Disputed yet Invaluable:
Philosophical Inquiry as Theory in Educational Research

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ABSTRACT Research shows that one of the aims of theory is to understand and the process of theorising is a distinctly human and humanising social process through which we understand ourselves and our environment. Philosophical inquiry can be said to be theory that explains practice and is in turn grounded in practice that can help to explore and clarify the underlying assumptions of competing value frameworks by critically reflecting on conventional views and assessing their worth in educational research. As theory, philosophical inquiry can provide tools for examining the things that researchers in education so often take for granted in their daily practices. But the question that we ask in this paper is: What makes researchers in education look down upon philosophical inquiry? Are they aware of the complementary role philosophical inquiry plays in scientific matters that concern education? It is on the basis of the foregoing that this paper seeks to argue a case for philosophical inquiry as theory in educational research. We argue that all successful educational research involves philosophical inquiry as implicit theory that informs the practice.

INTRODUCTION

Educational researchers are constantly confronted by the need to make sense of how educational theory, policy and practice are to be investigated and understood (Bridges 1997; Carr 1995; Sheffield 2004; Whitehurst 2003). Philosophical inquiry into educational problems has been in place in western tradition as far back as the olden days of Socrates and Plato with the position that reflection on the methods of education was inseparable from reflection on ethical, epistemological and political issues. What sort of inquiry enlightens practical decisions? What is the nature of assumptions and inferences that can be drawn from the available evidence? In the final analysis: Does philosophy matter anyway? There is a micro-political issue regarding the relationship between philosophers of education and educational researchers with educational researchers sidelining philosophers

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of education. To this end, both sides tend to miss fruitful exchanges and development of ideas on both sides. We argue 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 our contention that the place of philosophical inquiry is being rendered invisible in discourses of educational research. It is our case, we are in agreement with Sheffield (2004) that;

Endless numbers of professional philosophers have attempted to explain what it is that philosophers do and exactly what it is that philosophers study and to what end…(As) more and more disciplines have graduated out of philosophy,(psychology for example) to operate in their own realms leaving philosophers, in the opinion of some, with little or nothing to do"(Sheffield 2004: 6).

The above goes to demonstrate even how scholars do not entrust philosophy with a pivotal and central role in educational research.

Our aim is to foreground the contributions of philosophical inquiry in educational research especially by placing emphasis on the question 'why?' that underlies the practice of research. In order to position our exploration of the

relationship between philosophical inquiry, education and research, we would like to start with a brief definition of our understanding of the notion of educational research. We explore philosophical inquiry as an activity of the mind; of theorizing, that can assist with understanding the nature of judgments in educational research. Our claim is that all practice, including research being a practice, is not self- evident and therefore needs to be subjected to continuous and careful and critical scrutiny. In order to do the afore-mentioned, we address the following questions:

- What is in dispute? What is being challenged?
- What is philosophical inquiry and what is educational research?
- What do philosophical inquiry and educational research have in common and where do they dissent?

What is in Dispute?

Many in the field of educational research neglect critical reflection about educational aims and the unexamined assumptions about know-ledge and value and instead are concentrating their research on the demands of test scores and measures of central tendency; characteristic of empirical studies. Even philosophers of education have often been sidelined in the distri-bution of resources. It is our experience that in universities, philosophy departments are judged on inappropriate criteria in the formal assessment of research quality. Educational researchers, especially those of the scientific persuasion, have deliberately attempted to avert the central concern of philosophy, that is, the matter of values. Philosophical inquiry has come to be seen as an extravagance with which sensible and pragmatic educationists need not concern themselves. Consequently, according to Bridges (1997), the scientific paradigm "with its baggage of expensive equipment, large scale funding, international teams…….. *(coupled)* with more intrinsic positivistic features of data gathering, hypothesis testing and replicability" (Bridges 1997:178) has become the defining model of research. It is on this basis that empirical resear-chers in education often accuse the work of social scientists including philosophizing in educa-tional research as only a poor imitation of proper scientific research.

Research today in the field of education has the tendency to obsess itself in the demands of test scores and other narrow measures of reliability; a preoccupation with "what works" and taking care of what works for the ends. But they have not bothered to see how often they ask the why question each time they attempt at meaningful research. Such a frame of mind as depicted by the former position submerges the critical and reflective part beneath the instrumental and pragmatic knowledge. As a result Whitehurst (2003) argues that, "The people on the frontline of education do not want research minutia , or post-modern musings, or philosophy, or theory, or advocacy, or opinions from educational researchers" (Whitehurst 2003: 12). However, as Carr (1995) succinctly observed:

Research … always conveys a commitment to philosophical beliefs even if this is unintended and even though it remains implicit and unacknowledged… researchers cannot evade the responsibility for critically examining and justifying the philosophical ideas that the enquiries incorporate. It follows that reflection and argumentation are central features of the methods and procedures of educational research (Carr 1995: 1).

Further to the above, the philosopher is sketched and mocked as someone whose head is in the clouds, hopelessly out of touch with ordinary reality. Elsewhere philosophical inquiry "has been perceived as dangerous and subversive, threatening society with endless questions about its cherished beliefs – even corrupting its youth" (Bernstein 1991: 2). We often hear that philosophy is irrelevant and marginal to "practical realities" (Bernstein 1991: 2). But if philosophy cannot supply ultimate answers to our pressing ethical and political questions, and if it still asks questions Socrates asked over 2500 years back of what value is it? We argue that the endless questioning informs all successful educational research.

It is our case that the above assumptions and generalisations are a product of non-philosophers who are more often than not confused, intimidated and sceptical about philosophical inquiry. They are confused about what philosophy is and how it can be rightfully included in research discussions and have come to hold that after all research is empirical, whereas philosophical inquiry generally is not. They wonder: where is the data? What is the research

design? They think perhaps philosophical inquiry is somewhat amateur and lacks the rigour. They are intimidated by philosophical analyses that are abstract, dense, and removed from the practical, especially the practitioners'/ researchers' feeling that philosophical issues are too intellectual or too difficult and are in the end not worth understanding. As Moses (2002) rightly puts it; "They are sceptical about a type of inquiry that does not seem to be an integral part of the business of educational research" (Moses 2002: 17). Consequent upon the above, philosophers of education have often been accused of talking to each other rather than to the wider world educational readership and not addressing the issues and problems which confront the educational decision makers, the practitioners and the researchers (Pring 2007). Critics of philosophical inquiry as theory in educational research are, however, unconscious of the fact that all that they do is, in effect, informed by philosophical inquiry and is the practice of philosophical inquiry itself. However, we note that as long as philosophers stray from human experience and remain in the empire of internal philosophical means and ends, the place of philosophy as theory of educational research will continue to be viewed as irrelevant and impractical. This is in line with Dewey's (1958) position that besides depending on theorising, philosophical inquiry "…fails to use refined, secondary products as a path pointing and leading back to something in the primary experience" (Dewey 1958: 6). But we take a cue from Socrates who advised us long ago, the philosophery is almost always faced with a reluctant audience, and the more we put pressure for the recognition of philosophy, the greater will be the pressure to either ignore it or trivialize it as irrelevant.

Research, Inquiry and Theory: A Tripartite Bond

Research comes from the Latin word re-circere which means to go round again (McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Peters and White 1969). Research is going around, exploring, looking within a situation, context or field. As Peters and White (1969) argue, research is "a systematic and sustained enquiry carried out by people well-versed in some form of thinking in order to answer some form of thinking in order to answer some specific type of question" (Peters and

White 1969: 2). From the above, we observe that all research encompasses and is qualified by systematic and sustained inquiry. The question of a *sustained* inquiry has some implications in that it connotes a committed seriousness which in turn calls for the intellectual virtues of patience, industriousness, thoroughness and care. It is also *systematic* in that it demands the on the part of the inquirer

- Comprehensiveness and representativeness of the information collected
- Orderliness with which information is collected or stored
- Thoroughness of the search
- Care and accuracy, with which information is translated, transferred or transcribed (Bridges 2006: 264).

Besides, research is also systematic in that it is a system of inquiry that is governed by rules. Given the above qualification, what then is the place of philosophical inquiry?

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).

Philosophy is also connected to conceptual analysis as a means to enhance thinking. In this sense, philosophy is a search for meaning and a search for connections and relationships between thoughts, ideas and experiences and in the philosopher's tool box are instruments for analysis, clarification and criticism (Sheffield 2004). Analysis serves the purpose of reducing complex ideas and explicating human situations into comprehensible relational concepts while clarification challenges the common sense understanding of the world and the often-taken-for granted in order to expose the true meaning. In the final analysis, the philosopher uses criticism to challenge the status quo. To that end, Sherman (1995) captures a succinct and clear definition of the method of philosophical inquiry by stating that it is "analysis, clarification, and criticism of the language, concept and logic of the means and ends of human experience" (Sherman 1995: 2). But the question is if research

is an orderly investigative process for the purpose of creating new knowledge: can educational research proceed without these tools? If not, can it be worth its name? Our case, therefore, is that all educational research is critical of itself hence it is philosophical inquiry.

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;

Serious inquiry aimed at acquiring knowledge of the real world …starts with the assumption that there is an answer, the answer to the question that directs the process. Moreover there is the further assumption that the answer would be found if the inquiry persisted (Smith 1983: 48).

In support, Gardner (1996) added the progressive aim of inquiry by suggesting that:

To seriously inquire one must not only inquire about something,… one must also make some progress – at least such progress is possible…if one is said to successfully inquire, one must have a substantially clearer picture of the topic under investigation at the end of the process than at the beginning. If an inquiry is to be worth of its name, it must make some progress toward the "truth"(Gardner 1996: 102).

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 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?

Conceptual analysis as philosophical inquiry has made immense contributions by shedding light on many educational concepts and theories such as 'education', 'teaching', 'knowledge' (Gutek 1988). Besides, it seeks to promote dispositions like clarity, consistency, rigour of thought, concern for semantic meaningfulness, methodological awareness and consciousness of assumptions. Privileging theory over practice, rationalists have argued that theory is a guide to practice although on the contrary the opposite view is that theory only acquires an educational character only if it can itself be corrected, improved and evaluated against its practical results. Our position is that the central concepts that all educational researchers engage have a bearing on conceptual analysis if their endeavors for new knowledge are to be realised

The Role of Philosophical Inquiry in Research

Philosophical inquiry has a long history and has been pursued in many cultures. Many associate philosophy with great thinkers of the past, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant or Hegel. 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 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.

Further to the above, it is through a painful and continual renewed effort of inquisitiveness that researchers see deeper into the nature of concepts and problems at hand. In order to demonstrate the mediatory role of philosophy as inquiry in research, Sherman et al. (1984) have argued that quantitative research (empirical) relies on philosophical inquiry in that even a study with quantitative formulation has a:

"...qualitative context out of which it grows and to which its conclusions must be put. The statement of the problem in such a study , to be made clearly, calls on philosophy, and the chapter in which the conclusions are suggested to be important (for further research or for practice) is philosophical in its axiological import. And one may see a " review of the literature" in any study as an historical account of what has been tried in reference to the problem at hand"(Sherman et al. 1984: 33).

To this end, the perennial questioning is the essence of philosophising in educational research. 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. We argue 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. Hence, 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 is to theorise, to analyse and critique and to raise philosophical questions about the problematic. To engage in philosophical inquiry, however, should not in itself mean to yield vital knowledge and understanding alone (as theory to tackle the practice) but the process offers resources in form of conceptual tools for

- exploring and clarifying basic suppositions of competing value structures
- critically reflecting on accepted and long established views
- proposing beneficial constructive and alternate frameworks and
- envisioning extremely different possibilities

In effect, Dewey (1916) sums it all by asserting that "if we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual or emotional, towards nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education" (Dewey 1916: 328). In other words, all good educational research is a product of sound methods of research and analysis. Philosophical inquiry makes an immense contribution to one's capacity to frame hypotheses, do research, and put problems into manageable form. Philoso-

phical 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 suggested by the hypotheses and questions one encounters in doing research. In effect, as Bridges (1997) rightly puts it, philosophical thinking provides "...a source for what eventually come to be empirically established beliefs and empirical observation and experience to provide the stimulus to what are eventually put forward as philosophically established or a priori beliefs" (Bridges et al. 1997: 184). In this sense we argue that philosophical inquiry with its toolbox of comprising of the critical, rigorous and analytical becomes theory upon which educational researchers and practitioners in general base their practice.

Educational researchers are engaged in thinking about educational matters by challenging and confronting issues that have to do with teaching and learning. Educators who are sceptical about the place of philosophical inquiry and seek to direct their efforts to purposeful and meaningful endeavours, are advised by Burbules and Warnick (2006) that:

" ...philosophy can offer various resources ranging from conceptual tools to explore and clarify the underlying assumptions of competing value frameworks; to skills for critically reflecting on conventional views and assessing their worth;... and finally to visions of radically different possibilities that can stretch the imagination and expand the spirit." (Burbules and Warnick 2006: 501).

Researchers are also engaged in comparing, contrasting, analysing, synthesising, adding and deleting and once they are employing these attributes, they are philosophising and therefore implicitly it means all research is philosophising. Both philosophy and educational research involve clear thinking and sound conclusions and on this ground philosophy is not something to be averted in all research, the empirical included.

CONCLUSION

The discipline of Philosophy has made, and continues to make major contributions to human thought. Despite the underdog role that philosophical inquiry is accorded by researchers in education in favour of the empirical paradigm whose thinking is informed by "what works" we have argued above that the place of philosophy in research cannot be dispensed with. Our case is that despite the concerted attempts at the relegation of philosophical inquiry to the periphery of the practice of research, its centrality is invaluable. It is on the grounds of the above that we have come to conclude that since inquiry is systematic and rigorous questioning of the problematic in order to find meaningful truth of our world and theory is the ideas that seek to explain any practice, therefore all educational research is and is informed by philosophic inquiry as theory. From human experience philosophy was born, and it is, into the human experience that it must always return in order to remain vital and relevant as a social practice. We, therefore, submit that it is difficult, if not impossible to imagine successful research that is not rooted in and buttressed by philosophical thinking and the soundness, reliability of any educational research as a practice **is informed by philosophy as theory.**

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