

## Chapter 2

# Open Research and Philosophical Reflections

**Abstract** This chapter provides a philosophical overview of this book. In line with many philosophers and scientists, I believe that even the most “strictly” social scientific research benefits from philosophical reflections. Philosophy can contribute to constructing the big picture and help to avoid getting lost in the details of empirical inquiries. The qualitative methodologist, Maxwell (*Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Sage, Los Angeles, p. 42, 2013), stated that although participants in the methodological “paradigm wars” in the social sciences each focused on the philosophical beliefs and assumptions of their own methodological communities, most of them saw the “philosophical positions as foundational” for research practices. Maxwell added that examples of such philosophical positions are positivism, constructivism, realism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. I choose pragmatism not only because this philosophy is very proper for experimental (intervention) research but also because of its emphasis on amelioration and change. In the *Need for Recovery of Philosophy*, Dewey (Creative intelligence: Essays in the pragmatic attitude. Henry Holy and Company, New York, 1917), one of the most well-known pragmatists, encouraged philosophers to be more than intellectuals who interpret past and present. Philosophy can work as effective equipment for a better life. “Philosophy does this by creating theories with meanings amenable to testing by application to human practices.” (Hildebrand in *Beginners guides on Dewey*. Oneworld, Oxford, p. 207, 2008).

**Keywords** Philosophical reflections • Open research • Ameliorative beliefs • Pragmatism

This chapter is a philosophical overview of this scientific book. In line with many philosophers and scientists, I believe that even the most “strictly” social scientific research will benefit from philosophical reflections. Philosophy can contribute to constructing the big picture and help to avoid getting lost in the details of empirical inquiries. The qualitative methodologist, Maxwell (2013, p. 42), stated that although participants in the methodological “paradigm wars” in the social sciences each focused on the philosophical beliefs and assumptions of their own methodological communities, most of them saw the “philosophical positions as

foundational” for research practices. Maxwell added that examples of such philosophical positions are positivism, constructivism, realism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. I choose pragmatism not only because this philosophy is very proper for experimental (intervention) research but also because of its emphasis on amelioration and change. In the *Need for Recovery of Philosophy*, Dewey (1917), one of the most well-known pragmatists, encouraged philosophers to be more than intellectuals who interpret past and present. Philosophy can work as effective equipment for a better life. “Philosophy does this by creating theories with meanings amenable to testing by application to human practices” (Hildebrand 2008, p. 207). In the following pages (of this chapter), the characteristics of this research project and the “beliefs” that are basic to it are presented.

## 2.1 Characteristics of Open Research

Open research is the term that I have chosen to describe the characteristics of the scientific subprojects that I have been engaged in since 2009. These characteristics include

1. *Openness*. This concept is the opposite of rigidity or dogmatism. This quality refers to the process that research changes and develops whenever necessary and is based on three sources: (1) respect for the obdurate character of the empirical world, (2) methodological principles that underlie and guide the whole process of research; and (3) the framework of sensitizing concepts [these three characteristics get inspiration from Blumer (1970); more details are presented later]. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that openness means creating models that are preliminary and leave space for development.
2. *Open research (public research)*. According to the Oxford Thesaurus (1992), one of the meanings of open is public. This project is called open research because, from the start, the project was presented in the local daily newspapers and became subject to critique by scholars as well as school practitioners. As Pring (2004, p. 134) put it elegantly “the research is conducted in such a way that others can scrutinize and, if necessary, question the practice of which it is a part.” Others become part of the reflective process of the research.
3. *Open research (initiating the research project)*. The word open has other meanings such as unsettled, receptive, and starting or initiating (Oxford Thesaurus 1992). This research project includes two subprojects: the first from 2009 to 2012 and the second from 2013 to 2014. This book is mainly the result of the analysis of the first subproject and, although it can be read as an independent project description, the general aim of these two projects is the same. The essential consequence of this openness—that is, unsettled, initiating, and receptive—also includes openness in theory and methodology. At the intersection of theory and methodology are the chosen sensitizing concepts, which

are basic, pregnant, or fertile, and leave a place for development in the other subprojects.

4. *Open communication with the readers.* Almost every researcher goes through a process that has its ups and downs, moments of joy and sadness, moments that include valuable learning. I am not sure that it is very common to write about these moments in one's book. However, I decided to briefly describe a few of these learning moments; they may be interesting for other researchers.
5. *Multidisciplinarity.* William James (1842–1910) has been a great influence on me with regard to multidisciplinary studies. He graduated from Harvard as a physician but started to teach physiology of the brain at a time when brain science did not exist as an academic discipline (neuroscience emerged many years later). After a while, he opened one of the first psychology laboratories at Harvard. Late in his career, he became active in pragmatist philosophy. This research project draws on philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, education science, social work, and sociology. This is a logical necessity, because the project is focused on learning, and learning is studied in several disciplines. Such an eclectic integration of theories and concepts from different disciplines has a better chance of success if it is guided by a philosophy.
6. *Philosophical.* The project draws particularly from pragmatist philosophy, which is appropriate for experimentalist research and can provide guidance and reflection during the research process (Reason and Bradbury 2006). As James (1907, p. 21) emphasized, pragmatism “unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.”
7. *Ameliorative (and consequently political).* The aim of the project is based on the need for amelioration of social problems as well as child/youth rights as established in the United Nations Child Convention on the Rights of the Child. This aim strongly facilitates connection between university and community, between the researcher and practitioners outside university. At the same time, doing research connected to the Child Convention, which is a political document signed by states, gives the research “political teeth” (Martin and Kamberelis 2013), which facilitates realization of the project's aim in society (more about amelioration in the next section).
8. *Ambitious but disciplined through hard thinking.* I am aware that this project embraces an ambitious aim, and there is a risk of becoming blindly affected by one's desires and consequently becoming disappointed. However, as Kandel (2006) indicated, researchers can be ambitious and bold if they stick to scientific procedures. This demands a “disciplined” approach to research. From my point of view, such discipline, besides following methods of collecting and analyzing data, should provide benefit from at least four more qualities: (1) the researcher's patience for hard thinking (Kandel 2006), (2) some experience from intervention research, (3) a rich arsenal of relevant theories, and (4) having a methodology that guides the whole process of research (the “method” of hard thinking is developed in some detail in Chap. 10).

9. *Methodological.* All empirical and experimental inquiries have research methods that are described explicitly. But not all researchers explicitly explain whether they have followed a methodology or not. There is an important difference between methodology and methods. Methodology is not limited to methods of collecting and analyzing data but starts before collecting data and continues after data are analyzed. As Blumer (1970) emphasized, methodology is about the principles that underlie and guide the whole process of research. In this research, based on several methodologies (relevant for this project), I construct my own methodological principles.
10. *Interventionist.* To design a new literacy demands that it be developed in practice. This project intervenes in several school classes with the aim of designing/experimenting (e.g., see Cobb et al. 2003) in a program for social problem-solving literacy. New ideas demand experimental design and testing these ideas in the classroom.
11. *Participatory and cooperative.* Experiment in the classroom necessitates close cooperation between the researcher and the teacher/teachers. Even the pupils should develop a positive feeling about their participation in the project and realize that without their constructive contribution, the project will fail.
12. *Creativity and enjoyment.* In order to succeed in these 11 points, two other qualities are necessary: creativity and enjoyment. Research is demanding and often stressful so at least some of the time the researcher should be able to enjoy what she or he is doing, and this enjoyment is important for creativity. For me to leave the university and go to the schools once a week and work with energetic pupils has always been a stimulating, enjoyable, and valuable experience.
13. *Belief-based research.* This project is based on several “beliefs.” These beliefs are described in some detail in the following section. The term belief is used here as a synonym for tenet or axiom. I searched on Google (22 May 2015) to find out how the word “belief” is used. I was not surprised to find 9,010,000 results for “religious beliefs,” 193,000 results for “philosophical beliefs,” and only 86,600 for “scientific beliefs.” But this does not mean that we should stop using the term belief. What we have to do is to make clear what we mean by the word belief. Many scientists and philosophers use this term. For example, Lakoff and Johnson (1999, p. 3) wrote that “Our most basic philosophical beliefs are tied inextricably to our view of reason.” So here belief is “tied” to human beings’ capacity for reasoning and there is no connection between beliefs and “supernatural powers.”

In my doctoral dissertation (Moula 2005), I raised the issue of the perspectivist understanding of reality and stated that no researcher is neutral; we are all influenced by some theories, concepts, and experiences, and I suggested that scholars can openly state their perspectives and facilitate a space for dialogue and critique. A decade later, I still think this is quite necessary for the advancement of research. The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to describe what I mean by the “beliefs” that influence this research project.

## 2.2 Ameliorative Beliefs and Scientific Research

Philosopher Campbell (1995, p. 99) distinguishes “three endeavors” in the work of those interested in bringing about change; the first is criticism of the present situation, the third endeavor is the introduction of proposals for bringing about change, and the second endeavor, lying between these two and justifying each, is a basic discussion of the nature of a fulfilled life. Campbell (1995) added that this second endeavor of social critics, the one that leads to deep conflicts among them, is the specification of the “good” or the content of the change. Following this argument, this book is based on (1) observation of the problematic situation of our world, (2) an attempt to construct the basics of a new kind of literacy that teaches pupils social problem solving at individual and collective levels for ameliorating problematic situations, and (3) the belief that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child accompanied by science and philosophy is a proper framework that gives us guidance and direction for creating necessary changes.

The Child Convention is not based on the personal values or beliefs of some individuals or groups who want change. It is an international document that took 10 years (from 1979 to 1989) to produce, and many experts from many countries participated in writing it. At present, almost all countries in the world have ratified it, and they are encouraged to realize it in their countries. These countries should continuously report to the United Nations on their successes and failures in realizing this convention. UNICEF, the largest and most powerful child organization in the world, is the main international union responsible for realization of this human right treaty.

There is a need for more researchers, from doctoral students to more experienced scholars to put time and energy into discovering resources and barriers impeding the realization of the Child Convention. There is an international belief that realization of this Convention leads to a much better situation for all the world’s children and, since children are the world’s future, so its realization means creating a better present as well as a better future for the world.

This ameliorative belief is the first belief on which this book is based.

The second belief is also based on the Child Convention, but specifically on Article 29, which is about the direction of school education and includes pupils’ right to optimally develop their mental capacities and schools’ obligation to prepare pupils to have social responsibility. This belief, if it becomes a public belief, can put pressure on governments that have ratified this document to take the necessary steps to realize it.

The third belief is based on the opinion that philosophical reflections (particularly pragmatist philosophy) and scientific insights are the best tools for interpreting the Child Convention and, through intervention research, taking the first steps to

create programs or models for actualizing the Child Convention (here the focus is on Article 29 of this Convention).

The fourth belief is based on a recent movement whereby a large number of researchers and child practitioners are engaged in a kind of “emotional and social education” in various countries, suggesting that this education should become part of a school curriculum (Clouder 2008). This movement strongly connects its activities with the Child Convention and suggests that such an education is essentially part of the realization of this international document. Children should learn more than mathematics, chemistry, physics, and other traditional subjects at schools. They should learn how to express and manage their emotions and regulate their social relationships (Clouder 2008).

The fifth belief is based on the opinion that John Dewey’s educational philosophy, together with many recent interpretations of his work, is a proper tool for creating emotional and social education in schools. John Dewey is North America’s most popular philosopher with a huge number of much cited publications and internationally considered as “the father of progressive pedagogy” (Malten 1981). He is called the philosopher for the 21st century (Pring 2007; Samuelson 2012) or the pioneer of qualitative methodology for educational psychology in our era (Rosiek 2013). Dewey’s method is “critical and cooperative” but his interest is social and educational (Campbell 1995, p. 22).

The sixth belief is based on the opinion that neuroscience, the most rapidly expanding science over the last 40 years, can help us to enrich emotional and social education. In 1971, only 1100 scientists participated in the first annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience. In 2006, the number of scientists convened at the 36th annual meeting was 25,785 (Squire et al. 2008). Neuroscience can indeed help us to better understand the relationship between cognition and emotion. Reason is always passionate (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Recent discoveries on the prefrontal cortex show us that what many scholars call social and emotional education should indeed be called cognitive, social, and emotional education. It is the aim of this book to connect the Child Convention’s emphasis on every child’s right to optimal mental development to neuroscience and get help from this science to interpret what optimal mental development means.

The seventh and final belief on which this book is based is related to the fifth and sixth beliefs and the opinion that an integration of pragmatism and neuroscience can enrich cognitive, emotional, and social education. A group of philosophers, social scientists, cognitive scientists, and neuroscientists have started to organize themselves and, in their first steps, they have produced works based on the integration of pragmatism with neuroscience. The author of this book is among the first scholars who have produced texts about this integration, often referred to as neuropragmatism (Moula 2009, 2011; Moula et al. 2009, 2010, 2014).

Neither the nature of these seven beliefs nor the strengths or sizes of the various populations that carry the respective opinion are the same. For example, the first and second beliefs, which are connected to children’s rights, are an obligation of states with UNICEF, a very powerful organization, financially, politically, and scientifically supporting realization of these two beliefs. But the seventh belief is

limited to a small but growing group of scholars. Cognitive scientist and philosopher, Thagard (2002, p. 5), emphasized that a “belief is justified not because it is indubitable or is derived from some other indubitable beliefs, but because it coheres with other beliefs that jointly support each other.” These seven beliefs on which this book is based fit together very well and support each other. They form a rather all-inclusive union based on international convention (or law, because in Finland, Norway, and Belgium, the Child Convention is law, and a wide discussion is going on to make it law in Sweden), philosophy, social science, and neuroscience. Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state, but belief is a calm and satisfactory state. Human beings, as individuals or groups, need to develop their doubts into beliefs. Although we always live with some doubts, puzzles, and questions, too many doubts disturb our daily activities. People use different resources to develop doubts into beliefs necessary for action. These resources can be religion, cultural norms, or authoritative individuals. However, as researchers we should develop doubts into beliefs by accompanying beliefs with observations (facts) and not sole wishes. To achieve this, we use scientific methods.

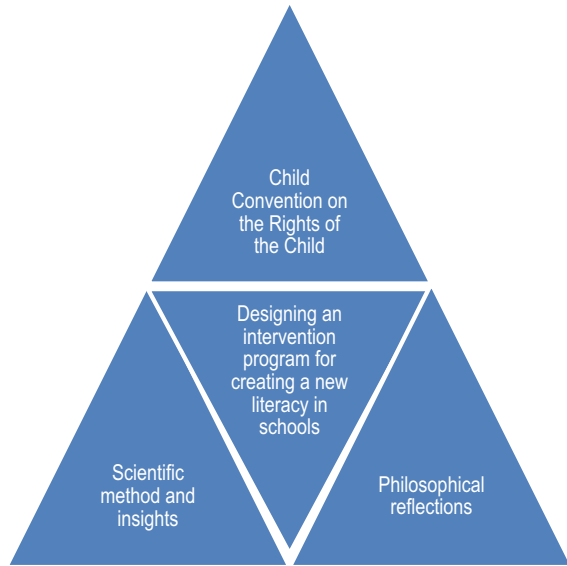
Pragmatists including Dewey and Mead presented meliorism (or ameliorism) as the belief that this life is neither good nor bad; it can be improved through human effort.

This is no blind faith, tossed off by Dewey; it is a working hypothesis, drawn from experience. “To accept the challenge implied by the melioristic hypothesis is to admit that the proper purpose of intellectual inquiry is to search for ways (ideas, practices) to improve *this* life rather than to look for absolute value or reality per se.” (Hildebrand 2008, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Meliorism encourages deliberate and purposeful action, which pessimism cannot, and arouses confidence and hopefulness without relaxing us into optimistic passivity. “Only a meliorism can underlie a philosophy of action that allows for the possibility of reform and progress through human effort” (Campbell 1995, p. 261). What I mean by ameliorative beliefs is to emphasize on opinions that focus on change and social problem solving.

Neuroscientists Asp and Tranel (2013, p. 405) stated that “the notion that emotions determine beliefs has been a common assumption during much of human history.” As James (1890/1981) claimed, in its inner nature, belief, or the sense of reality, is a sort of feeling more allied to emotions than anything else. According to James (1890, p. 913) belief means “every degree of assurance, including the highest possible certainty and conviction.” James emphasized the influence that emotions exert on belief and indicated that some refer to belief as emotion of conviction. Then the question that arises is, if belief is so tied to emotions, can we build our scientific research on beliefs? The answer is that scientific activities cannot be judged by science itself; they have to be judged by some beliefs or values. The atom bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed about 200,000 Japanese, were made by the latest scientific discoveries of mankind. Atomic power can be used for human welfare or human destruction; that is, creating electricity or atom bombs. According to Dewey, science is impersonal; it owes its operation and its consequences to the human beings who use it. It adapts itself passively to the purposes

**Fig. 2.1** The three sources that make up the ameliorative triad of these research subprojects: the Child Convention, scientific insights, and philosophical reflections. Together they effectively influence the design of an intervention program for a new kind of literacy in schools



and desires that animate these human beings. It lends itself with equal impartiality to the kindly office of medicine and hygiene and the destructive deeds of war. It elevates some by opening new horizons; it depresses others by making them slaves of machines operated for the pecuniary gain of their owners (Campbell 1995, pp. 104–105).

Campbell (1995, p. 105) concluded that the ends to which the power of science is put are not to be found in science itself, and this fact makes the role of the inquirer ever important. “The actual uses to which the power of science is put are based in our choices of fundamental human values.” Figure 2.1 visualizes what I call the ameliorative triad.

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