

A cautionary tale on research methods in the field of parents in education.

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Introduction

It is with great pleasure that we introduce the new volume (n.7, issue 1) of the International Journal about Parents in Education. During the last years, the journal has increased the number of submissions from a wider international audience who is continuously working on the topic of parents in education. Looking at bibliometric measures, the IJPE's H-index (Hirsh, 2005) and G-index (Egghe, 2006) are steady growing: this represents a quite satisfying result for a still young (and tenaciously open access) journal, situated in a very challenging and competitive context.

We are also excited that the volume 7 of IJPE is published in the same year of the 9th International conference of ERNAPE network that will be held in Lisboa (Portugal) from 4th to 6th September, 2013. This means that, even after twenty years from its birth, the research network is still running on the field of school-family relationship with intact energy and strict adherence to scientific integrity.

In this first number of 2013 the IJPE presents seven articles which cover different research topics traditionally represented in the journal and, at the same time, it expands our international perspective on school-parents relationship. There are two distinctive features of this volume which distinguish it from other previously published regular numbers of IJPE. First, the volume is composed of articles coming from four different continents of the world; this means that authors having different fields of expertise and theoretical traditions are presenting their work in the same virtual space.

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This reflects the idea of "international" journal that we had when, in 2006, we planned to begin the editorial venture of IJPE. Second, in the volume are included two qualitative researches from Sweden and New Zealand that are characterized by a common theme. In both contributions authors structured their research designs using data on parental participation gathered from the words of those who theoretically (and practically) should benefit of positive school-parent relationships: the young students. This kind of research represents a methodological challenge, given the fact that interviewing children presented several problems related to the issue of data validity. However, what we learn from our experiences in the field is that the larger the methodological challenge, the greater the information collected, and the more significant and rewarding the potential outcomes of the research project. However, our cautionary tale on methods in the field of parent in education is not focused on highlighting methodological consequences of collecting data with children or young adults (in both articles, authors provided interesting rationales for their method and we can only encourage readers to read and discover it by their own). This note has been written with a different aim.

In 2010, in our attempt to investigate how emphasis on different constructs in the field of parents in education has evolved across different countries of the network, we unveiled that the way in which researchers represent their constructs in the field of parents in education reflected their cultural local tradition which, in turn, shape the perspectives from which school-parent relationships are studied. If one agrees with the view of paradigms as "a set of beliefs within a community of researchers who share a

consensus about which questions are most meaningful and which procedures are most appropriate for answering question" (Morgan, 2007; p. 53), he or she would be not particularly surprised by our conclusion.

Apart from such evidence, the point here is that we (surprisingly) also discovered a nearly total absence of articles adopting a quantitative-qualitative perspective in a database of approximately 230 articles collected into the field of school-parent relationships. On one side, many articles aimed to test sophisticated models, hypotheses and develop research tools from a strictly quantitative perspective. On the other side, many other fine pieces of qualitative research such as ethnographic studies, analyses of naturalistic conversation and on-site case studies emerged. After a closer look at the database, it became apparent that the so-called "outdated antagonism between quality and quantity" (Neuenschwander, 2012; p.1) in the field of parent in education was far from being outdated. On the contrary, it seems to us that the "paradigm war" still affects today how authors and practitioners structured their research design as well as their methodological choices. For Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003, 2009) there have been at least three paradigm wars among scientists during last decades: first, the constructivist position against positivism (1970-1990), then, the war between post-positivist, constructivist and critical theory paradigms (1990-2005) and finally, the current conflict between evidence-based and mixed-method approaches (Denzin, 2012). Obviously, it is not possible to debate forty years of methodological reflections within this short note. Yet in the following we would like to address the need for more mixed-method based researches (the so-called third movement, Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2010) which is now more evident in many other areas of educational research.

The term mixed-method research is used here to define "a research design for collecting, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a study in order to understand a research problem (Plano-Clark, Creswell, O'Neil Green and Shope, 2008; p. 364).

An appealing view advocating the adoption of multiple research methods within a single research design is that methodological complexity offers the opportunity to provide alternative explanations to research questions and empirical evidences arising from complex real settings. Paraphrasing

Maxwell's (2010) words, the real distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches should not be collapsed into the number-versus-text contrast: that would be simplistic at best. On the contrary, the real distinction should be conceived in term of different sides of the same coin: 'quantity' attempts to describe the real world by decomposing the total variance through the analysis of variables and using different kinds of statistical tools (regressions, structural equation modelling and so on), 'quality' attempts to understand that same world by using a theory of process through the analysis of events, discourses and interactions. From this perspective it is clear that we need a strong integration between the two paradigms: a synthesis between two ways of thinking about social phenomena is certainly worthwhile in the context of parent in education. Findings from different methods need to reciprocally communicate in order to enhance our comprehension of the educational phenomena.

We do agree with the view of Sandelowski, Voils & Knafl (2009) stating that researchers increasingly quantify qualitative data for integration with quantitative databases in order to strengthen hypotheses about the relations between independent and dependent variables, or to identify recurrent patterns in qualitative data in order to discern and report regularities they might not otherwise see (p. 209). However, we want to move a step forward arguing that the existing dividing line in the field of school-parent relationships between quantitative and qualitative approaches should be increasingly considered as blurred and crossable. It is only in the social and behavioral sciences that the merits of both research paradigms are so vehemently debated (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995). Running a parallel with one of the most quantitative discipline of the natural sciences (mathematics of celestial mechanics) we can remember that, during the plenary lecture at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Rome (1908), H. Pointcaré advocated the foundation of the *qualitative theory of differential equations* and the *qualitative theory of dynamical systems* (as a result, M. Petrovitch published in 1931 the book *Intégration qualitative des equation différentielles*). It is surprising that in the field of parents in education there is less epistemological ecumenism (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) than in the field of mathematics of celestial mechanics one hundred years ago.

For these reason we will continuously encourage authors, researchers, professionals and

practitioners in planning and designing more ambitious researches, based on adopting, blending and combining different research methods and approaches. The framework of school-parent relations is inherently complex, so there is a fragile balance between assessing parents, teachers and students in ecologically accurate situations and preserving the methodological rigor of a research design.

The current volume begins with a research conducted by Asnat Dor from Emek Yezreel Academic college (Israel) which reported on her experience investigating Israeli primary teachers' feelings, opinion and challenges during their relation with parents. The main result from thematic content analysis reveals that teachers' representations remain still ambivalent, ranging from outspoken skepticism to open support, thus concluding for the need of significant progress in teacher-parent relationship in Israel. The author believes that systematic in-service training and support should be focused on ways of reducing teachers' tension and enhancing their understanding of the possibilities and potential positive outcomes of parents' involvement.

Karen Nicholas, Jo Fletcher and Faye Parkhill from the University of Canterbury (Christchurch, New Zealand) present a small scale investigation on issues surrounding the role of parents in the literacy learning of their young adolescent students. The research suggested that there was a close link between parents who enjoyed reading and modeled this in their home environment to their child's perceived interest and success in reading achievement. They finally underlined the role of fathers (a too often neglected target of researches) as a powerful model for their children, more particularly their sons, in developing positive attitudes towards the value and interest in reading for leisure or information.

The third article by Venerande Kabarere, Tabitha Muchee, Lazarus N. Makewa and Elizabeth Role from the University of Eastern Africa (Baraton, Kenya) surveys the issue of parental participation in schools of rural area of Gasabo District in Rwanda. The authors quantitatively compared level and type of the involvement of parents (a sample composed of a majority of farmers) in high performing and low performing schools as measured by the Annual National School Campaign. Evidences demonstrated that

parents were generally interested in the education of their children but their frequencies and type of involvement is challenged by the socio-economic status, the overpopulation of families and high illiteracy rate of parents. The take at home message of the study seems to be that when families' basic needs (such as food, health and care) are not properly fulfilled then it is quite difficult for parents or caregivers to invest their effort in more complex activities of parental participation.

Ann-Marie Markström from the University of Linköping (Sweden) turns to shed new light on the point of view of children about the parental participation and interaction with teachers. Her qualitative study describes children's knowledge, ideas and perceptions of the relations between their parents and teachers, focusing on how children perceive their own role within this context. What emerges is a very interesting and new interpretative framework of ways in which young adolescent students (aged 12 and 13 years) talk about home-school relation. The students show a deep and well developed awareness of the main dimension shaping home-school relationship (such as the concept of institutional power or autonomy). Author concluded that children adopt different strategies in relation to adults, and that young adolescent students are already able to resist to their current social structure.

In the fifth paper, Annamaria Pinter from the University of Warwick (United Kingdom) discusses the reflections of a small group of temporary students sojourning in UK who have the double role of parent and student. Data revealed that the first year of sojourn is often more problematic than expected. The author finally advocated the idea that more research in this area is needed to address how universities interested in internationalisation can best support these student parents.

Sabine Wollscheid from the NOVA – Norwegian Social Research (Oslo, Norway) illustrates a medium-large scale quantitative research on the impact of parents' cultural resources (reading habits, parents' interaction and education) on school-aged children's reading habits by controlling the effects for children's gender. Drawing on the idea of reading socialization (a complex interactive process between school,

family and peers), she demonstrated through multiple regression analysis parents' reading habits have a more relevant impact on young people's reading habits than family interactions and parents' education. The conclusion accounted for different dynamics in the impact of parents' cultural resources on young people's reading in terms of gender.

Last but not least, in our section "Food for thought", Kees van der Wolf from the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) questions about empowerment and disempowerment of parents in schools. In this case, the fundamental (and perhaps provocative)interrogative is that we should ask ourselves if the drift towards a pervasive idea of professionalism in different aspects of current societies has not become so great that there is no room left for parents' confidence and their own ideas about key education issues. The conclusions of the article are aimed at strengthening the functional relationship

within the family; professionals in the field of youth care and education should be focused on the social environment of children and families. The more authorities and institutions claim for themselves, the less the social environment will be activated.

All articles have been subject to an anonymous, external and long reviewing process and must meet challenging quality criteria. For this reason, we do hope that they will contribute to foster and stimulate new reflections and debate on the role of parent in education from different perspectives, countries and continents.

On behalf of the Editorial board, we wish you a productive and enjoyable reading.

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