RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY TO EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper is a critical examination of the relevance of philosophy to education research. It highlights the point that education has a common ground with philosophy as rational and knowledge-focused ventures. Both are polymorphous in the sense that they manifest in every discipline. Researches in philosophy and education are systematized on clarification, verification, justification and critical evaluation of ideas and issues to establish knowledge. The paper examines some traditional methods of philosophy along with the acclaimed scientific methods of education research to establish the inextricable link of philosophy and education. It concludes that philosophy, education and research are on inseparable springboard for knowledge acquisition.

Introduction

The contention as to the place of philosophy in education research is a matter of concern. This arises from a possible impression that philosophical research seems to lack its own proper method coupled with the possible resistance to abstract theorizing as noted in many quarters (Conroy, Davis et al, 2008). Research in the Arts and the Humanities is characterised by the literary style that is peculiar to essay writing. The sciences in turn are characterised by the problem-solving approach. Philosophy as a researchable discipline seems to mediate between the established formats of other disciplines, the reason for this is not far-fetched.

Philosophy is both a human and rational activity as well as an academic discipline. As a rational activity, it permeates every sphere of thinking to determine the validity of ideas. As a school discipline, it harnesses facts and ideas from both the Arts and the Sciences to build up a system of thought. Any of the school disciplines lends materials for philosophical thinking. The ubiquitous nature of philosophy makes it adaptable to all forms of thinking; hence a single research approach may not be attributed to it.

Education too, like philosophy, is all embracing, when one considers it from the point of view of learning. Its polymorphous nature puts it at par with philosophy in the sense that both philosophy and education make use of ideas or facts offered by various subjects of study to build and promote the power of thinking and to produce further ideas for on-going rational activity. As a human enterprise, education, like philosophy, is enduring, as it goes synonymously with living. The issues at stake in this paper are whether both education and philosophy require the same methods to teach and learn, and whether it is possible to draw a dividing line in their research approaches. Hirst (2005:618) called attention to the involvement of philosophy in education in his contention on philosophy of education. He stated:

In its particular pursuits, philosophy of education draws as is appropriate on all that has been achieved in the developments of academic philosophy from the Pre-Socratics down to the present inheriting the body of methods and well founded conclusions of that discipline to further our understanding of and the rational development of educational practices.

This citation stipulates that philosophy makes use of theories from what may be undetood as its traditional methods to provide a base for intellectual explorations in education. It also stipulates that the materials for philosophical activity are technically the same for educational activity. Education is diversified in scope, so much so is philosophy. He argued further that philosophy, like psychology, sociology and history is an abstracting academic and theoretical discipline that significantly contributes to practical reasoning in education. This is clearly stating that philosophy shares with other disciplines the goals and possibly methods of knowledge acquisition. But Wilfred Carr submitted that philosophy is not just the name of an abstracting academic theoretical discipline but also of a consciously performed and culturally embedded human activity. One would argue that
what may be called the ‘Rational aspect’ of theoretical philosophy is no less than the rational aspect of education. What philosophy is to education research is therefore the point of inquiry in this paper.

Research as an academic enterprise is meant for the purpose of knowledge discovery and utilization. This too is the objective of education. Education focuses on knowledge and explores avenues for knowing. Research as a tool for knowledge acquisition suggests a nexus of philosophy and education to the point of finding it difficult to imagine if there can be a research in education that may be devoid of philosophy.

Philips (2005) remarked, I do not wish to commit the mistake of implying that philosophers of education (among others) do not engage in research – of course we do, but we do not regularly or even often engage in empirical research, although sometimes our works help to clarify the normative and conceptual terrain in which empirical labours are carried out.

The fact that a philosopher engages in research on any issue including education is not a point to contend with. What is of significance from Philip’s remark is the involvement of philosophy in all forms of education research be it empirical or otherwise.

Nature of Philosophy and Education

Philosophy as an academic discipline is a researchable discipline. This is alongside other disciplines such as the sciences and the humanities. It has no subject matter of its own, but makes use of experience to generate several subject matters for thought processes. By its nature, philosophy is not bound to proffer solution to every problem, it still maintains its academic status to expose different thoughts and posit hypotheses on issues. It could revisit old problems and issues to exhume some age-long values to be refurbished within modern ideational framework.

Various subject matters lend themselves to the activity of philosophy, as education too in its multifarious dimensions offers itself for philosophical enterprise. Philosophy examines propositional beliefs developed in each discipline to bring about the meaning, presuppositions and justification of all claims to knowledge. In respect of its critical approach and reconstructive role, philosophy assumes a second-order activity while the primary subject matters of each discipline may be taken as the first order. In this way education theories and practice become a subject matter for philosophy at the superordinate level. This is a level of abstracting, analyzing, clarifying, verifying and justifying postulates on education issues. One would opine that education requires clarification of salient concepts and beliefs to function as a means of intellectual development.

The activity of philosophising is inherently the same in every discipline even though the focus may differ from one discipline to another. This is because several disciplines have several subject matters and methodologies laid out for the learner. Some disciplines like the sciences, call for more practical activities than theoretical while some disciplines settle fundamentally on theories that serve as foundations for practical thinking. Education amalgamates several disciplines in their varied forms to enhance learning and development. It is both practical and theoretical. Hirst (2005: 618) again, lends a backing to this in his claim.

The nature of philosophy in pursuing the philosophy of science is the same as that of philosophy in pursuing philosophy of education. But the significance of philosophy of science in the development of theoretical scientific knowledge on the one hand and that of philosophy of education in the development of educational practices on the other, is I suggest, very different indeed. What we need to be much clearer about is the role of philosophy in these two very different areas rather than to imagine that some totally different form of philosophy to be called ‘Practical philosophy’ is required in the case of an area of practice like that of education.

Notwithstanding the difference between philosophy of science and philosophy of education, philosophy plays the role of practical reasoning in every discipline. What is otherwise known as practical philosophy may be simply understood as the activity of reasoning, structured along a demonstrable line of cause and effect. The activity of reasoning in itself is the same in every discipline. What makes philosophy of one thing different from that of another is the focus and line of
thought. Thus the philosopher of science engages in rational activity on science while the philosopher of education focuses on education issues and problems.

This point clearly brings a possible distinction of philosophy into the natural and the applied. As a natural activity it involves making use of whatever experiences come to mind to deliberate on and generate further experiences. But as an applied activity philosophy assumes a focus on specific area of thought to make out meaning and experiences. Education encompasses these two dimensions in the sense that an educated person is expected to make use of general experience and specific or particular experiences to generate new thoughts. Actually in any discussion on philosophy and education the two dimensions come in vogue. The first seeks to provide a philosophical base for ideas that emanate from the education process, while the second makes education planning, process and outcomes the subject of rational activity.

Research in Education and Philosophy

Research in education can be defined as the systematic approach to discovery of truths on issues or matters with a view to postulating solutions to educational problems. Scientific research may be understood in the general sense to encompass all forms of inquiry that rely on evidence of sensation and reason for the establishment of knowledge. Education research is mainly scientific. By its nature scientific research is problem-solving. The same difficulty it takes to make a clear distinction between philosophy and education as separable independent disciplines makes the distinction between their research approaches impossible. Whatever could be identified as a distinction between them is simply a matter of details in the methods of research. If research is generally associated with the need for discovery of new grounds for knowledge, the methods of philosophy and education harmonize.

Research in both education and philosophy dwells on theoretical issues that call for clarification, verification, justification and critical evaluation to make out new ideas or build new systems of thought. An important philosophical outcome is expected from every research in education whether the issue under investigation is purely a philosophical matter as in conceptual thinking on abstract points or it is purely an empirical matter. In the case of empirical matters the findings made become objects of investigation and rational thinking to establish new ideas or theories. Theory is the summit of every inquiry. There are two senses to understanding a theory. It may refer to a body of knowledge derived from observation or experiment on hypotheses and validated on evidence of reason. It may also refer to the underlying thought at the base of systematic thinking on issues and problems to establish the truth of knowledge and even open up other dimensions to this truth. The first interpretation is understood as empirical theory while the second is philosophical.

Balogun (2001: 178) commented:

*Philosophical research rests heavily on the formulation of a theory, equivalence of an hypothesis in empirical research and the application of critical reasoning in its appraisal. The theory is a statement tentatively accepted in the light of what is known about a phenomenon at the time, it is employed as a basis for action in the search for new truth.*

This remark clearly strengthens the comparability of philosophical theory and empirical theory. The hypothesis which is a springboard for empirical research is a theory in as much it is a proposition that expresses a belief and every theory is a propositional belief. Every research in education culminates in establishment of a theory as a statement of truth. Even when a research outcome rejects an earlier postulated hypothesis it still ends up in establishing the negation of the hypothesis as the new theory. Again, it is possible for a researcher to argue against the faulted hypothesis to propound new statements as theories. Research and theory are mutually inclusive. This is because every research concludes on a theoretical note and theories are output of investigations. The activity of fashioning out a theory from any research is in essence philosophical in the sense that it requires logical thinking and reasoning on some facts to make out new facts and predict other postulates.

Let us examine the process of education research to highlight the place of logical thinking in it. In embarking on a research the first attempt is to choose a topic. This first stage is delicate in the
sense that it requires good reasoning on some acknowledged contemporary issues or problems to fashion out a specific matter for investigation. Many research works suggest abandonment soon to their beginning or midway through the job simply because the researcher does not have a clear understanding of what he or she is after.

To determine a research topic requires experience and sense of creativity. A researcher must be experienced in types of research in education and the differences between them. This would dispose him to name his intended research to a specific class and frame his topic along the class. His sense of creativity comes to play in framing a topic to invite new thought and contribution to knowledge. This is as against the possibility of embarking on a mediocre research which assumes a merry-go-round other research works. A researcher should develop inquisitive mind capable of generating useful and relevant questions to stimulate the probe into the issue of interest. He needs a philosophical tool of logic to do this.

Other steps to education research are logic dependent. These include providing a background for the study, and raising research questions and hypotheses to put the research on focus. They also include spelling out the purpose and significance of the study as well as defining the scope of study and the salient terms. All these must be logic controlled to make the research attempt worthwhile. A review of literature on the topic is necessary. By this the researcher critically explores other literary works to make out useful and relevant theories or ideas as a foundation for his new research. Ideally, it is not meant to be a catalogue of citations or a report of named authors on certain issues. It is meant to be a critique of the consulted works to bring out something new in their thoughts or introduce new perspectives to the same thoughts. This in essence is doing philosophy.

The research procedure as defined in terms of its design, population, sampling, as deemed necessary and the method of analysis together with presentation of results precipitate the rational position of the researcher himself on the findings of the study. A researcher is expected to clearly and unambiguously emerge with his own thesis as the outcome of his study. This is the rational outcome of the consideration of facts presented by the study. Notwithstanding the nature of the research, a thesis is perceived as a philosophical outcome of any research as the scholar’s contribution to knowledge. The contribution may either assume a solution to clearly identified problem or simply an awareness of other ancillary problems to them. It is not uncommon for a research thesis to raise further questions on issues at stake. This is equally a philosophical face to the research.

A question now arises: Is philosophical research the same as research in philosophy? The answer to this question is ambivalent in the sense that a research needs not make philosophy a subject matter before it becomes philosophical. In as much as a research subject carries some traits of logical organisation of thought, to some degree it is philosophical. This argument would answer for the convention of ascribing philosophy to the highest academic degree awardable on a successful research venture, this is talking about the degree of Doctor of philosophy. One would uphold that an academic research, whatever its purpose and design, exhibits traits of philosophy before it is so awarded. On the other hand, a research in philosophy makes philosophy its object of study and the end product is to facilitate further reasoning and build a system of knowledge. Thus philosophical research assumes research on philosophy.

Education research makes a symbiotic union of the empirical and the philosophical methods. In his discussion of method in philosophy, Ukaagba (2003) enumerated some traditional approaches to philosophy. These were classed into: (a) The scientific, (b) The phenomenological or existential approach and (c) The peripatetic methods. According to him, the scientific method makes reference to the method of the sciences by generalizing hypothetically the result of empirical findings to make out further facts on the issues at stake. This method seems to find a basis in Dewey’s problem-solving approach to knowledge. The scientific method oftentimes systematically handles variables and attempts to systematize these variables in terms of cause and effect. This is urging on the philosopher to subject variables to conceptual examination and to rationally emerge with theories which become modal principles for successive explorations. This falls in line with the point made earlier on the harmony of philosophy with empirical research.

The “Phenomenological cum existential” methods, according to Ukaagba, guarantee the autonomy of philosophy in relation to scientific cognition. This method reflects directly on the contents of man’s mind. It is a hermeneutical approach to world problems in the sense that the philosopher engages in insightful interpretation of issues, problems and concepts as they make their
mark on human existence. Reality is sought for what it is and what relevance it makes on human condition. This method is not unscientific either because much of the world realities is introduced and explained to man through the natural sciences. Rational interpretations are possible only when data for them are supplied through scientific means.

Finally, the peripatetic method of philosophical investigation in Ukagba’s view finds a basis in intuition on identified matters to evolve general principles for inductive-deductive reasoning. This follows the Thomistic tradition of radical realism in which knowledge is made out through methodical reasoning on sense experience and proceeds on investigation into transcendental matters.

Each of these methods of philosophy holds value for education research in the sense that it clearly represents a dimension to obtaining information. This dimension may be classified in Kantian terms as either ‘a priori’ or ‘a posteriori. It is ‘a priori’ when new facts are systematically made out of old ones through logical thinking. Issues and problems are treated in this way, beginning with speculations on possibilities and progressing to deductions on probabilities. This gives room for various and different positions of thought on particular issues. For example, issues like ‘Freedom in education’ ‘Education for all in the new millennium’, ‘Childhood education’, ‘Teachers Education’, among others fall into this class. The ‘a posteriori’ research embraces investigations made at expository level. This is through revelation of facts and figures at the first instance and discussion of the same in the context of contemporary situations. The conventional empirical investigations fall into this category. In general, philosophical research assumes more of the ‘a priori’ dimension while the descriptive, historical and experimental studies are in the main ‘a posteriori’. But none of these dimensions is exclusive. Each one serves as a necessary complement to the other.

Akinpelu (2005) once raised a question as to the existence of philosophical research method in education. He was not unaware of the various approaches to doing philosophy, and the fact that there is no limit to the evolvement of new approaches. The question he raised, according to him, sounds ambiguous in view of the fact that several research works have been successfully carried out in the discipline of philosophy of education and there are renowned researchers in philosophy of education to name. Many centuries ago, Descartes, Bacon, and Leibniz made attempts at method. One would expect every method of research to be classifiable as philosophical since philosophy opens its doors to every discipline, hence in the case of education such traditional methods as historical method, descriptive method, experimental method, and quasi-experimental, among others may match the philosophical research method. But this would deprive philosophy of education its uniqueness as a professional course of study, hence the inquiry and advocacy into a method of research proper to it.

Actually, philosophical research defies rigidity of format compared to the empirical. This is to allow flexibility of thought patterns by various thinkers. More so that the philosopher researcher does not assume the obligation to provide solutions to every problem raised. His efforts are worthwhile if only he could sufficiently expose, inform and sensitize other minds to knowledge exploration.

Various thinkers have postulated different critical thinking methods. John Dewey cited in Balogun (2001: 178-180), for many years, named certain steps that are considered crucial to research. These include:

(a) Identifying a problem
(b) Defining the problem in a clear and unambiguous language as to suggest the need to explore it.
(c) Postulation of hypotheses as guess answers or directions to achieving solution to the problem.
(d) Exposition of the findings and the discussion made on them to build a system of thought.
(e) Possible application of the research outcome to existential problems and issues.

These steps are later systematized for philosophical research in education in this way:

(a) Identification and selection of a topic of research interest either on philosophy or on contemporary issues in education.
(b) Delineation of the topic into rational components. This is the statement of the problem.
(c) In-depth analysis of concepts and issues in the problem
(d) Synthesis of rational submission into a thesis
(e) Application of the thesis to contemporary education setting

Again, as Akinpelu warned, these steps may not be rigidly adhered to. What is important is a logical system of thought on an issue to make out useful research outcome.
Conclusion

Putting the details of operating any of these steps apart, it would be unimaginable to draw an absolute line of divide between philosophical research and other forms of research in education. The essence of a research is not in irresistible compliance with a set format rather it consists in identifying a named problem, justifying the reality of the problem, and procuring a solution to it or at least opening the minds of other thinkers to explore solutions to the problem. Education research therefore by its nature entertains philosophical activity in its approach and materials. Education, philosophy and research are on inseparable springboard for knowledge acquisition. The three are knowledge-focused and to engage in one carries consequences for the others. Education in its theory and practice is an inquiry into knowledge and by this very fact it is research prone and carries implications for philosophy which again is a knowledge prone venture.

References


