

### The Relevance of Qualitative Research Methods in Education in Brazil

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# The Relevance of Qualitative Research Methods in Education in Brazil

## 1 Introduction

Which path did qualitative research methods in education in Brazil take? When and how did they emerge? How did they expand? What are their main contributions and challenges? These are some of the issues we intend to discuss in this text.

The origins of qualitative methods go back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century when various sociologists, historians and social scientists were dissatisfied with the results of the physical and natural science methods, which at that time were the model of studying social science phenomena. They started to look for new forms of scientific investigation. Among them, Dilthey argued that historical investigation is mainly interested in understanding historical phenomena, which should be seen in the context where they occurred and not in the light of causal explanation. Thus, he developed a hermeneutic, which, broadly speaking, aimed at the significance of the texts. Weber, also, made important contributions to the qualitative perspective: he thought the focus of scientific investigation should be to gain an understanding of the meaning the subjects attributed to their actions. Both resorted to social analysis to understand the meaning of interactions, seen in their socio-historical contexts.

It was these ideas which initiated a critical debate about the concept of positivist science and the idea of a perspective of knowledge, known today as the idealist-subjectivist approach. Contrary to the idea of separating subject and object, this perspective values the subjective understanding of social reality. At the same time, the practice of interpretation instead of measurement, the discovery that facts and values are deeply related, raise significant doubts about the neutrality of the researcher.

Based on these assumptions, a new scientific approach developed: it was called 'qualitative', because it does not divide social reality into measurable and isolated facts. To the contrary, the qualitative approach propagates a holistic view on social phenomena, including the diversity of dimensions of a given situation, as well as their interaction and reciprocal construction.

Another base of the qualitative approach can be found in the principles of phenomenology, which are still used in various qualitative studies, such as those employing symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, cultural studies and ethnography. All these methodological perspectives draw attention

to the world of the individual and to how he attributes meaning to his daily experience and social interactions. Based on this, he is able to understand and interpret social reality, knowledge and daily social practices.

While these basic principles were already part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century debates about the methodology of social science, it was only in the 1960's, in Brazil and other American countries that they were finally recognized in the field of educational research. This was most probably due to the strong influence of experimental psychology on educational research.

The more liberal climate of the 1960s was a result of the social movements, whose fight against racial discrimination and equality of rights led to alternative scientific approaches. Qualitative methods permitted the observation and description of the voices and the actions of the participants in these social movements, while describing the interests and the ideas of this period, especially through a modality of research called "action research".

The 1960s was also the decade of student protests in France, where they attracted the attention of educational scientists, who wanted to know what was going on inside the schools and especially in the classrooms. It was in this context that ethnographic studies were first applied to the field of school research.

Another important fact for the implementation of the qualitative perspective to the area of educational studies was the paradigm change in North American sociology, which had been dominated by the concepts of functionalism for more than 20 years. In fact, it was in Sociology that the principles of symbolic interactionism were first applied during the 1960s (see i.e. Becker, 1961). Therefore, it can be said that educational science adopted the new influences of this discipline at the time.

If this type of studies started to emerge at the end of the 1960s, it was during the following decade that it spread to many places and nations. In Brazil, in particular, studies published in North America and England had a big influence (among others i.e. Bogdan/Taylor, 1975; Hamilton et. al. 1997).

## **2 Origins of Qualitative Methods in Brazil**

The introduction of qualitative methods in education in Brazil in the mid-1970s had a lot of influence from the studies developed in the areas of program and curriculum evaluation, promoting also the emergence of new perspectives for school and classroom research.

In the areas of program and curriculum evaluation it is important to mention a notable publication: *Beyond the Numbers Game* (1977), edited by David Hamilton, David Jenkins, Cristine King, Barry Malcolm MacDonald

and Parlett, which resulted from a seminar in Cambridge (United Kingdom), in 1972. In it, non-conventional methods of evaluation were discussed and proposals for further studies in the area were made. One of the texts, presented by Parlett and Hamilton, had a major impact on this event: the authors criticized the quantitative paradigm, prevalent in evaluative research, and proposed the illuminative approach, based on socio-anthropological grounds. The text defended the need to take into account the social, cultural and institutional dimensions that surround each program or situation investigated, arguing that it is necessary to consider the particular context in which educational practices are developed. It also stressed that the different points of view of the various groups participating in the program, or the situation, should be taken into consideration. At the end of the seminar, a document was written, in which the participants summarized their recommendations in three points:

- Observation data, carefully collected, should be used more often than usual test data;
- Flexibility must be a tonic in research design in order to include unforeseen events. Progressive focusing should be used instead of a fixed design;
- The researcher's values and perspectives should be clearly described in the research report.

Although these ideas were directly addressed to specialists in program and curriculum evaluation, they had great impact on educational research in Australia, Sweden, the United States, and Scotland, where participants of the event had come from. Their impact was also felt in other countries where the seminar's results were accessible, one of which was Brazil. This can be seen in the Brazilian publication of the article '*The ethnographic approach: a new perspective in educational evaluation*' (André, 1978) which discusses two new approaches in educational evaluation: the illuminative and the responsive, and proposes the use of qualitative methods in education.

Another important source in the introduction of qualitative educational methods in Brazil was the book '*Explorations in Classroom Observation*', organized by Michel Stubbs and Sara Delamont (1976). The book makes a sharp critique of classroom research based on interaction analysis. In the first chapter, Delamont and Hamilton (1976) criticize the observation systems which, similar to Flanders, ignore the spatial and temporal context in which classroom behaviors take place, focusing strictly on what can be measured, making use of observation units that, derived from pre-established categories, guide the analysis and create a kind of circularity in the interpretation. To avoid and to overcome the problems encountered in classroom studies, the authors suggested the anthropological approach. According to them, classroom events can only be understood in the context in which they occur,

since they are permeated by a multiplicity of meanings that, in turn, are part of the cultural universe which must be studied by the researcher. Therefore, they propose the "participant observation", which involves field records, interviews, documental analysis, photographs and recordings. In this approach, the observer does not want to prove theories or make "broad" generalizations: his aim is to understand the situation, describing it in details to enable the reader to grasp the participants' multiple meanings, allowing him to decide whether the interpretations, based on theoretical plausibility, may be generalized or not.

The contribution of Sara Delamont to Brazilian educational research must be acknowledged. At the end of the 70s, in a series of seminars in the Carlos Chagas Foundation in São Paulo, she defended the use of the anthropological approach in the investigation of school problems, making this approach more renowned. Another important event that helped to spread the qualitative perspective in research was the Southeastern Research Seminar, held in Belo Horizonte, State of Minas Gerais (Br), in 1980. On that occasion, the theme "Qualitative Research and School Study" was discussed and several researchers had the opportunity to analyze the possibilities and limits of these new methods for the study of schools. This discussion, through texts written by André (1984), Campos (1984), Gonçalves (1984), Thiollent (1984) and commented by Joly Gouveia (1984) were subsequently published by Research Books, divulging these ideas to a wider audience.

At this stage of approximation between the qualitative methods and educational research, the visit of Robert Stake, Director of the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, from the University of Illinois, in 1983, was important to several Brazilian institutions (e. g., the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo, the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, the Federal University of Espírito Santo, the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul and the Carlos Chagas Foundation, in São Paulo), since it gave rise to a very productive discussion about the potential of qualitative approaches in education.

But it wasn't just British, Scottish, Australian and North American influences that marked the first steps of qualitative research in Brazil. In 1983, a Mexican researcher, Justa Ezpeleta, attended a seminar in INEP (National Institute of Educational Studies and Research) on participant research. A few years later, she and Elsie Rockwell published a book, entitled 'Participant Research', which gave a strong boost to ethnography in education. It was also at this time that the works of the French authors Bourdieu, Passeron, Lapassade, Lourau, Baudelot and Establet arrived in Brazil, gaining wide acceptance within academic circles. This also helped to spread the qualitative methods in education.

## *2.1 The Expansion of Qualitative Methods in Education in Brazil*

In the year 1980, groups of researchers were already working with these methods in various institutions across the country. Many studies were produced to understand intra-school relationships and their contexts, presenting different views on institutional issues, classroom situations, and representations of school actors. Most of them emerged in graduate education centers in the form of theses and dissertations. The tonic presented in these studies was critical of quantitative and economic approaches when employed in a simplistic way.

Educational research was enriched by different criticisms: a) the limitations of numeric or experimental nature of the studies; b) the wide-spread use of research-action methodologies and theories of conflict in the 80s; c) the idea that technical solutions could solve most of the basic problems in Brazilian education. The educational research profile was enriched with new perspectives, opening up space to alternative approaches which became identified with qualitative methods.

It should be remembered here, that this entire process from the 1970s to the 1980s occurred in a specific social and political context. The freedom of expression was restrained by censorship; an economic policy of capital accumulation was imposed on society; technologies of different natures became valued as a priority. Also, various social movements started to emerge, in a crescendo, creating more occasions for socio-cultural demonstrations and social criticism, leading to a transition period of social and political struggles, which helped to build the slow return to democracy. Educational research was to be largely affected by the social criticism of the traditional methods of research in education in Brazil. The 80s ushered a major source of educational research: post-graduate dissertations and theses at academic institutions, characterized by the hegemonic treatment of educational issues based on Marxist theories and/or studies generally of a qualitative nature.

The dichotomy deepened between "quantitative X qualitative" methods among Brazilians. The expansion of qualitative research in the field of education came in the midst of a search for alternatives to the experimental method, to measurements, and to numerical empiricist studies, whose explicatory power of the educational phenomena was questioned. In the same manner, the concepts of objectivity and neutrality - embedded in those models - were questioned. The almost universal option of qualitative approaches in educational researches was identified as revolutionary, as the only modality of research able to modify reality, condemning the quantitative treatments to exile.

Although we are living a moment in which there is a superation of this dichotomy in terms of "good" and "evil" paradigms, the research production in education has ignored important analyses about educational demographics

and their implications, depriving educator training of the ability to deal with issues that require a quantitative treatment and qualified criticism. However, in spite of this, the contribution of qualitative methods in education was, and still is, of the greatest relevance.

## *2.2 Contributions to Educational Research*

The use of qualitative methods brought large and diverse contributions to the advancement of educational knowledge, allowing for better understanding of school, learning processes, social relationships, institutional and cultural processes of socialization and sociability. In the same manner, daily school-life and its many implications, ways of change and resilience present in educational actions were better understood.

All these combined possibilities for studies of educational problems expanded the epistemological universe for the discussion of educational facts, allowing for new theoretical and methodological positions and for a stronger commitment to the issues under investigation. All of this led to the recognition of close relationships between researchers and their subjects of research, creating a greater involvement with the needs and possibilities of socio-educational improvement. Direct interventions in the field, involvement in discussions and formulation of education policies were some of the available tools for social and educational change. Four important points must be mentioned:

- (1) The incorporation, among education researchers, of flexible investigative attitudes and more suitable micro socio-psychological and cultural study processes brought to light concealed aspects, not worked by quantitative studies;
- (2) The realization of the importance of multi/inter/transdisciplinary and multi-dimensional treatments;
- (3) The focus on the actors in education once again, leading the researchers to portray both the subject's point of view and the characters involved in the educational process;
- (4) The awareness that subjectivity intervenes in the research process and that we must take measures to control it.

In addition, other specific aspects gained new connotation with the qualitative approach:

- A a deeper understanding of the aspects that produce school failure - one of the major problems in Brazilian education - studied from different angles and multiple approaches;
- B an understanding of educational issues linked to social and socio-cognitive prejudices of various types;

- C a deeper awareness of the implications of diversity and equity;
- D an emphasis on the importance of school and community environments.

### *2.3 Different Types of Qualitative Research*

Although the application of qualitative methods in the field of education in Brazil had, at first, been characterized by the dichotomy qualitative-quantitative and by a strong influence of phenomenology and critical theories, its development in the following decades was significantly diversified, in terms of theoretical basis and methods of research.

In Brazil, different groups of researchers located in various regions developed studies in diverse directions and settings. For example, one of them, created by Joel Martins of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo during the 1980s, was identified by a strong phenomenological approach. Later, this group constituted the Society of Studies and Qualitative Research (Sociedade de Estudos e Pesquisa Qualitativa - SE&PQ), which organized periodic seminars in the national context, attracting a great number of participants. From 2005 on, SE&PQ edited the *Journal of Qualitative Research* (Revista Pesquisa Qualitativa), which describes itself as “a space in which research and studies based on qualitative investigation are supported”, [...] following the diverse perspectives of this approach, including the various facets of phenomenology and dialectics, such as hermeneutics, structural analysis, ethnography, historical research, symbolic and critical studies” (Editorial Observation, 2005: 5).

Another constantly growing and developing group in the national scientific scene of Brazil is one that employs studies in historical perspective. Within this group, though, various traditions and subgroups can be identified, as, for example, autobiographic, self-studies and oral history studies. This group is progressively getting stronger and is already holding scientific events in those fields. Furthermore, there is another tendency, within this group, which aims at using qualitative research to study school-related topics, combining a historical perspective with cultural and curriculum-related approaches.

Studies whose main focus is the daily life of schools or classrooms have grown extensively along the 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and became the most popular type of qualitative research in education. Some of those studies followed an ethnographically oriented research tradition, influenced by anthropology and sociology, others were centered in a micro social perspective and examined interpersonal relations as well as teaching and learning strategies. Those studies can be characterized as ethnographic-like since they are based in the use of field work and ethnographic research techniques. In recent years a new tendency linked to this group has been developed: it is called ‘critical ethnography’ (Mattos, 1995) or critical ethnomethodology (see Macedo, 2006).

A fourth group of studies in the large field of qualitative research is one that is centered in the subject, in order to grasp the way he sees the world and the meanings he attributes to reality. Those studies try to investigate the opinions, perceptions, representations, emotions and expressions of teachers, students, parents and other actors involved in school or other social experiences. They are mainly socio-historical studies, working with categories of attribution of personal and socially negotiated meanings, activity and conscience, necessities and motives; studies in the theory of social representations; investigations about processes of identity building and development based on social psychology, on the sociology of professions or on psychoanalysis.

A fifth important field of qualitative research in Brazil, with a high number of studies, is related to the area of Action Research, where different theoretical as well as methodical approaches are used. These studies involve some type of intervention in social and educational situations and might imply different levels of participation as far as the investigated subjects are concerned. They might also entail a strong political direction in the attempt to emancipate the subjects from an unjust or oppressive situation, most of the time connected to social practices, including the pedagogical activity. Action Research is also characterized by cooperative and collaborative work (Fiorentini, 2004).

It is worth to mention that among the broad field of qualitative studies in Brazil can be included those written by scholars called “post-modern”.

Finally, an emerging field of research is the implementation of new technologies in school and class-room settings. Up to now, since technological devices are still rare in Brazilian schools, these studies are more of an experimental character. In fact, most of these studies are included in the disciplines of social psychology, philosophy or linguistics.

### **3 Problems in Qualitative Research Development**

Studies of several authors (Warde, 1990; Alves-Mazzotti, 2001; Andre, 2001; Gatti, 2007) show that the methodological approach of qualitative studies continue to face basic problems in constructing procedures for data gathering. The main problem is the lack of an in-depth analysis of the implication of using certain forms of data collection, such as narratives, written and videotaped records, discussion groups and focus groups. All of these procedures require appropriate evaluation of their adequacy, appropriateness, and consistency in light of the theoretical framework of the qualitative approach.

It is necessary to consider the high degree of subjectivity presented in qualitative studies, which demands maturity and refinement on the part of researcher employing qualitative methodologies (Ludke/André, 1986). Since this is not usually the case, the lack of fundamental understanding is quite evident, especially in relation to the theoretical and methodological requirements for conducting studies of this nature. This is not only due to the adverse conditions in which researches are carried out in Brazil, as is generally believed, but mainly to the inadequate and insufficient training given to researchers in the country.

The qualitative approaches demand dealing with reality and its reconstruction, mainly assuming the involvement of the researchers (Brito/Leonardos, 2001). What we find in many cases are casuistic observations without due theoretical parameters for consistent inferences: the obvious description, the poor elaboration of field observation conducted precariously; content analyses performed without clear methodological procedures; incapacity of data reconstruction and of critical perception of atypical situations; ignorance in dealing with history and stories; precariousness in researching and analyzing important documents. All these problems point out to the lack of good training the researchers should have had in order to use qualitative methods appropriately.

Authors, such as Morse et al (2002) argue that, without rigor, research processes have no value, since they do not effectively translate into reality and thus are of no use. Moreover, the lack of the researcher's sensitivity to the importance of knowing how to record good field work, how to gather meaningful data and, above all, how to analyze data endangers the reliability of the study, affecting the relevance and weight of qualitative research. Awareness and sensitivity involve the domain of the field of study as much as knowledge and the ability to interpret well-founded and constructed arguments that are supported by the observed or obtained data. In other words, they involve a capacity to "read" the findings in a more accurate way and to elaborate on their meaning by inductive/deductive thinking processes.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) warn that even if one considers studies of qualitative nature as belonging to another epistemic framework, radically different from the traditional quantitative approaches, they can not be exempt from conscientious and adequate criteria to ensure a scientific standard. There are, in effect, a good number of works that really are not based on strong theoretical or methodological concerns. As a consequence, such studies do not provide the conditions for drawing generalizations nor for understanding the problem from a scientific point of view. They also lack criticism and adequate discussion of their findings, transcending common sense and going beyond elementary rationalizations.

## 4 Conclusion

Stressing the important contribution of qualitative approaches to research and knowledge in education in Brazil, it is important to consider that we have to face the question of the significance and the consistency of this investigative modality. We advocate that it is necessary to strengthen the explanatory capacity of the researchers, because identification of patterns, dimensions, and relationships, as well as the construction of explanatory models are not incompatible with the study of micro social phenomena. Indeed, it is a crucial step towards construction/reconstruction of theories and towards their application to other contexts, as mentioned by André (2001). The major challenge, according to this author, is combining the richness afforded by the in-depth study of contextualized facts and processes in education with the possibility of transferring knowledge and/or creating new hypotheses for studying the same problem in similar contexts.

The applicability of knowledge in the area of education depends on the development of an appropriate understanding, based on stringency in the conditions of a conscientious research. This does not mean following strict protocols, but to make flexible use of methods and instruments necessary to gain significant approximation to reality. We must commit ourselves to the production of reliable knowledge, if we want to have an impact on the educational situation in Brazil: this is the only way we can contribute to more effective decision-making, replacing the improvisations and empirical trends that have hitherto guided the policies and actions in the educational area. Therefore, the search for relevance and rigor in qualitative research is also a political goal.

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