

Are we (t)here yet? Qualitative research in education's profuse and contested present

Handel Kashope Wright*

University of British Columbia, Canada

This essay addresses the topic of the state of qualitative research in education by asserting that qualitative research in education is in quite a state. Drawing heavily on Denzin and Lincoln's periodization of qualitative research as a guide, it outlines the various competing developments from within and outside that are vying to characterize the current moment and illustrates the difficulty of pinpointing the moment. Arguing for a conception of overlapping moments rather than a neat historical progression, the essay posits that the current period is simultaneously one of overt politicization, epistemological and paradigmatic proliferation, post-posts (post-postmodernism, post-poststructuralism, post-experimentation) and a new post (postcolonialism), as well as a new or renewed paradigm war. The conclusion drawn is that the current/next moment in qualitative research in education is one of methodological contestation, one that demands either complicity with or resistance to the government-sanctioned resurgence of the hegemony of positivism.

Introduction: 'Well I don't know why I came here tonight...' (Stealer's Wheel)

Well I don't know why I came here tonight.
I've got the feeling that something ain't right.
I'm so scared in case I fall off my chair,
and I'm wondering how I'll get down the stairs... (Stealer's Wheel)

In this very brief essay I attempt to address the broad theme of this special issue, namely, 'the state of qualitative inquiry,' by indicating that, frankly, qualitative research in education is in quite a state. In other words, rather than putting forward what I believe are the definitive characteristics of status quo qualitative research in education, I undertake the more modest task of simply indicating that it is difficult to pinpoint and characterize the current moment in qualitative research in education, whether in terms of

*University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4. E-mail: handel.wright@ubc.ca

the history of qualitative inquiry or of the issues and developments that characterize current work. In articulating this difficulty, I do arrive at something of a conclusion, namely that the present/next moment is one of Methodological Contestation.

Qualitative research in education is currently in such flux that it is a daunting, perhaps even foolhardy task to attempt to trace its outlines, indicate its principal characteristics or even name the moment definitively. Each of the three editions of Denzin and Lincoln's (1994, 2000, 2005) *Handbook of qualitative research* has provided an exposition on the status quo of the field of qualitative research that has been widely accepted (though with a few detractors such as Alasuutari, 2004) as comprehensive and well contextualized (historically, thematically). One approach to sketching the current moment, therefore, would involve drawing on Denzin and Lincoln's summary of the status quo of qualitative research, with necessary additional discussion of the specificities of qualitative research in education. This approach places the emphasis on research as opposed to education: in other words it involves discussing qualitative research in education as an aspect of qualitative research rather than focusing on issues in the field of education and how qualitative research is being employed to address them.

Taking this approach, I draw heavily on Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 2005), utilizing a re-reading of their story of the history of qualitative research to guide my efforts to indicate that qualitative research in education is in contentious flux and that it is difficult to pinpoint and name its present moment. I also point to a recent phenomenon, the proliferation of epistemologies and how it is related to the turn to 'scientific standards,' an emphasis on a narrow conception of evidence-based research and a resurgent positivism and postpositivism in educational research.

It would be misleading to describe the task at hand as involving merely outlining developments in what Edward Said (1983) would decry as the impossibility of a hermetically sealed field; as providing indications of a neat linear progression of the discourse of qualitative research in education. Rather, anyone undertaking this task does so acutely aware of developments such as a resurgent positivism and the turn to scientific standards, backed by government intervention in various Western countries including Britain and the United States. This set of characteristics is both a backdrop to any account as well as a contributory factor to the evolution of qualitative research in education (or, as I shall indicate in the conclusion, a counter to the qualitative research revolution). In addition, there is the bewildering profusion of trajectories that qualitative research in general has taken: the postmodern turn, the poststructuralist turn, the narrative turn (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and I would add for progressive qualitative research in education, the turn to cultural studies (Dolby & Dimitriadis, 2004). All of this makes for multiple, slippery staircases to identify, select from and navigate: a rather difficult and uncomfortable task.

'What time is it?' (Flavor Flav)

... we are already in the post-'post' period—post-poststructuralism, post-postmodernism, post-postexperimentalism. What this means for interpretive ethnographic practice is not clear... (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 26)

One flight of stairs which at first glance appears easily navigable involves steps in the history of qualitative research. In the second edition of the *Handbook of qualitative research*, Denzin & Lincoln (2000) provide a succinct general account of the history of qualitative research in which they identify six periods. By identifying the characteristics of the current period in the context of the six periods that have preceded it, we would presumably be able to outline a clear picture of the status quo and even project the next moment in qualitative research in education. The periods they identify are Traditional (1900–50), Modernist or Golden Age (1950–70), Blurred Genres (1970–86), Crisis of Representation (1986–mid-1990s), Postmodernist/Poststructuralist (mid-1990s–2000) and Postexperimental (2000 onward). As I will indicate presently, however, the present moment resists clear delineation.

Given Denzin and Lincoln's useful periodization, what are the characteristics of the present moment in qualitative research? The second edition of the *Handbook* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) ends with the postexperimental period (2000 onwards), a time in which postmodernist and experimental forms (multimedia texts, ethnographic poetry, etc.), which were once cutting edge, have now become accepted as legitimate in some quarters (though they are still not mainstream). In the third edition of the *Handbook*, however, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) identify 2000 to 2004 as the seventh period, 'the methodologically contested present,' one characterized by 'conflict, great tension, and in some quarters, retrenchment.' They conclude that 'the eighth moment is now, the future (2005–),' a period in which qualitative research is confronting a backlash associated with a fundamentalist, positivist/postpositivist conception of empirical research.

There is a marked (though unremarked) progressive compression of the actual duration of the periods identified by Denzin and Lincoln (Traditional lasted some 50 years, Modernist 20, Blurred Genres 16, Crisis of Representation 10, Postmodernist/Poststructuralist 5), to the point where there is apparently an overlapping of periods in the current moment (the sixth moment, postexperimental, is 2000–, the seventh is 2000–2004 and the eighth moment is already upon us, 2005–). Fortuitously, this makes it rather difficult to clearly delineate the current moment. I regard this progressive compression as fortuitous because it is unlikely that Denzin and Lincoln intend for the periods framework to be read as definitive and the specific periods as clearly delineated. Rather, the characteristics of a period often continue into other periods. For example, while the original Crisis of Representation moment was largely ignored in the mainstream, it has continued in critical circles and is associated with the triple crisis of the Postmodernist/Poststructuralist period. In fact the various crises, including the original crisis of representation, are issues with which progressive qualitative research continues to grapple.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the present moment is a quite complex one in which at least three 'periods' virtually overlap. It is clearly Postexperimental: this is an era in which experimental forms have been accepted in some circles and postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches and their challenges to modernist research are no longer new. While the current moment involves the generation of more postmodernist and poststructuralist work and greater accommodation of the postmodernist/

poststructuralist challenge in qualitative research generally, it is also a surprisingly contested and contentious moment. This is because closely following the postmodernist challenge has been a strong resurgence of positivism and postpositivism in research generally and in educational research in particular (Hodkinson, 2004). The present moment is marked by a strong turn to scientific standards (Shavelson & Towne, 2002) which constitutes a strong positivist and postpositivist backlash against the gains of mushrooming postmodernist, poststructuralist, identity-based politics and other critical paradigms. Consequently this is a moment of Methodological Contestation in empirical research generally and certainly in educational research.

While developments in qualitative research in education have for the most part been an integral part of the developments in qualitative research in general that Denzin and Lincoln outline in their periods framework, there are important specificities that have marked the evolution of qualitative research in education, sometimes divergently. Appropriating Ernst Bloch's (1977) notion of non-synchronicity, we could observe that qualitative research in general and qualitative research in education are not always living in the same 'now.' For example the period Denzin and Lincoln identify as one dominated by Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1983) notion of 'blurred genres' (1970–86) coincides roughly with one of momentous confrontation between quantitative and qualitative research in the field of education. For educational research this period has been variously identified as 'the great quantitative versus qualitative debate' and 'the paradigm war.' Quantitative research had been virtually synonymous with educational research up to the 1970s and thus the emergence of qualitative research in education and an assertion of a shift from issues best addressed by quantification to ones best addressed by qualitative research (e.g. McDiarmid, 1976 in the Canadian context) provoked a charged paradigmatic debate. The debate was recorded in the United States in a number of essays, principally in the 1980s (e.g. Smith, 1983; Smith & Heshusius, 1986; Howe, 1988, Gage, 1989) in the journal *Educational Researcher*. If one undertook to identify a number of historical periods that have characterized qualitative research in education specifically, the period late 1970s to mid-1980s could appropriately be labeled the Paradigm War. The war presumably ended after a period of détente in the late 1980s: qualitative research had moved from being 'an attractive nuisance' (Miles, 1979, p. 590) to considerable success, with a 'dizzying array of traditions and possibilities' (Wright, 2003a, p. 12).

'Proliferation happens' (Patti Lather) but 'The positivist empire ain't half striking back' (Phil Hodkinson)

... any attempt to think paradigmatically about epistemology is doomed. We have to have proliferation of epistemologies, whatever that means. We have to live with and accept a proliferation of epistemologies. [However] ... if you pardon the cliché, the positivist empire ain't half striking back. (Hodkinson, in Wright, 2006, p. 91)

The widely accepted account of the Paradigm War is that it ended (or rather fizzled out) after the period of détente in the late 1980s and the establishment,

acceptance, maturation and mushrooming of qualitative research in education. But did it? Recent developments within qualitative research itself and even more recent developments outside qualitative research have produced a situation in which a new (or revived) tension exists between foundationalism, positivism and postpositivism in educational research on the one hand and post-foundationalism, critical and postmodernist and poststructuralist work on the other. Thus a period that was supposed to have ended in the 1980s has re-emerged in the present (2000–). In fact it could be argued that the Paradigm War never really ended, that the widely held assumption of an end following the period of détente was a collective overly optimistic (mis)reading of a simmering situation that is now threatening to boil over once again into open hostilities. We could do a lot worse, therefore, than to label the present moment post-Paradigm War, New Paradigm War, or Resurgent Paradigm War.

How did we arrive at this moment of déjà vu in qualitative research in education? In order to understand this, we need to look not just broadly to the success of qualitative research but to the associated specific phenomenon of paradigm proliferation (or at least, the proliferation of epistemologies). Since the 1990s qualitative research in education has been marked by a breathtakingly rapid proliferation of work based on postmodernism, poststructuralism, identity politics, global relations (especially postcolonialism), new media, etc. Thus, another example of the specificities of historicizing qualitative research in education involves two principal developments in educational research that are reflective of Denzin and Lincoln's Postmodernist/Poststructuralist period. The first is a set of mostly white male researchers who have embraced postmodernism (e.g., James Scheurich, 1995) and the second is a set of mostly white female researchers (e.g. Elizabeth Britzman, 1995; Elizabeth St.Pierre & Wanda Pillow, 2000) who have embraced poststructuralism. In addition, the moment that Denzin and Lincoln identify so strongly as postmodernist and post-structuralist for qualitative research has also been one in which in the specific field of education people of color, indigenous people and other minoritized people working in education have been strongly putting forward research that reflects their identities and communities. In educational research, therefore, the Crisis of Representation and the Postmodernist/Poststructuralist periods have overlapped and been prolonged in interesting ways. It is a period that has extended into the early 2000s: one of 'racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies' (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and a turn to critical race theory (Delgado, 1995; Parker *et al.*, 1999); one in which white privilege and racism are named and actively tackled (Scheurich & Young, 1997, 1998; Tyson, 1998) and Chicana/o (Delgado, 1998), Black (Dillard, 2003, 2006), Maori (Bishop, 1998; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), First Nations (Hermes, 1998; Graveline, 2000), lesbian and queer (Khayatt, 1992; Leck, 1994) educational research have proliferated, intermingling with existing epistemologies such as feminism to produce hybrids such as black feminist (Dillard, 2000, 2006) epistemologies and inspiring responses such as black male pro-feminist postmodernist inflected critiques (Wright, 2003b). These newly articulated epistemologies challenge not only established, mainstream postpositivist and constructivist research but established

feminist, critical and emergent postmodernist and poststructuralist educational research as well.

Some, me included, have taken up a discussion of the proliferation of epistemologies in terms of paradigms (Donmoyer, 1999, 2001; Wright & Lather, 2006), or more accurately, 'paradigm talk' (Lather, 2006). Lather's phrase, 'Paradigm talk', is more appropriate since 'paradigm' is put under erasure in this work, its adequacy and viability for discussing the phenomenon of epistemological proliferation questioned. For example, Robert Donmoyer (1999, 2001, 2006) questions whether paradigms are an appropriate and useful conceptual tool for addressing this phenomenon, Cynthia Dillard (2006) places the word 'paradigm' in tentative, questioning quotes in her title, Jan Nespore (2006) reminds us that paradigms are a double-edged sword that 'can be used both to add complexity and diverse standpoints to inquiry—and to build reductive boundaries that bleed out difference and obscure alternatives' (p. 115) and while Patti Lather (2006) holds that paradigm talk is 'a good thing to think with' (p. 35), she argues for a new way to think with paradigms: old talk of paradigm shifts and normal and revolutionary periods should give way to new, postparadigmatic narratives of proliferation versus successor regimes. There is an interesting diversity of reactions among qualitative researchers in education to the proliferation of epistemologies. Donmoyer (2006) for example is ambivalent about the phenomenon, supportive of the new voices and worldviews but worried about the resulting danger of incommensurability. In contrast, Dillard and Lather are unreservedly supportive, with Dillard (2006) actively contributing by adding her notion of an 'endarkened feminist epistemology,' and Lather celebrating proliferation as a means of undermining the hegemony of foundationalism. Given this situation, it would be tempting to label this moment in qualitative research in education one of Epistemological Proliferation or Paradigm Proliferation.

However, while some qualitative researchers in education are busy addressing the problematic of epistemological (and possibly paradigmatic) proliferation, others would acknowledge, as Guba and Lincoln (1994) do for qualitative research in general, that we can identify several competing paradigms but not that paradigms are proliferating. In fact Harvey Siegel (2006) argues that epistemological differences are not as diverse as those who advocate epistemological diversity presume and those epistemologies that are quite divergent are not justifiably so. Resistance from within qualitative research to the advocacy and fact of a proliferation of epistemologies in qualitative research in education buttresses (whether wittingly or unwittingly), the (post)positivist backlash or at the very least contributes to the turn to standardization, conformity and uniformity, to the taming and curbing of what Lather (2006) celebrates as 'a wild profusion' (p. 35) of approaches to qualitative research in education. This current situation of innovative qualitative research in education being under threat is shared by qualitative research in general. In acknowledgement of this and taking into account what has become the awkwardness of paradigm talk, we could label the current moment, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) do, '*the methodologically contested present*' (p. 1116, emphasis in the original).

Conclusion: ‘...They’re talking about a [counter] revolution’ (Tracey Chapman) so ‘You’re gonna have to serve somebody’ (Bob Dylan)

... you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

Yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody. (Dylan, ‘Gotta Serve Somebody’, 1979).

Given the brief points made in this essay, how are we to identify the current moment in qualitative research in education? It is one in which the original Crisis of Representation has been addressed in part by the emergence of the other as researcher and a proliferation of epistemologies. The delicate question of how dominant group researchers are to represent the minoritized other as research subject has been answered in part by the assertive emergence and self-representation of the other as researcher and investigator of their communities. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) forcefully and poetically puts it, ‘the children of fieldhands have returned to do field-work’ (p. 269). It is also a moment characterized by rapid Epistemological Proliferation, with new epistemologies acting in combination with each other and previously existing epistemologies to produce complex hybrids, a development that leads some to consider this a moment of Paradigm Proliferation. Even as we tentatively identify the present moment as ‘post-post,’ we find that Postmodernist and Poststructuralist approaches are being joined by Postcolonialist qualitative research in education. From within qualitative research, therefore, this is moment of overlapping moments and ‘central’ themes (Postmodernist and Poststructuralist Turn, Post-Postmodernist and Poststructuralist Turn, the Cultural Studies Turn, Epistemological Proliferation, Paradigm Proliferation, the Other as Researcher); one of considerable diversification, complexity and flux.

It is important to look at how developments and influences from outside qualitative research are contributing to the characteristics outlined above and indeed contributing other characteristics of the present moment. I hold that a combination of ‘the posts’ and a politics of difference and representation is the engine driving what has been identified as the qualitative research revolution (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) from within. On the other hand, there is a counter-revolution of sorts brewing, a reassertion of the hegemony of positivism, postpositivism and foundationalism that threatens a New Paradigm War or a Resurgent Paradigm War in educational research. Much of this turn is being steered not from within qualitative research or even from within educational research in general but rather from outside academe. As Nespore (2006) points out, ‘the [supposed] gold standard is inextricably woven into ongoing efforts to ontologically standardize ... the educational system through state-established content objectives and standardized tests’ (p. 118). Such efforts include policies that not only emphasize but virtually fetishize a foundationalist, positivist approach to research such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the 2002 Education Sciences Act.

In the original paradigm war what was at stake was the viability and utility and hence the very existence of qualitative research in education. In the new, renewed or at least threatening paradigm war, what is at stake is the existence of emergent epistemologies

based on difference and the diversity of approaches, genres and sub-genres, and continued innovation of the field. Outside positivist and postpositivist paradigms, all other paradigms, namely constructionist/constructivist, critical theory, queer, post-modernist/poststructuralist, action research and even the supposedly entrenched feminist research as well as every overtly social-justice-oriented approach to research (e.g. emancipatory, anti-racist, feminist, cultural studies) is threatened with delegitimization by the government-sanctioned, exclusivist assertion of positivism and foundationalism as the 'gold standard' of educational research. While it may be difficult to name the present moment in qualitative research in education, it seems the next moment is clearly emerging: it is one of Methodological Contestation.

How are qualitative researchers to respond and contribute to determining this next moment? Some might decide to be 'pragmatic' and undertake mixed-methods studies (which would appear to render mixed-methods studies a form of complicity with hegemony). Others might consider undertaking and utilizing quantitative studies for quite overtly political ends (thus undermining positivism's supposed neutrality). What is emerging, however, as the principal strategy is a more direct approach: the launching of a spirited defense of qualitative research and post-foundationalism (Lather, 2004) or at least the articulation of arguments that qualitative research ought not to be left out of the 'gold standard' (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003). Any and all work undertaken in the present moment is inherently political. While nuances and a diversity of strategies and responses might develop, it would appear at the end of the day that the present/next moment is one of stark alternatives: acquiescence to and compromise with the gold standard on the one hand and resistance to it and continued innovation and diversification on the other. Which side are you on?

Handel Kashope Wright is Canada Research Chair in Cultural Studies and Director of the Centre for Culture, Identity and Education at the University of British Columbia. His teaching and research interests include qualitative research, cultural studies, critical multicultural and anti-racist education, Africana studies, and post-reconceptualist curriculum.

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