CRITICAL RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The article compares the existing paradigms of research methodology with particular emphasis on educational research. It suggests that critical research be given due consideration because its aim is to empower the participants to change themselves for the purpose of collective growth. This is particularly so in Malaysia where the education system is still very examination-oriented and students are at the receiving end of a teacher-dominated "banking education". There also appears to be insufficient production of teacher research. If teachers were encouraged to critically examine their every day experiences, these findings could be utilized to implement positive changes in the educational milieu.

THE PARADIGMS OF RESEARCH

According to Shulman (1988), research methodology in education is an intriguing area because education is a field of study that contains phenomena, events, institutions, problems, persons and processes as its raw materials. These multifarious factors interact with one another within the education environment to produce a complex setting that is susceptible to change. Thus in education research, there is a need to select a research paradigm to look at the multi-faceted reality of the issue in question as well as the interacting factors that influence it.

The existing literature on research methodology generally reveals three broad paradigms. For example, Carr and Kemmis (1986) classify it into the positivist, the interpretive and the critical traditions. This classification is also adopted by Teppo (1998) who talks about the objective-quantitative approach arising from the natural sciences, the interpretative-qualitative of anthropology and the critical-theoretic of sociology and political science. Romberg (1992) supports a similar viewpoint as he uses Popkewitz's world views of the empirical-analytic, symbolic and critical paradigms as the three research paradigms which have emerged to give definition and structure to the practice of educational research. An understanding of these broad paradigms of research methodologies serves as a constant reminder and guideline for researchers to stay focused within the paradigm of their study.

More recent work reveals a fourth paradigm– the post-structuralist (Lather, 1992; Smith, 1993). According to Lather (1992), based on their approach to generating and legitimising knowledge, these various methodologies can actually be classified into four broad research paradigms. Using Habermas' 1971 thesis of the three categories to underscore knowledge claims, that is prediction (positivism), understanding (interpretive) and emancipation (critical), Lather includes the *non-Habermasian* right-

hand column of deconstruction for the post-structuralist paradigm.

In an area as complex and as human as education, some researchers may be more interested in studying the peculiarities and uniqueness of the environment and its participants. This is especially so if the aim of the research is to understand and improve practice, and not to validate any general theories in education. In this respect, a qualitative research paradigm would be deemed to be more suitable. Researchers generally classify qualitative methods into two broad categories, namely, the interpretive and the critical approach. Kilpatrick (1988) describes the interpretive approach as a method which attempts to observe an encounter, describe and explain in a non-judgmental stance while the critical researcher enters the encounter with the aim of providing opportunities of freedom, autonomy and change to its participants.

Smith (1993) gives a brief but useful description to highlight the differences among the research paradigms by looking at their respective *empowering potentials*. According to him, empowerment may be perceived as personal self-growth, raising political consciousness and collective action or struggle. These *spheres of empowerment*, as Smith calls them, do not exist independently of each other but are interrelated. Empowerment is also not the sole province of any one research paradigm. Smith writes that the empowering potential in positivism lies in its predictive and universalistic goals. It appears that in positivist research, it is the researcher who is empowered since the responsibility for decision-making rests on the researcher and the participants merely function as the objects of the research. This paradigm will not serve the aims of a study which aspires for critical consciousness and collective growth. On the other hand, the interpretive paradigm empowers the researcher as well as the researched to understand their situation; but while there are elements of heightened understanding there is no effort directed towards change and collective growth.

According to Ramdas (1990), the empowering potential in critical research is tied to its moral imperative of human emancipation and social justice. It appears then that critical research is supposed to empower its participants to change themselves and their habits by raising their own consciousness in the context of the situation they are in. This change is seen as a struggle towards personal as well as collective growth. If the ultimate purpose of a research is to change and improve the education environment through the concerted collaborative effort of the participants, it would seem to be most suitable if the methods employed are oriented towards the critical paradigm.

A RATIONALE FOR CRITICAL RESEARCH
According to Kemmis (1995), critical social theory is about one hundred years old. It originates from Marxist thought and was propagated by the Frankfurt School in the 1920s. One of the proponents of critical theory is Habermas whose work is still very vibrant and alive today. Other influential writers in this field are Horkheimer (1972), Fay (1987) and Pusey (1987). Various other literature on critical research includes the work of Freire (1972), Carr & Kemmis (1986), Kemmis & McTaggart (1993) and Comstock (1982).

Smith (1993) describes critical research as a form of *conviction research*. He asserts that critical research is designed "not just to explain