
TOPICAL REVIEW

STATUS OF RESEARCH ON EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

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THE TASK OF DRAWING TOGETHER USEFUL OBSERVATIONS ABOUT RESEARCH on problems of education in Latin America is at once an attractive and a disagreeable task. It is attractive because the kind of effort exemplified by this publication seems to imply increased attention to the need for research. It is disagreeable because of the obvious paucity of research, lack of a dynamic role for research in the educational process, disjointed and unrelated effort in the research that does exist, and misunderstanding of the nature of research and its function in a social field. The views expressed here are critical of research—its goals, its conduct, and the mechanisms for integrating it into educational development; but, hopefully, the observations made can be of use to enhance the research potential in this important sphere of activity.

The preparation of this paper began more than one year ago with the initiation of a collection of research reports and papers. More than 600 items were received and listed. Initially, the purpose was to classify works by one or more typologies and thus provide a framework for assessing current effort and identifying areas neglected. This approach was set aside but not abandoned, as is explained in another section. The decision to postpone this work was made because the nature of the items received raised fundamental questions about the research effort in education, and, therefore, the present approach was chosen. Specific research is reviewed in the articles that follow.

The basis of this paper, then, is an examination of the conditions under which educational research is conducted in Latin America, observations about the nature of the research located in the course of preparation for this issue, and some proposals for consideration by those who are committed to conduct research in Latin America. The theme of the paper is that a commitment to research must include a deeper concern for the broad conditions under

which specific research is conducted and that the future of research in this area of interest is questionable indeed unless researchers themselves give attention to the conditions for the enhancement of their studies.

RESEARCH—THE PERIPHERAL ACTIVITY

There seems to be no need to develop the argument that research is peripheral to the educational enterprise in Latin America. Instructional and operational decisions are based upon the knowledge of experience and tradition. Administrators, policy makers, and teachers do not use research or research findings in their work and do not seem to feel that it has a place in educational improvement. At present, research has no dynamic role to play and until some model for such a role is created and demonstrated, resources are not likely to be made available to support even a meager effort.

Many reasons may be advanced for the current state of affairs. The reasons adduced are usually cultural, economic, and historical generalities; e.g., the university, which is not devoted to the generation of an empirical knowledge, has not concerned itself with the applied fields, therefore, those trained for educational work have little knowledge and appreciation of research methods and results. Other applied fields, however, such as health and agriculture, are in fact employing research as an integral feature of their operations. Another typical response for the neglect of research is that the problems are clear and their solutions involve more classrooms, teachers, and didactic materials. This response contains the built-in assumption that improvement is based upon what is already known—that the provision of more textbooks will improve instruction although how the teachers employ text materials in their teaching is unknown.

As long as research is peripheral to educational work in Latin America it is likely to be peripheral to North American interests as well. Under the conditions pertaining now, research may be justified only upon the truism that every field of human endeavor should be studied. Such an attempt is difficult, for studies in Latin American education offer limited opportunity to the researcher in terms of the all-inclusive field. This is due to several conditions—one of which is the lack of a dynamic role for education research.

Variation of input is the essential character of experimental research. The dynamic nature of research is destroyed when what can be hypothesized is limited. Until mechanisms are built into the educational enterprise by which a research approach is taken to the study of problems, undue limitations will be placed on input factors. While this problem should not be overemphasized, it should be of concern to those who wish to see Latin American research more fully utilized and improved in impact.

SOME DANGEROUS INFLUENCES

Perhaps this section should begin with the admonition that establishing research priorities is the most dangerous influence in educational research. Research of the sort being carried out in Latin America seems to be based on predetermined priorities. They are tied to some specific project contract or are justified on the basis of a definition of need by a ministry, professional organization, or even a team of researchers. One of the most impressive ways to justify a proposal is that it fits into a scheme of research needs drawn up by a competent panel. Hanson and Breneck edit an otherwise excellent book by ending it with a chapter, "Priorities in Research."¹ This writer has become deeply concerned by the tendency of USAID to tie educational development contracts to studies of manpower needs and to limit curriculum development and evaluation studies to criteria generated by such studies.

Research is the most valid process of knowing that man has devised. The incisive analysis of Charles Pierce into methods of knowing identifies the highest technique as that of science. He wrote, "The method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same. Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis . . . is this: There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them. . . ."² As a way of learning, it is its own nutrient. The more dependable knowledge one attains, the more one recognizes the need to pursue learning. This is the dynamic that powers research. When research goals are tied to established priorities and primarily to incentives other than knowledge development itself, serious disruptions will almost inevitably occur and the criterion expressed by Pierce is in doubt.

The dangers that flow from the restrictions placed upon much of the research in education are well known and need only be noted here:

- 1) The immediate applicability of research findings becomes a primary criterion in the identification of the problem, research design, and support.
- 2) The field of investigation is limited prematurely and may exclude essential criteria and/or experimental variables.
- 3) The factor of self-correction—control and verification of activities and conclusions—is suspect.
- 4) The haste to state conclusions crystalizes thinking and precludes examination of assumptions.
- 5) Projects are too ambitious for the personnel and resources, thus they contribute to loose speculation about observations made in differing situations.

A final caution relates to a common misunderstanding of the research process and its use in the educational field. It is that research is conducted to solve an operational problem. Under this assumption, research needs tend to be stated

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in questions related to *how* rather than to *what* and *why*. The expectation is that the aim of a study is to provide a solution to a given problem, not provide information about the relationships of factors under specified conditions. Somehow the point must be made that multiple experimentation is more typical of science than one-shot definitive experiments—the problems of education call for studies of relationships in different dimensions and interactions of factors with many experimental variables.

AVENUES TO IMPROVEMENT

Several lines of activity suggest themselves if educational research in Latin America is to mature and grow. Most readers who have worked in Latin America or who have studied the research on education carried out there have probably already expressed one or more of the observations made here. These observations stem from expressions of the writers of the following articles, this writer's survey of the studies collected for this project, and his experiences in Latin America.

The point has been made that research is a peripheral activity to education in Latin America. Improvement of such a status depends upon mechanisms which must be found to train and support Latin American researchers. The American Educational Research Association has assumed primary responsibility for the storing and dissemination of educational research knowledge. The AERA's *Review of Educational Research* and the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* have established a standard of quality that has made these documents important to students of education in many areas overseas. Twenty-six international contributing editors are located in areas outside of the United States—three in Africa, but not one is found in all of Latin America.

The first issue of *Investigaciones Educativas en América* was published in 1966.³ It is an attempt to disseminate the findings of researchers in education. The studies are primarily descriptive reports of data collected relevant to a topic; results are reported in percentages with little evidence of concern or need for specifying relationships among or controlled study of variables, and it is not possible (or, in the case of purely descriptive studies, necessary) to replicate the work reported.

If the conditions noted above are an indication of the level of research talent available as counterparts in research activity, why has the North American not seen fit to involve Latin American colleagues and to advocate research training for them? Several answers suggest themselves but two are particularly germane to this point. First, North Americans who do research in education in Latin America are not committed to long-term research goals. They have a specific problem or project which they complete in a relatively short period—

one to five years—and leave. They are “in-and-outers.” Second, the arrangements under which research is conducted mitigate its becoming an integrated activity. Funds are earmarked for specific problems. Contrast this condition to that which exists in the field of public health where the limit of support is the extent to which competent researchers are available.

In addition to the need to train Latin American researchers and to establish research as an integral part of the educational enterprise so that mechanisms are available for persistent, long-term effort, the North American researcher in Latin America faces still other perplexing problems. First among these is the fact that there is no single source to which he can turn with confidence to review recently completed research on the problem which interests him. The effort represented by this issue of LARR is an excellent object lesson, and comments by reviewers themselves offer some testimony of the problem. This writer found it necessary to communicate with individuals, institutions in the United States and three European countries, and more than 150 ministries, centers, and universities in Latin America. Dissemination devices—even the printed word—have not been used in any coordinated or comprehensive way to report the small amount of research that has been done.⁴

Progress in the training of researchers in the field of education will have its influence upon the quality of research conducted by those who apply their interests to Latin America.⁵ The studies collected for this review reflect limited methodological tools. Single variable analysis treatments predominate even though it is surely the case that every experiment in education is a multivariate one; designs are, with few exceptions, quasi-experimental as defined by Campbell and Stanley;⁶ none appear to lead to significant theory development. Although this state of affairs will remedy itself with time, under the general conditions already noted, improvement is likely to come in the back-wash of activity elsewhere and not as a function of the research activity in Latin America itself.

With significant exceptions in anthropology and, regarding higher education, political science, the related social sciences have not shown vigorous interest in the field of education. A part of the problem is undoubtedly due to the conditions that impede the educational researcher and to the fact that educational policy-makers continue to conceive of a closed system of knowledge about education. It would, however, be valuable for social scientists to examine their problems and reservations openly with those who have chosen to work within the area of education. Somehow an integration of effort among researchers must take place if a scientific approach is to influence educational improvement.

This commentary is purposely critical and pessimistic. For this reason, specific examples of research were not singled out, but, hopefully, some of the

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important underlying conditions are identified. Short-term gains can be made by improved training of researchers, developing communications among researchers and particularly the dissemination of research, consciously involving Latin American researchers. Built-in field testing and other mechanisms for demonstrating the interpretation of research, integration of efforts with researchers in the social sciences, and developing resistance to restrictive specifications of problem areas are other short-term measures. Long-term gains are dependent upon concerted efforts by those who wish to pursue research interests in Latin America and those who wish to more fully realize the ideals of research and who can provide models as well as guidance and support to extend research activity. The mechanisms for bringing this about are far from clear.

NOTES

1. John W. Hanson and Cole S. Brenecke, *Education and the Development of Nations*, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966.
2. J. Buchler, *Philosophical Writings of Pierce*, New York: Dover, 1955, p. 18.
3. Unión Panamericana, *Investigaciones Educativas en América*, Washington, D. C.: 1966.
4. The Educational Research Information Center (ERIC) at the University of Illinois has agreed to accept studies not published in readily available journals and make copies available upon request. Materials may be contributed and lists of materials obtainable through the center may be requested from ERIC, 805 W. Pennsylvania Ave., Urbana, Illinois 61801.
5. See: *Review of Educational Research*, (December 1966) 86:5, devoted to methodology of educational research, and N. W. Gage (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963.
6. *Ibid.*