

Promoting Human Well-Being: Elements of Good Research

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At times I find numerical data comforting; however, when reading quantitative research, I also find myself wondering about the details behind the numbers. Who are the participants in the study? What are their life histories? Good research can develop from various methodologies (e.g. scientific method or discourse analysis) and a body of research should include variety. When considering the question of what is good research for me or what research would I like to emulate, my left and right brain tango over wanting the precision of numbers while being drawn to the complexities of the human experience. In the end I find myself aligning with works similar to Sosa (2012) because I want to know the life history, uncover the human experience, and produce a study that ethically informs practice.

Defining Good Research

Good research should not solely be based on processes, but also take into account ethical standards encompassing the ideas of serving human well-being as the driving ethical force (Hostetler, 2005). For example, Wolcott (1983) had a purpose to learn more about a young man, Brad, who had created a temporary shelter on his property, and he implicitly had many research questions when beginning the study. Why is this young man here? Why does he not have a home? What is Brad's educational background? Where is his family? The purpose of Wolcott's (1983) study was connected to a goal of uncovering knowledge about human experience.

Hostetler (2005) outlined the historical debate over good research and the narrowing of the definition by the U.S. federal government with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. He argues this narrowing has led to an emphasis on methodology instead of research informing policies for human well-being. Wolcott (1983) exemplified this idea by constructing knowledge about homeless young adults, which could inform practice on how the nation could

approach issues around dropping out of high school and how to continue to have influence on young adults after the completion of formal schooling.

Good research is about provoking thought and leaving the reader with even more questions. Too often research based on scientific method is used as evidence for one prescribed method for educational policy and practice (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002). Good research can lead to the implementation of practices but should also lead researchers and policymakers to questioning how practices are implemented and this demands a need for further research.

An Example of Good Research

When considering these ideas around good research, I analyzed a study based on a dissertation on how teachers viewed the connection between their practices and student resiliency (Sosa, 2012). In this study, Sosa (2012) uncovered knowledge about human experiences, respected the confidentiality of participants, and informed the work of educators. She saw a gap in the research literature with respect to understanding youth's resiliency in everyday life and pursued filling that gap with a qualitative study using an interview methodology. Her research constructed knowledge and raised questions for further investigation.

Much of the research on resilience has focused on students who are going through one tragic event or live under extreme conditions, such as parent alcoholism, and researchers have often used adult participants to research past influences (Sosa, 2012). In contrast, Sosa (2012) gave an account of resiliency in middle and high school youth who struggle with the everyday obstacles of growing up in an urban city. Interviews uncovered knowledge about how these youths managed day-to-day stresses but remained engaged in school or became re-engaged.

From the words of students, Sosa (2012) delivered insight into how these students cope over time with obstacles, including personal, systemic or academic. From Lucia we learn about

her lack of support from her family and her current situation of being pregnant. She wanted to drop out after her freshman year, but reported, “They [two teachers] became the person I never had. They opened my eyes and they started telling me, you’re not going down the right path” (Sosa, 2012, p.37). Another student, Angela, with the support of two teachers, rebounded back from an unsuccessful freshman year but continued to face new problems, such as having to arrive late to school in order to help take care of her younger sister (Sosa, 2012). Throughout the study, Sosa (2012) uncovered knowledge about students’ experiences related to resilience.

The work of Sosa (2012) aligns with good research by informing practice and promoting human well-being. Teachers who took an interest beyond their classroom created opportunities for students to build resiliency through guidance by a caring adult (Sosa, 2012). Both Lucia and Angela only described two teachers each who stepped in as the caring adult they needed in their lives whereas other students, Raul and Elena, detailed uncomfortable classes and the lack of caring teachers (Sosa, 2012). What educators might learn from this study is there is an overall lack of understanding of the obstacles in the students’ lives and that care for each individual student, as a human, should drive the educational climate. Furthermore, teachers can play a significant role in fostering student resilience.

Sosa’s (2012) work develops my understanding of how educators and the systems of school can counteract the obstacles students face in striving to learn, as well as be part of the problem in creating the obstacles. However, when I read this piece I am not only left with a “new knowledge,” I question what other systemic issues within our schools create extra challenges for students to overcome. I also question the roles of the teacher. These students had a couple of teachers who, in the students’ realities, went above and beyond, by creating personal connections. These teachers were not solely concerned with the students’ performance in their

classes but in all classes. How do we change the teacher mindset to view all students as everyone's responsibility? Good research sets the stage for further questions like these to be explored.

Relevance of Sosa's Work

I connect with the epistemological view of valuing experiences of the individual and knowing there are multiple truths. I relate to Sosa's (2012) work because her narrative reflects these values. Although, as I mentioned before, I find numerical data comforting because of the clean and quick attributes, I often read positivist research with a mindset of wanting to know more about the participants and what are the possibilities of multiple truths within the data. Sosa (2012) demonstrated what I could hope to produce as doctoral student, a review of literature on academic resilience and a study of resiliency within a marginalized group of students. Her report focuses on constructing knowledge from the firsthand accounts of individuals. I know I could have found a study reporting similar information using a survey and the scientific method but there is something so very powerful about reading the actual words of another human being. Research findings such as, 41 percent of Latino students come from homes where the mother has less than a high school diploma (Gandara, 2010) does not evoke images and emotion created through reading the words of Lucia "I didn't have anybody to push me forward, I didn't have anybody to tell me keep going, you could do it, you could make it. I didn't have anybody to tell me you know what, I'm here when you need something" (Sosa, 2012, p.39). It is this kind of evocation that educators need to inform practice and create change.

In addition to the epistemology, Sosa's (2012) work speaks to me because uncovering knowledge about academic resiliency is a subject close to my heart. Many of my family members live near or under the poverty line. Most would be considered what is termed as "the

working poor.” I question what was different for me to escape those chains. I especially question why I did and my sister, only two years younger, did not. When I read works like Sosa’s (2012), I am not only hoping to discover information that may help me as an educator but also searching to make sense of my own successes. I related to the words of Adriana when she described the support of Ms. Romo, “She would just pull me aside and talk to me … She tried to help me a lot. If I ever needed to talk to anybody, she’s like, you know, I’m here for you, you don’t always have to hide yourself and keep everything inside; you can talk to somebody” (Sosa, 2012, p.40). Like Adriana, I know I had some teachers who played a critical role in pushing me toward success. Did my sister not have that kind of support? Do we have students, in our system, who never experience a caring adult or never have that teacher who gets involved? How do systemic issues affect resilience?

The Heart of Good Research

My examination of what is good research leaves me questioning: What is good education? Discussions, forums, and political platforms often proselytize on effective education without considering who is being educated or what the purpose is. The definition of good education is not a definition at all but rather a flexible descriptor depending on what and who is being educated, or at least it should be. Out of 100 people, a certain educational strategy could be effective for 90 and in the political arena we would hear cheers for this strategy. What about the other ten people? Do we leave that question unanswered? A wider vision for educational research is necessary in order to not leave those questions unexplored, and discussions centered on what is a good education are imperative to defining what is good research.

Hostetler (2011) argued if we are going to change people’s lives we must focus on human well-being in education which allows us to create meaningful experiences that incorporate the

body, emotion, spirit and the mind; thus transforming student thinking, establishing a wider vision, and enriching people's lives. When we begin to connect good education to human well-being and promote research with that focus we should begin to see a transformation in our schools that has yet to be actualized in our country. I further this thought by how we should also consider what is a good researcher. Do we have to be confined within the boxes of our paradigms? Like Lather (2006), I do "say yes to the messiness, to that which interrupts and exceeds versus tidy categories" (p.48). However, I see myself as a researcher who can play in different epistemological sandboxes. If the condition of promoting human well-being is met, I find myself being what Lather (2006) referred to as the qualitative researcher who can be "positive about quantification" (p.49).

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