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Issues of Power and Voice in Designing Research With Children and Adolescents

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Most youth will readily agree that the adults in their world are unable to comprehend the realities of *their* generation. Indeed, this may well be true. Each generation has its unique identity and sense of its own importance. However, as those adults, we, the researchers, the counselors, the educators, and the parents are accountable to create opportunity that the youth voice be heard and understood. In the zeal to identify effective programs to reduce and eliminate the achievement gap and social injustice in schools, research designs have not consistently encouraged a youth voice to emerge (Soto & Swadener, 2005). Structured with imposition and power, traditional research requires “reconceptualizing” to allow the youth voice to better guide our learning (Padilla, 2004; Soto & Swadener, 2005). In many schools across the nation student voice rarely impacts the creation of curricula and instructional practice, or influences procedure (Noguera, 2003; Wyngaard, 2005). The intention of this article is to offer discourse on the “dominant models of scholarship that often have privileged narrow areas of largely quantifiable research and have done little to enlighten the needs of learners in a democratic sphere” (Soto & Swadener, 2005, p. 2). By utilizing research paradigms and designs which give credence to the voice of the youth-participant, the reality as perceived by that participant can more authentically be heard, understood, and addressed through equitable policy and practice.

The voices of children and adolescents provide the content by which researchers can investigate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Of particular interest to counselors and counseling psychologists, investigations of cultural orientation, social class, linguistic diversity, gender, educational attainment, and language proficiency (Padilla, 2004) support the effort to reduce the inequitable academic and social achievement of ethnically/racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse learners. The premise of culturally responsive research, like that of culturally responsive teaching, is that culture encapsulates knowledge and identity development (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Malewski, 2005; Nieto, 2005), which in turn, predicates perception and behavior. The use of cultural referents in research bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' own cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Such

research recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources (Nieto, 2005) for creating data which is both representative and empowering. The recent proliferation of research involving youth, in particular its more marginalized communities (e.g., LGBTQ, Latino/a, exceptional learners), has intention of shedding light on the impact of social policies, programs, and school curricula as well as to measure the status of these communities in relation to the majority. Efforts to orient the field and related fields to the ways of being, concerns, considerations, and aspirations of the nation's youth can serve to both empower and inspire adults to honor that voice.

The Youth Voice

A youth is typically identified as a person under the age of 21. The youth-participant, commonly a student, is identified for research purposes because he or she has had some level of exposure to a phenomenon of interest to the researcher. This notion itself lends to the imposition of the researcher's want on the lived experience of the youth-participant. The emergence of the idea of "student voice" and associated with it research language such as claiming, reframing, decolonizing, democratizing, and involving (Cook-Sather, 2006; Soto & Swadener, 2005), indicate the shift in paradigm to one of collaboration and partnering. Such language repositions the youth-participant in the work of school reform, and educational research and practice (Cook-Sather, 2006). According to Holdsworth (as cited in Cook-Sather, 2006), student voice can be defined as having a legitimate perspective and opinion with the intention of being present and taking part in educational policies and practices. The implication in such a definition is not only does a youth-participant have experience and opinion, but also the "presence, power, and agency ... to speak [his or her] mind, be heard and counted by others, and, perhaps to have an influence on outcomes" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363). The inner motivation on the part of research participants to express openly and authentically can result in refractive, reflective, and meaningful data (Edmiston, 2005).

Much of the recent counseling and educational outcomes research has focused on the status of at-risk and underrepresented student populations. The research has primarily come in the form of quantitative studies (Park-Taylor, Ventura, & Ng, 2010; Smith, 2000) which have aided in the identification of failing and failed students, from where and when students tend to fail, and what preventive measures seem to impact the failure rate. Literature of a qualitative nature that reveals or recounts the experiences of the students themselves or enhances the knowledge of the student perspective is increasing, but remains limited (Smith, 2000; Soto & Swadener, 2005; Whiston & Quinby, 2009). In fact, qualitative studies continue to be underrepresented in the psychology and counseling journals (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007).

The addition of research that focuses on the student perspective and experience is vital in understanding what actually happens or does not happen in schools which impacts a student's ability to learn. For example, Smith (2000) postulates that it is of extreme importance to the educational community to "uncover how school experiences may help create youth's alienation from school" (p.299), thus giving voice to the student experience. By decolonizing the method by which data is gathered affirms for youth-participants that their attitudes, perceptions, and experiences in the school setting may lead to a greater depth of information and understanding when creating or redesigning

school policy (Cook-Sather, 2006), or shaping a school environment. From the school counseling framework, fostering student voice affirms the belief that all students can learn, are valued, and capable of self-efficacious problem-solving and decision-making.

The Issue of Power

The power dynamic inherent in researcher-researched relationships is of primary consideration in the attempt to gather data that conveys the lived experience of the youth-participant. Traditionally, researchers have held the status of expert investigator. The co-constructivist, interpretivist, postmodern movement presents a theoretical framework for forming a more collaborative relationship between the researcher and researched. Yet, sometimes youth-participants can be considered objects of adult attention and care, leading to an assumption that they are unequally able to participate in dialogue which may constrain the researcher's understanding of what they actually know or can do (Jipson & Jipson, 2005).

Children and adolescents are constrained by the imbalance of power and do not and cannot provide informed consent (Jipson & Jipson, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Soto & Swadener, 2005). Their ability to assent or withdraw from research may be compromised along with their sense of autonomy, confidentiality, limits to the confidentiality (Mertens, 2005), and their capacity to be authentic in the conveyance of the desired information. Since the intention of gathering data is to produce results that are informative and, thereby, transformative, the accuracy of that data seems imperative. Recent approaches to research with children and adolescents have acknowledged the importance of listening and respecting youth-participants as active agents in their own development (Parkes, 2008). The researcher whose approach does not incorporate a co-participatory stance with the youth-participant may find the data lacking in integrity and student voice (Malewski, 2005; Parkes, 2008).

Problematic in the process is that many educational research practices are value-laden (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005). The postpositivist view of childhood and adolescence and its expression of a "universal, uniformly developmentalist conception of ... normal" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. xi) tends to direct behavior, restrict freedom, create dependency, and foster external motivation (Soto & Swadener, 2005). As Landreth (2002) promotes a child-centered counseling approach that contradicts the notion of inserting oneself into the world of the child, research of a socially constructed, participatory paradigm allows the youth-participant to lead the process of exploration (Kincheloe, 2005). When advocates of such an empowerment paradigm "enter diverse class cultures and racial/ethnic cultures, they find childhoods that look quite different from the white, middle-/ upper-class, English speaking one presented by positivism" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. xiii). The social, cultural, and political structures that shape the lives and development of youth-participants are the context by which they make meaning. Attending to the power structures embedded in those contexts (and where the researcher may fit into those structures) explains the norms by which youth-participants function. When considerations include how to afford voice and mitigate power dynamics, the use of a transformative paradigm – one which advocates for underrepresented communities and allows for political agenda and action in research (Mertens, 2005) – "is emancipatory in that it helps

unshackle people from the constraints of irrational and unjust structures that limit self-development and self-determination” (Creswell, 2009, p. 11).

The epistemology by which research is conducted directly impacts the manner in which data can be gathered and, thus, analyzed and presented (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, an ethical obligation of the researcher is to determine the paradigm or knowledge claim he or she will use to explore the world of the youth-participant. According to Creswell (2009), a knowledge claim means that “researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during their inquiry” (p. 6). The epistemological stance sets in motion the manner in which voluntariness, assent, confidentiality, and anonymity are determined, and whether the youth-participant feels in any way obligated, either directly or indirectly, to defer to the authority of the adult-researcher.

Forming a Paradigm

When contemplating which paradigm best fits, it is necessary to go back to the most basic of research questions: what do I really want to know? The researcher must consider the complexities of culture, power, and knowledge and identity formation which play out in a researcher-researched relationship. As explained by Morrow, Rakhsha, and Casteñeda (2001), there are three levels to consider when creating a research paradigm. First, one must identify the “paradigm of the soul” or one’s personal attitude toward research and the researcher role. Second, one must choose the paradigm that best fits the research topic. Third, one must consider the “paradigm of the discipline” or how the research will be viewed in terms of the current dictates in one’s field. Morrow and associates indicate that while the first two levels seem to evolve naturally, it is the third that can create the most difficulty for the researcher. Not always do the scholarly expectations of one’s profession match the desired research agenda.

The use of samples, populations, verbal data, and subjective analysis, the primary approaches in research data collection, provide for the diverse epistemologies of the researcher to be represented (Gall et al., 2005); yet how well positioned are the youth-participants? More astutely asked by Wyngaard (2005), “how can this research be a transformative act, versus an oppressor-oppressed, researcher-researched relationship, *if I’ve already formulated the questions?*” (p. 78). Having knowledge of varying forms of inquiry supports a researcher’s ability to answer such a question.

Creswell (2009) identifies three forms of inquiry: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches. A brief examination of these three approaches, under the auspice of culturally responsive research, is intended to create within the reader the aspiration to investigate more deeply the nature of research approaches suitable for children and adolescents.

Suitability of a Quantitative Approach

In quantitative research the aim is to determine the relationship between one thing (an independent variable) and another (a dependent variable) in a population. Quantitative research designs are either descriptive or experimental. A descriptive study establishes only associations between variables. An experiment establishes causality. The traditionally positivist approach to research provides valuable information regarding at-

risk student profiles and the causalities of academic failure (Quintana, Troyano, & Taylor, 2001; Smith, 2000). The primary strength of this research paradigm is its ability to demonstrate the correlational and causal relationships between school factors, student behaviors, and academic outcomes (Gall et al., 2005; Quintana et al., 2001; Smith, 2000). A distinct advantage concerning the use of quantitative research is that it addresses issues with traditional and conservative procedures making it particularly credible and persuasive to the scientific community (Awad & Cokley, 2010; Sue, 1999).

Quantitative research, however, has been often criticized for its limitations (Cawthorne, 2001; Quintana et al., 2001; Smith, 2000). According to Smith, the quantitative framework itself limits a scholar's approach and "consequently, [his or her] interrogation and understanding of school processes" (p. 296). Smith continues: "this paradigmatic approach does not necessarily facilitate a critical investigation of school structure and objectives, is unable to uncover *how* marginalized youths' experience school, and does not seek to understand the meaning of student agency within the educational context" (p. 298).

A quantitative research paradigm does not enable the researcher to learn about the social construction of class, race, age, and gender in the school setting and limits the scope of any research project (Morrow et al., 2001; Quintana et al., 2001). The literature indicates that underrepresented populations are equally underrepresented in quantitative studies (Delgado-Romero, Galvan, Maschino, & Rowland, 2005). Delgado-Romero et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 796 empirical studies published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, and *The Counseling Psychologist* over a 10 year period, 1990-1999. The data revealed that, compared to the overall U.S. population, Whites and Asian-Americans were overrepresented and African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans were underrepresented. As synopsised by Quintana et al. (2001), "the message is clear: researchers define normalcy with White populations and deviance with ethnic minority groups" (p. 605). Subsequently, student populations represented in quantitative studies do not adequately represent the typical student body and such findings may not be accurately generalized.

Student voices are not represented well in most educational research (Smith, 2000). Research that uses methodologies such as self-report questionnaires and surveys do not adequately convey what school failure, for example, means and what possible feelings of disempowerment and marginalization a student might have with respect to academic failure and school climate. As Smith (2000) explains it, such studies provide only closed-ended reporting and the youth-participant is never given the opportunity to express him- or herself narratively.

The possibility, however, of creating culturally and contextually valid quantitative research has not been abandoned. Quintana et al. (2001) stipulate that while

some may reflexively equate quantitative research with traditional, conservative, and Eurocentric views of science and therefore conclude that quantitative research cannot be appropriate for historically oppressed groups. We acknowledge the previous and ongoing misuses of quantitative research as well as important limitations. Nonetheless, we believe that quantitative research is an important tool, and like any tool, we believe its utility depends on the skill and intentions of whoever wields it. (p. 605)

Indeed, we see a concerted effort to explain and control for the cultural biases and limitations when utilizing quantitative methods (e.g., Awad & Cokley, 2010; Padilla, 2004). Currently, however, the literature indicates that when the purpose of a study is to seek out the socially constructed perceptions, perspectives, attitudes, and reasons for comportment among individuals, a quantitative paradigm and corresponding research methods offer serious limitations and obstructions (Atkinson, Bui, & Mori, 2001; Cawthorne, 2001; Morrow et al., 2001).

Suitability of a Qualitative Approach

Educational literature has established that quantitative research tends to separate the facts from their meanings, maintains an objective distance from researcher to subject, and that “factuality is a property of the empirical world and not of the observer” (Sutton, 1993, p. 411). Conversely, “qualitative research in counseling attempts to ground research in the lived experiences of those whose lives we investigate” (Morrow et al., 2001, p. 575). While qualitative research has been regarded as subjective, biased, and generally unscientific (Nelson & Quintana, 2005), the use of a qualitative, exploratory framework can produce a greater insight into the meanings of the social constructions encountered in a school setting, and answer the meaning of quantitative data (Nelson & Quintana, 2005). Creswell (2009) explains that qualitative research has gained momentum and credibility in the later half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, and the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods are conceptualized as ends of a continuum as opposed to conflicting philosophies.

The charge of a qualitative researcher is to make sense of the experiences of participants, to interpret the stories, and determine if there may be theories that explain the behavioral phenomenon (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). A social constructivist/interpretivist paradigm attempts to describe meanings, understand participants' definitions of the situation, and examine how realities are produced (Creswell, 2009; Gall et al., 2005). An advocacy/participatory paradigm asserts a co-participant relationship in the research process (Creswell, 2009; Soto & Swadener, 2005). Such research seeks to explore or explain a phenomenon, and deconstruct issues of power and the roles of adults and youth in research. The key to hearing and understanding the experience of the youth-participant is to create an opportunity to share in the meaning that he or she has constructed.

A recent study by Reisetter et al. (2004) indicates that a qualitative framework is a “natural fit” for many counselors in that a successful qualitative inquiry requires an appreciation of the complexities of the human experience which is an essential quality for an effective counselor. Reisetter et al. state that counselors possess validating skills such as “observation, conversation, participation, and interpretation” and that these skills go hand in hand with the “conceptualization, reasoning, and analyzing skills associated with qualitative data analysis” (p.11). In addition to counselor skills, the aforementioned study clarified that a counselor’s disposition as reflected in the capacity to respect the client’s lived experiences and meaning making comprise the necessary aptitude for conducting qualitative research and advocating for equitable practices and social justice.

The act of validating context for, gaining an understanding of, and giving a voice to a marginalized or underrepresented group is indicative of a research agenda aimed at empowering and advocating for social change (Rappaport, 1990). Rappaport suggests

that “because research changes those who participate in it, those who hold empowerment social values may find that they need to engage in certain methodological practices that contradict those currently popular in mainstream psychology” (1990, p. 53). He refers to qualitative methodologies because they allow research to be conducted in context of the participant and contributes a strength-based perspective which gives voice to those concerned.

Two qualitative methodologies of the various strategies (e.g., narrative inquiry and grounded theory) that are well suited for the considerations under discussion are Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Phenomenology. PAR can be described as a research methodology which pursues action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time (Dick, 2002). PAR assumes that the participants are the experts on their own situation and the researcher is more of a consultant rather than expert (Morrow et al., 2001). The action researcher is expected to develop critical consciousness concerning the sociopolitical realities of youth-participants. PAR includes in its definition the goal to address the power imbalances and oppressive structures of a system, and to create conditions for “emancipation, empowerment, participatory democracy, and the illumination of social problems and is a cyclical process of research, learning, and action” (Grant, Nelson, & Mitchell, 2008, p. 589-90). This attitude of inquiry could be well realized in schools as the professional school counselor is ideally situated to foster the understanding of the living experiences of students, and to advocate for equitable policy and practice. Potential areas for research could be student perspective and perception of discipline programs, the relevance of curricula, the effect and impact of teacher attitudes, and the function of school culture in developing student agency.

A phenomenological study “describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). A key tenet of the phenomenological study would be to determine what an experience means for the individuals who have had it (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological inquiry requires that researchers go through a series of steps in which they try to eliminate their own assumptions and biases, examine the phenomenon without presuppositions, and describe the deep structure of the phenomenon based on internal themes that are discovered (Moustakas, 1994). Given data is gathered within the perspective of the youth-participant, professional counselors may choose to investigate school related phenomena such as alienation, school connectedness, youth depression, identity development, and social and academic agency. Since both methodologies are well suited to the exploration of student voice and examination of power, a consideration that may determine the choice is the researcher’s ability to find an acceptable balance between the paradigm of the soul and the paradigm of the discipline.

Suitability of a Mixed Approach

Addressing issues from a perspective of both *breadth* and *depth* in the same study might seem an optimal framework for any researcher. Yet the mixing of the quantitative and qualitative paradigms has been quite contentious (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The “paradigm wars,” as described by Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003), seem to have subsided, giving way to the pragmatic paradigm which focuses on the problem under consideration rather than the method, and “us[es] pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 12). According to Creswell (2009), proponents of a

pragmatic paradigm, while not committed to any one philosophical tenet, agree that research always occurs in context (i.e., historical, political, social), thus allowing for a postmodern theoretical lens; therefore, the research strategy can be sequential, concurrent, or transformative.

A mixed methods approach provides the participatory/transformative researcher structure for developing a contextualized view of the world of a youth-participant through the use of "multiple perspectives and lenses" (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 275). Mixed methods allow for a greater diversity of values, attitudes, perspectives, and positions to be voiced (Somekh & Lewin, 2005) as both a breadth and depth of content is provided. Mixed method investigations which explore an issue such as school attendance can generate valuable data regarding who may not regularly attend (i.e., Latinas, ages 13 – 18) *and* the context of their lives which may account for the absences (i.e., caring for younger siblings). Effective policies can be constructed with both breadth and depth of information.

Mixed methods studies are not yet commonplace in counseling and educational research (Plano Clark & Wang, 2010), yet combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enables the voice of the youth-participant to be heard and understood from varying perspectives (Hoyt & Bhati, 2007). Learning about this emerging approach, and becoming a discerning reader of the differing research approaches (Plano Clark & Wang, 2010) will support the efforts of those compelled to hear and understand the experiences of children and adolescents.

Conclusion

Finding the best fit connecting research topic, research paradigm, and researcher soul is a monumental undertaking. One is required to be well educated in and have intimate, detailed knowledge and information on the characteristics of each concept. Whether based on deductive or inductive approaches, all approaches need grounding in theoretical constructs (Nelson & Quintana, 2005). Furthermore, it is essential to have a solid grounding in the current expectations of one's professional field regarding scientific inquiry. The ethic of care required to work in conjunction with youth-participants fosters a co-participatory relationship, and can allow the child and youth narrative to emerge (Soto & Swadener, 2005).

The current dictates of the counseling profession indicate elements of identity, systems of belief, and orientation of values be placed within a sociocultural context. Children and adolescents form and live within co-constructed political and sociocultural contexts. The myriad of self-expression available to the child or adolescent is often lost on the adult-researcher (Edmiston, 2005), yet the liberation and humanization produced by having presence, voice, and power to express in one's own terms is not lost on the youth-participant.

The plethora of available literature expounding the virtues and limitations of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research paradigms make the decision-making process exceedingly complex. The dearth of literature connecting paradigm, methodology, and youth-participants adds to the complexity of choosing the appropriate combination.

Ultimately, a synthesis of the literature reveals that, given the research topic and question at hand, a qualitative approach is most promising in terms of allowing the voice and perspective of the youth-participant to be heard. There seems to be consensus that a qualitative/interpretive/ participatory stance provides for meaning and context to be preserved, and is particularly well suited for counselors who use the very skills taught and valued in the profession. Qualitative inquiry allows for a cultural and multicultural framework and “these approaches to inquiry also offer us liberatory paradigms in which to contribute to the empowerment of both clients and research participants” (Morrow et al., 2001, p. 585). Situated among the virtues and limitations of research, lies the truth as constructed by the youth-participant.

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