

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHISING ABOUT EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Research... always conveys a commitment to philosophical beliefs even if this is unintended and even though it remains implicit and unacknowledged. (Carr 1995: 1)

PHILOSOPHISING AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

It is helpful, I think, to distinguish three sets of relationships between philosophy and educational research.

First, there is the role of philosophy in addressing in particular the epistemological and ethical underpinnings of that research – *philosophising about educational research*. This is the traditional role which philosophy exercises in relation to other fields of enquiry, as in philosophy of science and philosophy of history, though, in practice, epistemological considerations about the nature of knowledge claims in these areas have tended to dominate the philosophical literature, whereas in educational research I would judge that the ethical issues have been at least as prominent.

Secondly, there is the sense in which philosophising about education (the products of which are to be found for example in the pages of the Journal of Philosophy of Education or Educational Philosophy and Theory) itself constitutes a form of educational research – *philosophising as educational research*..

Thirdly there is the role of philosophy in the process of empirical research – *philosophising in educational research* and in particular in the context of expressly interdisciplinary projects.

In this chapter I shall consider the first of these three relationships – and provide in so doing an introduction to some of the topics dealt with in more detail in the rest of this book. I shall consider the second and third relationships in chapter three which follows.

PHILOSOPHISING ABOUT EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Carr observed succinctly in a paper presented at a BERA/ECER conference roundtable in September 1995:

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 their enquiries incorporate. It follows that philosophical reflection and

argumentation are central features of the methods and procedures of educational research. (Carr 1995: 1)

Many researchers who would not necessarily identify themselves as philosophers are, of course, perfectly alert to these methodological issues and their philosophical underpinnings. Guba and Lincoln (1994), for example, construct their very notion of a research paradigm in terms of three areas – epistemology, ontology and methodology – of which the first two are unequivocally philosophical. The growth of qualitative research methodology in educational research circles has, for example, itself rested on epistemological challenges to: the naive empiricism and behaviourism which has been applied to social research and human interaction; to traditional notions of validity; to positivistic constructs of reality; to conventional views of the way in which inferences may be drawn between the particular and the general; and to the perceived gendering of particular research styles. In the field of ethics, the same developments have represented challenges to conventional definitions of the relationship between researcher and researched and to conventional views about the ownership of research data and who is entitled to access to it or protection from its exposure.

This area of development alone offers an enormously fertile field for philosophical engagement. My complaints have been that too few of those who might be identified as philosophers of education have actually chosen to engage with it (Bridges 1995, 1998c) and that some of those who have entered the field from an empirical research background have done less than justice to, for example, the subtle and complex history of philosophical writing in both ethics and epistemology.

I am concerned, too, that researchers who have clearly recognised the fundamental importance of the philosophical questions underlying education and educational research have not always recognised them as philosophical. Ranson, for example, in a report to the UK Economic and Social Research Council under the title 'The future of education research: learning at the centre', argued that:

The transformations of our time are altering the structure of experience and the powers and capacities needed to live in a post-modern world. The changes raise deep questions for education and for the polity in general about: what is it to be a person?... Is there such a thing as society and what is it?... What should be the nature of the polity? (Ranson 1999: 11)

While I can readily endorse the importance of the 'deep questions' which Ranson identifies, I have, too, to observe the oddity of the assumption that these questions are peculiarly the product of the post-modern world and the writer's apparent failure to observe 2,000 years of philosophical literature dedicated to precisely such questions as these.

The failure of awareness and communication is, however a problem for which the philosophical or philosophy of education community has to accept its share of the blame. Philosophers of education have been slow to acknowledge and engage with the philosophical sophistication of some of the mainstream 'research' writing, particularly perhaps, that which draws from US pragmatism and constructivism and that continental European tradition in which the Anglo Saxon boundaries between sociology, politics and philosophy are routinely transgressed. As I illustrate in

chapter three, philosophers of education can be naïve and patronising in their own assumptions about educational research. Too often, when philosophers do engage with issues to do with educational research, they do so with scant attention to the actual debates and dialogue which are going on within the educational research community itself.

I am of course not the first to have bewailed the absence of mutual recognition between the educational philosophy and educational research communities. In a 1981 response to *Philosophy of Education, the Eightieth Yearbook of the NSSE* in the United States, Rist complained of the absence of any reference in this philosophical writing to research findings which were applicable to the concerns of the authors. 'Those who toil in the vineyard of educational philosophy,' he concluded, 'are unaware of those who are working in the fields of research.' But he hastened to add that 'the absence of familiarity and utilization is not simply one way. The same can be said for those in educational research with respect to their understandings of cogent philosophical issues... The single most important conclusion I come to in reflecting on the evident isolation of the philosophical enterprise from that of the research enterprise is that we are all diminished by the lack of a viable linkage' (Rist 1981: 27). My ambition in this book is to establish some of those linkages and to draw debates which have taken place in the educational research and philosophical communities more closely together.

This collection of essays will illustrate, I hope, some of the different aspects of the educational research endeavour which, as Carr has indicated, are underpinned by contestable and contested philosophical assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not, whether we make the explicit or leave them as part of the implicit framing of our research discourse. To some extent we have to operate on the basis of undeclared or unexamined assumptions. There are psychological limits on our self questioning and certainly practical limits given that even philosophers have to mark assignments, submit to processes of audit, collect the kids and clear out the garden shed... from time to time. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but a life spent only in its own examination would be a pretty bizarre one too.

Most of this book will illustrate one kind of relationship between philosophy and educational research, ie philosophising about educational research. This is a second order activity which explores, in particular in this context⁵, the beliefs about the nature of educational research knowledge (and its relationship to other kinds of knowledge) and the beliefs about the right, the good and the virtuous in the practice of educational research – in short, the epistemology and ethics of educational research. The following outline of the contents and the chapters themselves will provide further illustration of this activity.

⁵ There is of course a much wider range of philosophical discussion about, for example, human identity, the political order and what kinds of things exist which could readily be applied here, but I have focussed on areas with which the educational research community has itself been most directly engaged.

Fiction written under Oath?

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