of qualitative inquiry—such as "ethnography", "action research", and "discourse analysis"—each contain multiple variants, often differing in fundamental respects.

Not surprisingly given this process of diversification, there have been recurrent disputes among qualitative researchers relating to methodological and theoretical matters. These began in the 1950s within the anthropology of education over the "culture and personality" perspective that was adopted initially in this field. While later work maintained the focus on culture, some of it adopted a more micro-focused approach, and rejected a psychological in favor of a more sociological orientation (see McDermott, 1977; Erickson and Shultz, 1981b; Garcez, 2008). These moves generated a significant debate with anthropological advocates of holism. They insisted that what happens in particular situations on particular occasions cannot be understood without being located in an understanding of the wider community, the whole society, and perhaps even global processes and relationships (see, for instance, Lutz, 1981). And, along with this, there were also some who emphasized the need for cross-cultural, comparative analysis. But many insisted that detailed analysis of processes of social interaction is required if these are to be understood, raising questions (implicitly or explicitly) about the validity of claims about macro-level contexts. Over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st, there has been continuing tension and oscillation between these two emphases.

This issue, frequently conflated with differential weight given to "structure" and "agency", also arose within the sociology of education in the 1970s and 80s. This reflected the growing influence of Marxism, in the wake of the new sociology of education. Some Marxists treated schools as locked into the reproduction of capitalist societies (see, for instance, Anyon, 1980, 1981), but many qualitative researchers in the UK, while not denying the pressures on schools to serve this function, emphasized the agency of teachers and students and the significance of processes of social interaction (see Hammersley, 1980). In addition, they complained that Marxist analyses failed to engage sufficiently with the problems involved in producing and analyzing data about school processes, tending to present just-so stories derived from Marxist theory rather than well-researched accounts (Hargreaves, 1982). A famous example that stimulated considerable controversy was Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labor*, a study of a small number of working-class boys with an oppositional attitude to school. While Willis stressed the agency of the boys, he portrayed them as exercising that agency in such a way as to condemn themselves to working class jobs, thereby reproducing capitalism (for critical assessments, see Turner, 1979; Walker, 1985; McGrew, 2011).

Somewhat similar debates took place in the United States, one example being a dispute between Cusick (1985) and Everhart (1985), (Cusick and Everhart, 1985). Both these authors had produced participant-observation studies of schools, and a journal assigned them to review one another's books. Cusick complained that in Everhart's account: "Although students are described and presented in a human and believable manner, administrators and teachers are described only through the eyes of the students and the Marxist perspective. In effect they are presented as mere unwitting tools of capitalist oppression" (Cusick, 1985:71). Meanwhile, Everhart criticized Cusick's "overly-rigid adherence to a functionalist approach", and a failure to "address at all the manner in which [the school] system works within the context of the larger sociopolitical order" (Everhart, 1985:75).

Another area of dispute was the relationship between research and educational practice. An influential strand of research coming out of the educational evaluation movement promoted various forms of action research (Hendricks, 2019). As part of this it was often argued that education research must be *educative* in character, in the sense of directly serving the improvement of educational

practice, rather than simply contributing to knowledge about educational processes, institutions, and outcomes. This sparked responses from some qualitative researchers committed to more "academic" forms of research, who questioned the quality of much that came under the heading of educational evaluation and action research (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985) and even whether action research could be a coherent enterprise (Hammersley, 2004). As already noted, though, action research fragmented into a range of competing approaches that were incompatible with one another in significant respects, from those adopting a "critical" orientation, according to which action research could challenge capitalist society, to those who viewed it entirely in terms of the educational development of individual teachers or the solution of practical classroom problems (see Kemmis, 1988).

In the 1980s there were debates sparked by feminism and anti-racism, with criticism directed at mainstream research for neglecting gender and race/ethnicity, and thereby overlooking significant forms of inequity. However, there was also some counter-criticism, with critics arguing that much research guided by feminism or anti-racism was speculative in character, substituting political assumptions for careful and systematic empirical investigation of what happens in schools, and of the complexities involved in the production of inequalities in educational outcomes (see Foster et al., 1996). For example, Foster (1990) challenged the adequacy of some of the work that claimed to document discrimination against ethnic minority students by teachers in UK schools, pointing to serious weaknesses in the evidence on which conclusions were based, and arguing that a bias was operating in the interpretation of this evidence.[6] Foster's criticisms of anti-racist research, supported by others (Gomm, 1993; Hammersley and Gomm, 1993; Foster et al., 1996), were met with a counter-charge of "methodological purism": of using methodological arguments to discredit evidence of discrimination, as a result of unconscious racism (Gillborn and Drew, 1993; Troyna, 1993; Gillborn, 1995). The issues involved here were important ones, but little progress was made toward resolving the disagreement. Indeed, the debate raised questions about whether there was any scope for dialogue between "critical" and analytic approaches; some commentators appeared to remove any possibility of this (see, for instance, Scheurich and Young, 1997), reflecting the growing influence of Critical Race Theory (Taylor et al., 2016; Dixson et al., 2017).

From the 1980s onwards, research on education, as in other fields, was influenced by the range of ideas often given the label "postmodernism" (see Stronach and MacLure, 1997). These amounted to a selective appropriation and interpretation of influential French philosophical thinking from the 1960s and early 70s, particularly the work of Foucault and Derrida. One central theme was the role of various types of institution, including schools, in normalizing behavior by pedagogic or therapeutic means—this often done in the name of scientific expertize. Postmodernism highlighted the rhetoric and functioning of social science in this process, and reinforced a commitment on the part of many researchers to the championing of marginalized groups and their "subjugated forms of knowledge". As part of this, claims to scientific expertize were attacked, not least through questioning the very possibility of the kind of knowledge science purports to offer, in which facts are presented on the basis of scientifically-controlled observation and analysis of one sort or another. In the firing line here was not just quantitative research but also many forms of qualitative inquiry. Any capacity of language to represent phenomena existing independently of it, or indeed to anchor and preserve meanings in the manner required for this, came to be denied by some educational researchers. The artifactual, if not fictional, character of all accounts of the world was emphasized, with literature and art increasingly treated as the appropriate model rather than science; though the rhetorical value of the latter continued to be recognized. The tension that had always been present within qualitative research between science and art was given a new twist, in fact several twists (see, for example, some of the articles in Reid et al., 2014).

An important effect of postmodernism was to increase the amount of attention given to the role of discourse (MacLure, 2003): official accounts, especially, but also those of informants in interviews, were no longer to be treated as accurate or inaccurate representations of the world but rather investigated for the work that they do in constituting and sustaining particular "truth regimes" within educational institutions and elsewhere—especially ones taken to be unjust. Thus, discourse analysis was often used to serve the same "critical" function as earlier forms of Marxist ideology critique, even though the previously assumed contrast between ideological and objective scientific accounts had been abandoned. Another effect of postmodernism was an exploration of alternative ways of pursuing and presenting the product of educational inquiry, for example the use of poetry, dance, and drama, much of this coming to be included under the heading of "arts-based research" (Bagley and Cancienne, 2002; Atkinson, 2012; Sikes, 2012; Leavy, 2018).

In the 1990s and into the 21st century a major conflict was prompted by the evidence-based practice movement and its promotion of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews as the "gold standard" source of evidence for educational policymaking and practice. Here, the older debate between quantitative and qualitative approaches was revived, albeit in a somewhat different form. There was growing public criticism of qualitative research in some influential quarters, on the grounds that it lacked scientific validity and that it did not serve educational policymaking and practice effectively (Hargreaves, 1996; see also Hammersley, 1997; Hillage et al., 1998; Tooley and Darby, 1998; National Research Council, 2002, Hammersley 2007). In the United States, a key development was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("No Child Left Behind") in 2001, which prioritized RCTs as a source of evidence in relation to educational practice. Increasingly, the use of RCTs was institutionalized by government in both the US and the UK (Hammersley, 2013b). Qualitative researchers reacted sharply against what they regarded as a devaluing of their work (see Lather, 2004a,b; Denzin and Giardina, 2006; Torrance, 2011). In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council's *Teaching and Learning Research Program* (TLRP), initiated in 2000 and ending in 2011, boosted investment in education research designed to make a practical contribution to educational practice; though quite a lot of this research was

[6]For full references to Foster's work, and a discussion of the debate, see Hammersley (1995: ch. 4).

qualitative in character. Subsequently, sponsored by the UK Government, the Education Endowment Foundation has funded a considerable amount of research aimed at providing evidence about the effectiveness of various educational strategies and practices, much of this relying on RCTs.

In the wake of attempts to defend qualitative research against the resurgence of positivist ideas, along with a funding emphasis on quantitative method and the rise of the mixed methods movement, some qualitative researchers have raised the prospect of a move to the "post-qualitative" (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2019). They have pointed out how, to a large extent, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches, and the opposition between positivism and other research philosophies, is founded on the assumption of a fundamental distinction between the physical phenomena that the natural sciences study and human social life. Some recent ideas, often going under the headings of "new materialisms" and "post-humanism", question the previously assumed ontological basis for that distinction, insisting that positivist assumptions about the nature of physical phenomena do not take account of more recent developments in the natural sciences—for example quantum physics and epigenetics in biology. Involved here is an appeal to vitalist conceptions of matter, with the latter viewed as having agential capabilities that previous approaches to qualitative research had tended to restrict to human beings. There is also a link here to a valorization of indigenous cultural beliefs (Rosiek et al., 2020). In part this amounts to a reaction against the previous emphasis on discourse by qualitative researchers, characteristic of work influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism, in favor of a focus on material processes. Thus, post-humanism rejects the idea that reality is constituted in and through the discursive or cognitive practices employed by human beings, and especially those of Western intellectuals. There is a focus on the role of technologies and material artifacts, and a recognition of both the ways in which nature (for instance the world's climate) is being changed by human beings and how human social life is interpenetrated by materialities, with technologies no longer being mere tools but actually doing work that humans previously did, such as EdTech teaching programs, and increasingly reshaping human bodies in various ways from hearing implants to wearable computing and embedded microchips to control behavior. The post-qualitative movement is by no means single-stranded, and at present it is difficult to know what consequences it may have for qualitative research in education. These developments bring us up to the present-day; and, if we were to take the phrase "post-qualitative" literally, to the end of the history of qualitative research.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined some of the history of qualitative inquiry in the field of education, and sought to provide a sense of the range of different areas of work and the proliferation of methodological and theoretical approaches that have developed there. As part of this, I looked at several of the disputes among qualitative researchers that have taken place over the years, these reflecting quite fundamental differences in assumptions about the nature of social and educational phenomena, how these can best be understood, and what the function of research ought to be. It is important to be aware of how current ideas and practices developed, since this will enable us to understand them better. It may also tell us to what extent we are merely treading water, or going round in circles, rather than making progress. Even aside from this, when doing research it is necessary to have a clear sense of the rationale for the kind of work one is doing in the context of the whole range of alternative approaches, their relative strengths and weaknesses, affordances and problems.

A key issue that arises from this history is whether the deep pluralism that now prevails was an inevitable product of the expansion of educational research, and of social inquiry more generally, or whether rather more agreement about fundamental issues could have been, and perhaps still can be, achieved. But there have also been disagreements about whether such pluralism is desirable or undesirable (Hodkinson, 2004; Hammersley, 2005; Lather, 2006). While the tension with quantitative method remains for many qualitative researchers, there is now little agreement among them about theoretical and methodological issues; and, as we saw, some erstwhile qualitative researchers wish to abandon or transcend it to enter a new post-qualitative age. The future is, as always, uncertain, but in facing it we would do well to learn what we can from the past.

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