

An Investigation of Research Paradigms in Two Studies on Proposition 227

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Abstract

It is believed that the research questions addressed, the methodology employed, and the results interpreted, are reflective of researchers' epistemological perspective. The purpose of this paper is to investigate different research paradigms within two articles regarding the implementation of Proposition 227 in the state of California through the lens of teachers' beliefs and their classroom practice. The review of these two articles has revealed that there is not a universal or best methodology for any research practice. The diversity of paradigms leads us to the ramification of the unknown and thus provides us rich understanding of the world. The demonstration of this study implies that researchers may want to assume a multitude of comprehension of what produces knowledge and make our own contributions toward this process.

1. Introduction

Research, according to Merriam (1991), "is a purposeful, systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process" (p. 43). During this process, we, as researchers, verify, explore, or critique the existed so as to produce knowledge. The research questions we address, the methodology we employ, and the results we interpret are, in fact, vivid description and reflection of our epistemological perspective toward the world and accordingly, toward the nature of our research project (Constas, 1998).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate two different research paradigms within the context of exemplary articles regarding the implementation of Proposition 227 (the elimination of bilingual program) in the state of California through the lens of teachers' beliefs and classroom practice. The first article by Alamillo and Viramontes (2000) interviewed eight teachers from three instructional settings and delineated four key areas of concern related to the effect of Prop 227. Within an interpretivist framework, they believed that the "top-down reform" overlooked the knowledge base of teachers in the classroom who are the ultimate executors of this policy, and then set their research path toward the "individual perspective" and "subjective realities" of teachers. On the other hand, in the second article, Revilla and Asato (2002) claimed that their case study was operated within the critical race theory (CRT) and Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit) in a view that the relationship between language and power (racial power in particular) plays a critical role in the birth of this educational mandate. They then challenged the white supremacy of English only instruction and concluded that the launch of such policy made it more difficult to provide appropriate instruction for English language learners. Both of the studies implied that the negative impact of Prop 227 is expected.

The review of these two articles revealed that the assumption researchers hold before starting the knowledge construction process modifies their inquiry, determines their methodology, and establishes their way of interpretation, even if the final goal appears convergent.

2. Research Operated Within Interpretivistic Paradigm

Unlike positivists' assumption of a single, objective reality, interpretivists locate their research in multiple and subjective realities. According to this perception, researchers believe "the world is a highly subjective phenomenon that is interpreted rather than measured" (Merriam, 1991, p. 48) and discover the meanings within a certain social environment (Geertz, 1973).

In *Reflecting from the classroom: Teacher perspectives on the implementation of Proposition 227*, Alamillo and Viramontes (2000) started with the review of literature by stating the conflict between “top-down reform strategies” and the “subjective realities embedded in people’s individual and organizational contexts and their personal histories” (Fullan, 1991, as cited in Alamillo & Viramontes, 2000, p. 2) and realized the importance of attending teachers’ role as well as the reaction toward educational reform, because they determine whether such reform will be successful in a local setting. This corresponds with Merriam’s (1991) discussion that interpretivists are more concerned with the inquiry process which is embedded in people’s experiences that shape their perspectives. As Alamillo and Viramontes maintained, teachers’ individual practices play a crucial role in their “interpretation and implementation of the top-down policies” (2000, p. 2). The aim of their study was to achieve an understanding of teachers’ epistemology toward the implementation of Prop 227, whereas a positivist would have sought for an absolute answer as whether the implementation of Prop 227 favors students’ academic achievement or not.

The interpretivist orientation of this paper is evident in both data collection and analysis procedures. Eight teachers were randomly selected based on a previous study pertaining the effect of first-year implementation of Prop 227 among 77 teachers. Instead of measuring the participants’ attitude through quantitative tools, the researchers chose to explore the subjective realities among teachers by dividing them into three groups: (a) teachers who maintained bilingual education instruction; (b) teachers who switched to structure English immersion (SEI), and (c) teachers who remained in SEI or English-only classroom. It was believed that teachers’ perspectives vary from educational context to context. This characterizes an interpretivistic approach which sees human beings as active creators of knowledge and emphasizes the understanding of multiple voices within a specific social context. Seven questions were designed for the structured individual interview. Through the interview, Alamillo and Viramontes identified four key themes in terms of the “impact on teacher profession; effect on instructional practice; effect on students; and impact on school culture and teacher relationships” (2000, p. 3). Such a qualitative research runs counter to a quantitative methodology which is a fact-gathering activity of scientific investigation for quantifiable data and value-free knowledge (Kuhn, 1970).

The data in this cross sectional study exhibited the continuous impact of a top-down reform while Alamillo and Viramontes reported further new-occurring factors such as high stakes test and accountability that “created a tense environment for teachers to work” (p. 3) in the second-year implementation of Prop 227. This demonstrated their assumption that the realities are interrelated with each other that is dynamic, and during this dynamic process, the knowledge is constructed in an inductive manner. Such a position differs distinctively from positivism which advocates either proving or refuting a single and static reality by objective observation.

This study shares an extensive length of these eight teachers’ personal reflection and experiences toward bilingual education in their classroom under each categorization. Research fitted within such framework of interpretivism tends to focus on the process rather than the results, and functions more toward an explanation of what has been existing rather than hypothesis-testing; while research subscribed through positivistic paradigm stands in contrary to aim at problem-solving and utilize strategies that can quantify each subject through scientific modeling. Following this distinction, Alamillo and Viramontes illustrated various transcripts from the participants within each of the four concerns to obtain a complete and holistic comprehension of the interaction between teachers and students, professions, and instructional practices circling the aftereffect of the ostensible inefficiency of bilingual program, which served as the primary interest of this study.

In conclusion, Alamillo and Viramontes suggested that it was through the investigation and exploration of those who are inside the classroom—teachers, that we can understand the challenges “educators face in implementing school reform” (p. 12). No specific concluding remarks are present in this article, but the researchers mentioned about the negative effect on English language learners’ cultural identity and academic aspiration. The authors have achieved their initial purpose by looking at what is inside the educational setting and eliciting teachers’ perception toward the newly implemented educational policy through the interaction with them. The multiplicity of realities has determined that “it is too early to evaluate the future outcome” (2000, p. 12) of this reform and yields no absolute outcome of proving or refuting any unknown truth.

It is also worth noting that the authors’ adoption of first person pronouns frequently in this article features a qualitative design, which distinguishes itself from a quantitative approach of favoring third person pronouns (Creswell, 1994; Kuhn, 1970).

3. Research Operated Within Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) Paradigm

The essence of critical race theory (CRT) acknowledges the flawed reality and aims at unmasking racial oppression. Critical race theorists center race as the core of analysis and discussion. They endeavor to advance political commitment of racial emancipation, destabilize all forms of domination, and “problematize traditional notions of race by examining the intersectionality of ethnicity, social class, and immigration” (Teranishi, 2002, p. 146). Similarly, Latino/a critical race theory (LatCrit) shares much overlapping area with CRT in that it presents multiple identities, uncovers all forms of oppression experienced by Latino/a groups, and seeks actions (Bernal, 2002).

This epistemological perspective can be detected in Revilla and Asato’s (2002) article *The implementation of Proposition 227 in California schools: A critical analysis of the effect on teacher beliefs and classroom practices*. The authors argued that teachers’ reaction toward the after-effect of the passage of Prop 227 varied vastly from school district to school district and their purpose was to systemize the questions as what effect the hegemony of English only had exerted on teachers, as well as students, parents or school community. Since their research questions were generated through the lens of “an ominous political and social agenda aimed at ‘reforming’ students, particularly students of color” (p. 108), which in its nature establishes a flawed premise of the privilege of English over other languages, CRT, LatCrit and Asian American legal scholarship formed the framework of their design and analyses. Revilla and Asato further explained that LatCrit is in alignment with CRT, which challenges the traditional norm of essentialism, subordination and the thinking of race and identity that occurs in many race-centered contexts. During this literature review part, Alamillo and Viramontes illustrated extensive theories by other CRT and LatCrit scholars and claimed their mission to expect “pervasive English only ideology” and inferiority of “Spanish language instruction and Spanish language to English instruction”, and thus to determine whether the hit on bilingual education locates on a “larger, and historically concerted, oppressive regime” (2002, p. 111).

Founded by these conceptual infrastructures, Revilla and Asato stated that in order not to ignore bilingual/bicultural students’ personal experiences in the classroom, their methodological approaches were initiated by launching an “ethnographic and participant observation” (p.111) in three county school districts in Los Angeles, all of which served a dominant population of students of color, including Latina/o, African-American, Asian-American, etc. Their purpose was evidenced that the study emphasized on non-White ethnic groups so as to trace any likelihood of ethnic marginalization. Extensive observations in classrooms, teachers meetings and parent meetings for Prop 227 were implemented for a year period; in addition, interviews with district administrators, school principals, and teachers were also conducted. Three themes emerged: “variance across and within districts; hyper-interpretation of Prop 227; and the pervasiveness of an English only ideology” (p. 112), which symbolized the relationship between power and language representing that the “socio-political perspective of language” (p. 112) have ingrained in the classroom practices in a way that devalues bilingual instruction. Transcripts were presented as examples for each of the themes.

The researchers of this article also provided a critical analysis by indicating that classroom practices are not simply a pedagogical or technical operation; in contrast, they carry with them the political implication of English priority. LatCrit had led them to the findings of the refusal to speak Spanish by teachers in some of the classrooms where Latino/a student could not fully participate in academic activities. Students also received this official message from outside the classroom that affected their perception toward English language, their home language, and their self-efficacy. This is true according to Crenshaw’s (1995) elucidation of CRT that people’s behavior, social life and even the perception of themselves will be referred to the law.

Revilla and Asato concluded that nothing is exempt from social and political discourse that situates educational events, which embodies the ideology of those who are in power. Since power and politics establish the ramification of teaching and learning (Solorzano, 1998), this political “backlash” hegemonizes English instruction and oppresses other ethnic groups in terms of students’ educational opportunities, as well as their “identity formation.” More importantly, Revilla and Asato proposed a public debate that re-evaluates bilingual education and deconstructs white supremacy, racial neutrality, blindness and subordination by creating justice in the arena of educating English language learners. Their accomplishment in this article is not only to offer a “critical vision” but advocate for “formal equality” (Crenshaw, 1995).

4. Conclusion

This paper investigates two research articles concerning the impact of the implementation of Proposition 227 that prohibits bilingual education. It is believed that researchers' own assumption of knowledge contribution process prerequisites their research questions, methodological practices, analytical actions, and interpretational patterns (Constas, 1998; Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). For an interpretivistic study, as in Alamillo and Viramontes (2000), teachers were tracked in three educational contexts and interviewed because they are inside the classroom where the top-down reform takes place. It is by this method that multiple voices can be heard within a certain meaningful social setting (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982).

According to Solorzano (1998), CRT in education seeks any form of racial oppression and advocates emancipation in all educational theory, policy and practices by examining those who are silenced or unheard by the public. Instructed by this theoretical foundation, Revilla and Asato (2002) focused their goal on the effect of the political restriction on pedagogical effort to respond effectively to the needs of non-white students.

These two studies resemble each other in their participants (teachers), social discourse (school districts that serve language minority students), and analyses (several themes evolved from the interview); however, because they fallen within two distinctive paradigmatic manifestation, these two studies differ from each other in the research questions (whether teachers report any type of effect vs. whether students of color experience any oppression after the educational alteration); interpretation and conclusion (not an appropriate time to reach a conclusion vs. language colonization through this political agenda and therefore a desired social justice).

My investigation of these two studies reveals that there is not a universal or best methodology for any research practice. The diversity of paradigms leads us to the ramification of the unknown and, thus, provides us rich understanding of this world. We, as researchers, should never be confined to a unitary technique; instead, we may want to assume a multitude of comprehension of what produces knowledge and make our own contributions toward this process.

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