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**Action and research opportunities in education. The multicultural dimension**

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ACTION AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION.  
THE MULTICULTURAL DIMENSION**Abstract**

The rigors of positive science require that educational research meet the same standards of validity and fidelity as those resulting from quantitative research methods. At the same time, the increasingly complex world of today brought the issue of multiculturalism on the forefront of educational policies, research and practice. In the present paper we present a series of relevant traits of educational action and research in relation with multiculturalism and we argue that educational research is in a particularly favorable position to make use of these challenges and transform them into opportunities for research and action.

**Key-terms:** culture, multiculturalism, race, ethnicity, quantitative, qualitative, mixed research, action-research, learner-centered learning, postmodern

**Zusammenfassung**

Die Strapazen der positiven Wissenschaft verlangen, dass die Bildungsforschung erfüllen soll die gleichen Standards für die Gültigkeit und Treue als jene, die aus quantitativer Forschungsmethoden. Zur gleichen Zeit brachte die zunehmende komplexe Welt von heute die Frage des Multikulturalismus an der Spitze der Bildungspolitik, Forschung und Praxis. In unsere Arbeit präsentieren wir eine Reihe von relevanten pädagogische Handels und Forschung im Zusammenhang mit Multikulturalismus. Wir argumentieren auch das die Bildungsforschung ist in eine günstige Position zu nutzen, diesen Herausforderungen zu stellen und wandeln sie die Chancen für Forschung und Handlungsbedarf.

**Schlagwörter:** Kultur, Multikulturalismus, Rasse, Ethnische Zugehörigkeit, quantitative, qualitative, gemischte Forschung, Aktionsforschung, Lernen-zentrierte-lernens, postmodern

## **Action and research opportunities in education. The multicultural dimension**

### **Introduction**

Our interactions with other people abide by different rules when it comes to our personal lives as opposed to our professional lives. Whereas in our personal lives we are free to choose our interactions, in the performance of our professional duties we encounter people with various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and of different religions and beliefs. Terms such as culture, ethnicity, and race, often come into play when we approach the issue of interindividual differences, more so when we tackle the issue of multiple cultures, or multiculturalism.

More so than others, teachers work with people towards, changing them towards a vast number of educational and social goals. Teachers work with individuals as well as with groups, they work with students as well as with institutions, not the least be it their own school administration. Thus, teachers meet a great variety of individuals, and must abide by a series of ethical and deontological principles, aiming at protecting the rights, values and identities of those who learn under their guidance. All educational professionals, albeit teachers, schools psychologists, school counselors and managerial staff face the challenges brought forth by culture, ethnicity and race.

### **Multiculturalism and the related concepts of culture, ethnicity, and race**

However familiar they may seem, a short definition of these terms is required in order to establish the terminology of this paper. Culture refers to a group's shared habits, customs, rituals, traditions, languages, and expectations; ethnicity differentiates among groups of people based on their shared historical past and culture; finally, race categorizes people according to their geographic provenience and common physical characteristics, such as skin colour, facial traits, or hair texture.

***Ethnicity.*** Ethnicity is probably the simplest to define amongst the three concepts. One's ethnicity always relate to that person's ancestry and tribal descent. We refer to Romanians as being the descendants of Dacia's people after its merger with roman legionary settlers. The Hungarian minority comes from the north-west of Romania, after their people of hunic descent occupied Pannonia. "Ethnicity refers to the national, regional, or tribal origins of one's oldest

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remembered ancestors and the customs, traditions, and rituals handed down by these ancestors” (Jackson, 2006, p. 189)

**Race.** As compared to culture and ethnicity, the term *race* seems to lack a great deal of objectivity. First, it is a social construct—that is a construct artificially constructed based on superficial observations. Nevertheless, many people still believe that there is something innate or biological about race and ethnicity (Murphy & Dillon, 2011). Second, no objective data supports the need for using race as a separating criterion in profession, work or school—scientists currently working on the Human Genome Project have shown that there are no real racial differences (Royal & Dunston, 2004).

**Culture.** The term *culture* seems rather difficult to define precisely, at least in comparison with *race* and *ethnicity*—mostly because it “covers a wide spectrum of meanings, from physical elements in a society such as buildings and architecture to abstract and metaphorical elements such as myths, values, attitudes, and ideas about spirituality. The concept of culture is so indeterminate that it can easily be filled in with whatever preconceptions a theorist brings to it. For example, culture has been defined as knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits that are acquired by individuals as members of society” (Jackson, 2006, p. 130). Helms and Cook describe several exclusion criteria about what “culture is not”: 1) a person’s socioracial classification; 2) skin color; 3) nationality or citizenship, 4) synonym for racial identity; or 5) a necessarily conscious construct (Helms & Cook, 1999).

**Multiculturalism.** As seen above, culture is by far the most difficult to define concept amongst race, ethnicity and culture. This challenge of definition is even more present in relation with multiculturalism—as noted by the Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology, “During the late 1990s and the 2000s, the concept of multiculturalism began to broaden to include race, culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, disability, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic class. However, this wider definition has led to confusion and conflict within the multicultural movement. For example, some proponents have argued for limiting multiculturalism to the racial and ethnic domains, whereas others want to see the inclusion of other disadvantaged groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals from both the European American and

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African American communities.” (Jackson, 2006, p. 325). As far as a definition is concerned, in the classical sense of the word, the meaning of multiculturalism is still in debate.

Fortunately, the issue of multiculturalism becomes somewhat clearer when it comes to education. Multicultural education refers to the theories and practices that strive to promote equitable access and rigorous academic achievement for students from all diverse groups (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). Banks (2004) formulated the five specific dimensions as *content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure* (2004). Instruction geared toward these ends can be said to be taking a multicultural stance, which confronts inequities in schools and societies (Farenga & Ness, 2005). Moreover, multicultural education should address deeply ingrained inequities, promote social justice, and be accompanied by equal access to resources (Nieto, 2001).

### **Changes in education. Multiculturalism-related challenges**

#### **The postmodernism. A landmark for multiculturalism in education.**

In education, one of the landmarks that recognized the importance of multiculturalism came is **the shift towards postmodernism**. Pioneers of postmodernism include thinkers and philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty. One of the main differences between postmodernism and previous approaches is the perspective on reality. Whereas, until postmodernism, the search for and the definition of reality was on the epistemological desiderates, in postmodernism the objective discovery of reality is considered no longer feasible, nor desirable (Sajjadi, 2007). The opposition to the metanarrative and, consequently, the affirmation of linguistic pluralism is amongst the main traits of postmodernism. As such, each individual builds his or her meanings. The interpretation of the surrounding world cannot be clear and transparent, and, thus, cannot enjoy the status of *reality* but rather, a localized, specific status.

Therefore, if the positive, quantifiable view of the reality of modernism is no longer considered sufficient, what would be the next step in epistemological approaches? It may be argued that education has always held the answer to this question, since educational research is, at its core, real-life research, situational, contextual, and ecologically immersed. Moreover, the

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qualitative analysis is frequently employed in educational research and practice. The supporters of qualitative research invoke three main points in relation with the descriptions used in qualitative research: 1) descriptions make use of language stemming from empirical investigations—without which they couldn't exist, thus, a focus on empirical grounding; 2) the descriptions, focused on life experiences, develop new ways of understanding and empathizing, thus, improving the human ideals—focus on the variety of knowledge and efficiency/functionality; 3) the description of life experiences offer not only alternative perspectives on educational programmes, but also, more specifically, anthropological and sociological approaches to the epistemological endeavor—thus, focus on the ecology of knowledge (Yerrick & Roth, 2005, p. 99).

**The multiculturalism of professional education**

The multiculturalism in professional education is today widely recognized by prestigious professional bodies, such as the American Psychological Association. For instance, in mental health education, the “culture of competence” takes into account the change from learning *objectives* to learning *outcomes* (Roberts, Borden, Christiansen, & Lopez, 2005). Moreover, in 2003, APA adopted a series of guidelines with respect to the multicultural education (APA, 2003). Handbooks dealing with professional education in psychology were written to ensure a proper understanding of what it means to interact professionally toward the psychological wellbeing and development of culturally diverse individuals, one notable example being *The Handbook of Multicultural Counseling Competencies* by Cornish et al. (2010). Similarly, a thorough preoccupation toward multiculturalism and its corresponding abilities and competencies is also encountered in education (Sinagatullin, 2003).

**Research, action, and action-research****Research, qualitative, quantitative, and the combined solution**

When describing positive science, the main trait brought into play is the quantitative aspect of fundamental research. The quantitative research is rigorous, replicable, and open to criticism. It brings vast amount of statistical data and makes good use of statistical power when passing inferences from the studied groups to large populations. It is the today's standard in research in psychology and exercises a strong influence on educational research also. The

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problem is that, besides the obvious impossibility of bringing life into laboratory settings, the educational research is inherently situational. It takes place in the classroom and for the classroom. The teacher is the researcher. It seemed that education had no alternative but to hire researchers to do positive science.

Table 1: Quantitative versus qualitative styles in research (Neuman, 2003)

Quantitative	Qualitative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures objective data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „Builds” social realities, cultural meanings</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize on variables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize on processes and interactive events</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fidelity is the main outcome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authenticity is the main outcome</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value-free</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present and explicit values</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Context-independent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situational-dependent</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many cases / subjects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer cases / subjects</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statistical analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic analyses</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detached researcher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involved researcher</li> </ul>

**Similarities.** Both type of research use empirical observations in approaching their research interests. Both methodologies collect data, construct explanatory statements/arguments, and make hypotheses about the causal mechanisms at play. Both base their results on logical inferences (a reasoning leading to a conclusion, in a process of simplifying the collected data). Both aim at collecting as much as possible raw data (to the disadvantage of qualitative research, which even if accomplishes the collection of numerous data, lacks the power to process them in their entirety). They both use comparison as central process of analysis, and, finally, both attempt to control for the errors and false conclusions or invalid inferences (Sechrest & Sidana, 1995).

**Differences.** The quantitative research can make use of standardized statistical techniques, based on applied mathematical apparatuses, whereas the qualitative analyses are less standardized and mainly based on inductive inferential processes. Often times, at the beginning of research, the characteristics or the type of research to be employed is not yet known or decided. As such, they are in an operational disadvantage in comparison to the quantitative research (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 108). A second major difference is that whereas for the quantitative research, the process of data analysis usually begins after the collection of raw data, in the qualitative research the data analysis starts earlier, sometimes even during the collection of data (Flick,

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1998). There are also other differences which include the usage of social grounding theory, or the degree of detail or abstractization,

The advocates of qualitative style of research argue that the mathematical description is not similar to the mathematical explanation. Thus, the statistical description of data would not rise to the finesse of a qualitative description. As Collins (1984) put it , “words are not only more fundamental intellectually; one may also say that they are necessarily superior to mathematics in the social structure of the intellectual discipline. For words are a mode of expression with greater open-endedness, more capacity for connecting various realms of argument and experience, and more capacity for reaching intellectual audiences.” (1984, p. 353). Still, with the advent of *mixed research methods* or *combined research methods*, the problem facing the relevance of educational research seem to have found an elegant solution.

**Mixed research methods.** Mixed methods research is defined as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). As such, the mixed research methods (MRC) combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research into a single study: as noted by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2004), “Qualitative research is typically based on small, nonrandom samples. . . which means that qualitative research findings are often not very generalizable beyond the local research participants” (p. 410). In contrast, mixed methods techniques can greatly improve the quality of inferences made in school psychological research, compared to monomethod studies (Powell, Mihalas, Onwuegbuzie, Suldo, & Daley, 2008, p. 305).

		Chronological order	
		Simultaneous	Sequential
Dominant paradigm	Equal Status	QUAL+QUAN	QUAL → QUAN QUAN → QUAL
	Dominant Status	QUAL + quan QUAN + qual	QUAL → quan qual → QUAN QUAN → qual quan → QUAL

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Figure 1: The Mixed Research Methods Matrix and the Design of Mixed Research Methods  
(apud. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004)

**Action. Learning as a learner-centered process**

The role of the teacher is to induce desired changes by reaching educational objectives. He or she is expected to do that whilst, at the same time, acquires knowledge and develops specific understanding, in a particular function of “practitioner-researcher”. Today, the student and his or her objectives and individuality are placed at the center of the learning process. The importance of self-determination in learning is widely recognized in educational research and writings (Harvey & Chickie-Wolfe, 2007). Significant changes, including in learning habits, take place from an educational cycle to the next. The students must take responsibility for and control their learning experiences. For instance, at all educational levels, the research show positive correlations between self-monitoring and academic achievement (Tobias & Everson, 2009, p. 112). Unfortunately, the biological maturing doesn’t eliminate the risks of lacks in learning strategies and, regardless of age, from children to collegiate students, the students present errors in metacognitions and misbeliefs that they possess knowledge which, in reality, they do not have (Pashler et al., 2007). A more multiculturally competent teacher, with respect to the competencies described by Sinagatullin (2003), would be a better conveyer, organizer and evaluator of information and knowledge for his or her students, more open to their particular or culture-specific learning profiles, and more inclined to recognize and value their different takes on and meanings of life. Such a teacher would also be better equipped to deal with school reforms and implementation of novel multicultural education programmes.

**Between action and research. Interviewing and multiculturalism**

One of the forms or means of gaining knowledge most representative for the transition from quantitative to qualitative research is *interviewing*. Since interviewing is one of the main activities of clinicians, it is not surprisingly that most information and guidelines regarding proper ways of conducting interviews, especially in a multicultural context, come from the area of clinical expertise. Nevertheless, the same experience is shared by a vast variety of professions, such as social workers, psychologists, counselors, human services professionals, criminal justice professionals, nursing personnel, and many others (Murphy & Dillon, 2011).

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The interview may be used both as **form of gaining knowledge**, including appraisal/evaluation, and as a **form of influencing the interviewed**, by means of providing a certain type of feedback. It is at the confluence between qualitative and quantitative research because it allows the gathering of data as deep as the researcher wants, within the limits of the instruments construction, but it still allows for the quantification and categorization of raw data. As such, interviewing is now the most important liaison between positive science and qualitative research, with a particular relevance also for action-research.

Not dissimilar to the clinical interview, the professor must also take into consideration the **reciprocal influence**—the manner in which every member of an interaction influences and is, in turn, influenced by others, thus, leading to a more cautious take on “detachment”, “neutrality”, and “objectivity” of the professional (Murphy & Dillon, 2011, p. 15). The teacher must be aware of the perception of **multiple realities**, or views on how things are, function, or should be, that various people hold. As such, an “objective” teacher would not assume that “their reality” or perspective on life is the correct one or that it bears more meaning than that of his or her students. Everyone has knowledge and experiences which they convey to the others, informing them, and changing the nature of their relationship, validating the strengths of both (apud. Murphy & Dillon, 2011).

**Action-research in education. A short description**

No discussion about research methods in education would be complete without noticing the action-research phenomena. Again, it is a highly controversial construct, even negated, for some and difficult to integrate consensually (McIntosh, 2010). Nevertheless, a working definition may be construed around Somekh’s eight key-components of action-research: 1) integration of research with action; 2) collaborative partnership of participants and researchers; 3) the development of knowledge and specific understanding; 4) the vision of social transformation and the aspiration toward greater social justice for all; 5) high degree of reflexivity; 6) exploratory engagement and wide range of existing knowledge; 7) participants’ learning; and 8) integration in the historical, political and ideological contexts (Somekh, 2006). “Change and development are perceived as natural occurrences rather than constructed, and the work engaged in is not seen as value neutral, such as is aspired to in scientific research; it is the

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opposite, with aims to promote social justice through politically informed stances and personal engagement, enabling access to mechanisms of power through which influence and direction to change can occur”(McIntosh, 2010, p. 34).

Bassey’s (1998) definition of educational action-research may be useful to illustrate why this way of conducting research is relevant for the issue of multiculturalism—“Educational action research is an enquiry which is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate and then to change, in order to improve some educational practice” (Bassey, 1998, p. 93). Also, the type of questions used in action-research may provide useful insight on the relation with multiculturalism: “[How] relevant is our own internal data? the feelings, thoughts and imaginings generated from our current experience? or the gifts and baggage we bring from our specific history and shared cultural and social context?”—these are all types of questions that bring about the relevance of culture within action-research (Cherry, 1999).

### **Discussions**

As seen above, at least several questions arise in relation with the ability of educational research to face the challenges brought about by multiculturalism. Among these, one relates to the means of building knowledge, or the ways of doing research. If the teacher cannot leave the real-life setting of the classroom, and the classroom cannot be “fitted” into the rigors of laboratory experimentation, does this mean that the educational research will always be a step behind the positive science of the controlled randomized trials? Arguments in favor of qualitative or quantitative research don’t seem to solve this issue, but rather to increase the determination of each side to refute the evidence brought by the other. Nevertheless, a solution seems to bring the necessary balance—the mixed research methods combine the rigors of quantitative research with the depth and finesse of qualitative research. Educational researchers, in general, and the teachers, in particular, are in a fortunate position to take advantage of this new style of conducting research. Already there are studies that show an entire body of academic journals heading towards this new territory (for more details, see also Powell et al., 2008). The teacher may use the powerful instrument of knowledge that is action-research. And the best part is that it all comes down to helping and empowering the student become more capable of learning, within the today’s most important educational paradigm, the learner-centered learning.

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