

ISSN 2277-3576

FRONTIERS IN EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

A Peer Reviewed Bi-Annual Journal

Vol. 7 Issue 2

July 2018



N.V.K.S.D. COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
(AUTONOMOUS)

[Re-accredited by NAAC with 'A' Grade]

ATTOOR, KANNIYAKUMARI DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU - 629 177.



RITUALISATION TO REVOLUTION: NEED FOR A CRITICAL METHOD IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

* Dr. Amruth G Kumar

ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates on the ways and means of educational research that has been conflated into the positivist methods. Critiquing upon the positivist approach, an attempt is made to expose its ritualistic nature when it is applied in education research. The mechanical nature of positivist research is juxtaposed with critical research. The paper argues that the proclivity of critical theory towards those people who are on the fringes of society should be appropriated in educational research to make research to be a source of solving the problems of educational settings. The paper restricts its scope to the need and scope of employing critical theory in educational research. Attempts to elaborate upon the methods of critical research is not made as it may also result in standardization of research methodology following the lines of positivist methods. It proposes the essence of individually crafted research methods that fit to the context of the researcher and the educational problem selected.

INTRODUCTION

Does research method obstruct the genuine interests of an educational researcher? If it happens so, would the researcher be able to passionately pursue a research problem trimmed by the

established research methods? These questions are a bit disturbing for everyone who engages in the institutionalized research in education. The paradigm of educational research seems to be very rigid with strict rules and regulations to be followed meticulously. Often the strict rules and regulations, imposed, take the form of a ritual to be followed by those who engage in the production of knowledge in education. The ritualisation of educational research has been the result of high regard and respect gained by positivist methods in educational research. In spite of the nature of the problem to be investigated, there have been attempts to compress the field experiences of researcher in positivistic exploratory procedures. This often questions the very nature of 'research'. This paper explores the scope of critical theory as an alternative to the iron fist of positivist framework in educational research. Since critical theory does not represent a single or unified approach, it cannot be described with a single definition (Held 1980; Tar 1977). There are excellent models of applying critical theory in education (See Freire 1986). These models help one to see how they work in real life settings. Reflections upon critical theory in education would serve as a stepping stone for educational researchers to wield its power for finding solutions for educational problem.

* Associate Professor, School of Education, Central University of Kerala

The major purpose of critical education is to increase the awareness of forces of contradictory conditions of action which function in the public understanding in a tacit form. The edifice of critical education is founded on the principle that all stakeholders of education have potential ability to construct knowledge they need. This implies that every individual, engaged in the process of education, are subjects not objects in the process of education. Those who engage in the process of education are neither abstract individual nor the world without people, but people in their relation with people (Freire 1986). Critical education proposes that the subjects of education are bearing the imposed ideology of the dominant which make them believe that people share some common beliefs that explain the world to them rationally (Parson 1937). It means that students remain to be silent and obedient just because they believe that compliance to the existing system is the best means for achieving their goal. Values like obedience and compliance contradict people's (student's) objective interest of liberation (Agger 1991).

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical Theory is generally referred to a broad theoretical position which approach critically to the prevailing norms, practices and standards. Poststructuralist literary theory and queer theory would be examples of Critical Theory. The writings and activism of Paulo Freire is an example of critical theory in education. Emanated from the Frankfurt school Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Hebert Marcuse, Frederic Pollock, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth are the key figures who evolved a basic structure for critical theory (See Agger 1991, Clarke and Hulatt 2014).

Through Critical Theory the main attempt of critical theorists was to reflect upon the reasons of failure of socialist revolution as prophesied by Marx. Following the line of Marxian criticism offered by George Lukas the Frankfurt theorists believed

that Marx did not give due importance to the possibilities of the exploitation of the false consciousness of the labourers by capitalists to keep the economic and social system run smoothly (Agger 1991). The ways and means of deepening exploitation being the key focus, Critical theorists argued for changes in favour of the underprivileged in the society. In his classical essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' Max Horkheimer argues that the fundamental aim of Critical Theory is to emancipate human beings from exploitation and oppression by providing them with the conceptual resources to transform the social order which oppresses them into a 'society without injustice' (Horkheimer 1975). As a very latest concept Critical Theory is treated as a continuation of Post Kantian tradition. According to Clarke and Hulatt (2014) "Critical Theory can be seen as continuous with the postKantian tradition in at least two ways. First, many of the themes, preoccupations, and theses that are characteristic of Critical Theory can be traced back to the Critical Philosophy of the post-Kantians. Second, almost all of the Critical Theorists develop and elaborate their positions through detailed readings of, and critical engagement with, their post-Kantian predecessors".

CONFORMISM IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

As critical education view the human element in education as a creative and critical organism, the research method of positive social science never serve its purpose. Drawing heavily from empiricist principle, positive social science treat human element in education as neutral datum for systematic observation (Comstock 1982). Attracted by the convenience and acceptability of positive social science, educational research is closed to diverse perspectives and innovative approaches in educational research. This, especially in India, has closed chances for discussion on new methodologies in the field of educational research. Aberration from the dominant method

practices (which is rooted in Positive social science) happened very rarely and if someone dares to do it, which would attract the wrath of adjudicators. As the educational researchers are realizing that use of new methodologies as 'aberration' their incentive for constructivist methodological approach is self-quelled. Conformity to prominent research methods make feeling among researchers that methodology is the result of immutable principles. The prevalence of hegemony and power structure in the educational research, that impose conformity over researcher, is a major concern addressed by critical theory in education. The main reason for the prevalence of conformity and educational research is due to the prominence of Positivism in educational research.

Positivism originated as an offshoot of enlightenment offered great expectation on its role in demystifying the religion and mythology. If positivism would have performed as expected, conformity imposed by the religion and several such powerful agencies would have declined. Instead of demystifying religion and mythology positivist theory of science has become a new mythology and ideology (Horkheimer&Adorno 1972). Thus instead of promoting changes positivist science resulted as the prop up for the maintenance of status quo. Horkheimer&Adorno (1972) continue to argue that positivism has become a dominant form of ideology in the late capitalism and it taught people the world as it is and there by deep rooted the belief of immutability and control beyond ability in social phenomenon.

Positivism and its influence as shown above have serious effect on educational research as well. It has narrowed down the methodological perspectives and imposed conformity to established research methods from educational researchers. Instead of viewing methodology of research as something to be constructed by the researcher positivist methodological framework deep rooted immutability of methodology. The notion that existing (positivist) methodology can facilitate generation of

knowledge has led to the uncritical acceptance of methodology. Uncritical acceptance of research methodology in educational research has resulted in 'reification' of methodology. Such reification has resulted in custodians of 'methodological knowledge' in educational research. Custodial possession of methodology by 'methodological experts' has been a gateway to converting research methodology in to a commodity which is scarcely available with those who are in need(researchers) of it.

Narrowing of methodological perspectives in educational research will have serious repercussions on the knowledge generated. This will impugn the ability of the new generation of educational researchers to revive the methods and thereby personalizing the methods that fit to the context in which they work. The system in which they work also stop the researchers to bring out with new creative and innovative methodological attempts in research that push the limits of the research practices often get unpublished. It proves that the dominant research methodology by defining itself strictly and narrowly is a well sponsored and pepped up by the dominant (soio-economic-political) system that prevails. Any such initiative to determine what counts 'knowledge' is oppressive. The role of critical theory as a methodological tool for research against domination of practices followed without questioning is having greater significance in this context. It is within these epistemological and ontological frameworks a contemporary educational researcher take methodological decisions.

CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

In an epistemological perspective critical theory is a serious challenge on positive social science. But the post second world war period witnessed a change in the epic center of critical theory from Germany to America (Adorno 1969, Arato&Gebhardt 1978). This period marked anchoring of critical theory to the paradigm of

empirical social science (Agger 1991). This could be mainly because of considerable ambivalence by the members of the Frankfurt school toward empirical research and their negligence to the research methods appropriate for the development of social science in line with the perspectives of critical theory.

The central argument of this paper is that production of knowledge for an egalitarian society requires a critical research method in the contemporary society. Potential of investigative logic developed by the positive social sciences is not hopeful in this direction. This paper limits its scope to the application of critical theory in educational research. The methodology of positive social science cannot be applied to the contemporary educational issues. The epistemology of positive social science remains to be an elephant in the room of educational research. Grounded in empiricism, positive social science proposes that school and its functions are neutral datum for systematic observation and study.

Rich past and opulent literature related to critical theory has not resulted in an active epistemology of educational research. This could be mainly because; the critical theory and its discussions are constricted to the academic ivory towers and are almost miles and miles away from the actual issues of the people or class whom they address. The critical theorists and their ideas are in no way used by the people who are facing oppression in the process of education, be it teacher, student or any stakeholder of education. The concrete struggle of the educational stakeholders, mainly students in the classroom and teacher in the school settings, for a progressive change is scuttled by the call for larger social issues. It is very evident from the literature that, for critical theorists' education and its issues are rarely a subject of reflection. Great advancement spearheaded by Paulo Freire through his writing and activism is of course an exception. But most of the contributions of Freire were limited to a critical method that help student to develop

critical consciousness. Freireian educational movement for building critical consciousness and empowering the individual to choose the ontological vocation was not properly bolstered by attempts to outline, at least a broad, framework of research methods. A large number of researchers who chose to work in the area of critical education addressed only theoretical questions and the end product of their research was theory building. For the purpose of theory building these researchers heavily adopted the epistemology of positive social science.

CRITICAL THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

A quick survey of the four volumes of survey on educational research published by National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi will prove the influence of positive social science in educational research. This compendium being the documentation of institutionalized research in India in the post-independence period is a better indicator for the methodological influences on educational research. Large majority of the studies published in this compendium were on the methodology of positive social science. The edifice of positive social science, as applied in educational research, is built on an assumption that educational institutions and the people involved in the process of education were objective and neutral. Invoking objectivity and neutrality very evidently denies its historic influences and its expectations for a future. Critical theory in educational research on the other hand views education as a construction of human being which can be mutated on the base of people's construal about their experience of the past and expectations about the future. If immutability is imposed on education, it is against the very basic interest of peoples' proclivity for bringing changes into the process of education. By attributing 'thing like' quality to education positive social science opened the possibility of commercializing the educational research. Research methods, rooted in positive

social science, become marketable due to its custodial nature in the hands of experts.

Educational researchers are alienated when they come across methodological hurdles. Positive social science perspective in educational research never acknowledges education as human construction. Being historical in its fundamental nature the research rooted in positivist methodological changes could never herald a progressive educational change. On the contrary a critical method in educational research is consciously engaged in restructuring the very nature of education to help those who are on the fringes of the educational process.

Critical educational research begins from the living experiences of those individuals, institutions or agencies that are on the fringes and alienated from the educational process. Often such groups will be put to maintain the system but never allowed to control or to make change according to their valid and socially justifiable interests. Starting from the lived experience, this method and its output aim at empowering the subjects to be more creative and constructive participants in the process of education. Kindling the critical consciousness of the oppressive class in education through enlightenment leading to liberation is the main purpose of critical methods in educational research.

Critical method in educational research can attain its aim through dialogue, which is the most powerful and democratic method suggested by critical theorist. Comstock (1982) argue that "its (dialogue) effect is to heighten its subjects' self-awareness of their collective potential as the active agents of history". This needs a thorough understanding about the social, cultural, economic and political background of the participants. A proper understanding of the background will help the critical researcher to design a programme of education inclined to the subjects. For this purpose an account of the dynamics of the educational

process of the subjects is very essential. Also the critical educational research must be able to provide critique on the politics of education that pull the marginalized further to the oppressive conditions. Even when oppression is apparent and palpable in the Indian education system the educational research methods maintain a dangerous silence over it. The positivist epistemology is an important tool for this. As positivist research methods in education calls for respect for the system, critical methods raise the clarion for an upheaval in favour of the oppressed in the process of education.

Educational change being the key purpose, critical theory in educational research can be treated as a practical science. Argument of Popper (1959) is very insightful in this regard. According to Popper (1959) "we must not look upon science as a body of knowledge, but rather a system of hypotheses; that is to say, as a system of guesses or anticipations which in principle cannot be justified". Every attempt to view the knowledge in education as a body of knowledge that would scuttle the proclivity for challenging the knowledge in the light of one's experiences. Unless and until one's experience cannot be problematized the stimulation for praxis can never be original.

All social theories are ideological (Murray and Ozanne 1991). Critical theory also is ideological. But it stand distinct through its proclivity for those who are in fringes of the society. When applied in educational research it outlines a research method which is absolutely self-made, contextually relevant, change oriented procedures that challenge all sorts of physical or ideological or both, domination in education. It needs liberation from ritualization of positivist methods of scientific procedures to revolutionary methodological adaptations to make educational research to be humane.

CONCLUSION

Every attempt that highlight the relevance of something 'new' need to be presented in

comparison with the existing. The omnipresence of positivism in educational research is being used to compare and highlight the relevance of critical method. This is done due to the overarching influence of positivism in educational research in India and elsewhere. Unless the educational research has to be liberated from the overarching influence of positivism, generation of genuine knowledge will remain to be a chimera. Positivist depends heavily on mechanical and stereotyped research methods. It starts with 'feasible' problems, developing hypotheses, data gathering and testing of hypotheses. Critical research starts from the real life problems of the oppressed in the educational system focusing mainly on praxis. Its procedure is interpretive and dialectical phases of analysis with the purpose of promoting critical consciousness of the subjects and progressive changes in the system. Critical method in educational research cannot constrict its scope by understanding and predicting the system of education and its nuances but by changing it. This method never comply with standardization, instead it needs educational researchers who could personalize the methods that suit to the aims of research.

REFERENCES

- Comstock, Donald E. (1982). A Method for Critical Research. *Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research*, ed. Eric Bredo and Walter Feinberg, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 370-390.
- Friere, P. (1986). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Held, D. (1980). Introduction to Critical Theory. *Berkeley and Los Angeles*: University of California Press.
- Tar, Z. (1977). *The Frankfurt School*, New York: Wiley.

- Agger, B. (1991). Critical theory, Post structuralism, Post modernism: Their sociological relevance. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17, 105-131.
- James, A.C. & Owen, H. (2014). Critical Theory as a Legacy of Postkantianism. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 6, 1047-1068, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1005046> (retrieved on 27/9/2016)
- Horkheimer, M. (1975). *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum.
- Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (1972). *The Dialectic of The Enlightenment*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Adorno, T. (1969). Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America. *The Intellectual Migration*, ed. D. Fleming, B. Bailyn. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Arato, A., Gebhardt, E., eds. (1978). *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Urizen.
- Murray, J.B. & Ozanne, J.L. (1991). The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(2), 129-144.