A critical commentary on combined methods approach to researching educational and social issues

Hope Pius Nudzor
University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

One major issue social science research is faced with concerns the methodological schism and internecine 'warfare' that divides the field. This paper examines critically what is referred to as combined methods research, and the claim that this is the best methodology for addressing complex social issues. The paper discredits this claim on the basis of the following three key points. First, it is argued that because there is necessarily not a one to one correspondence between epistemology and methods, an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life cannot necessarily be any one peculiar research methodology. Second, combined methods research attenuates the crucial issue of objectivity in social research and skews the debate towards qualitative and quantitative research as if they are in themselves theoretical perspectives opposed to each other. Third, the supposedly 'pragmatic philosophy' underpinning combined methods research (which most adherents of this methodological approach misconstrue as mapping both quantitative and qualitative research onto positivism and interpretivism) amounts to the inherent suggestion that on the one hand the world is flat, and on the other that the world is round. It is concluded that an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life is one which gives pre-eminence first and foremost to the research purpose before such other issues as the skills base of the researcher, who commissions the study and contributions of the research to wider political discourse.

Introduction

One of the issues social science research (of which education research is part) is faced with concerns the intense criticism and attacks against its methodological approaches. The criticism relates to, and in fact question the 'validity' of the measurements on which its research findings are based as well as their underlying 'truths'. At one end of the methodological research spectrum are positivistically minded scientists who ascribe to or hold with a significant fervour the notion of objective, empirically verifiable knowledge of value neutral science encapsulated in the spirit of 'enlightenment' (William and May, 1996; Crotty, 1998; Brown and Baker, 2007). At the other end of the spectrum are non-positivists (post-positivists most especially), who see the logical positivist science not as an enterprise involved in the discovery or construction of knowledge but an engagement in "a continual process of conjecture and falsification" (Popper, 1959). Put simply, whereas logical positivists offer assurance of unambiguous and accurate knowledge of the world, non-positivists, Popperian thinkers most essentially, have always argued against objectivity on the grounds that an advance in science is not a matter of scientists making a discovery and then proving it to be right but rather a matter of scientists making a guess and then finding themselves unable to prove the guess wrong, despite strenuous efforts to do so.

This already complicated debate is further exacerbated (particularly for research students and those of us who are novice researchers) by the array of research methodologies and

methods laid out before our gaze. By *methodologies* is meant the strategies, plans of action, processes or designs lying behind the choice and use of particular methods, whereas *methods* concern the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data. (See Crotty, 1998 and Gray, 2004 for further discussion on this.) More often, these methodologies and methods are not defined consistently and in an orderly fashion, and their philosophical underpinnings (that is, how these methodologies and methods relate to larger theoretical ideas) are left unclear. To add to the confusion, one frequently finds the same methodological or philosophical terminologies used in the research literature in a number of different, sometimes contradictory, ways without any recourse to 'scholarly sympathy'.

In this paper, I want to examine a key aspect of this debate. I want to examine critically the underpinning tenets of what is referred to in the research methods literature as combined methods research. I want to find out the extent to which the claim that this research methodology is the best for researching social issues holds true. I will begin by looking briefly at what is referred to as the 'paradigm wars' (Creswell, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). That is, the philosophical debates about research from which what is popularly known today as combined methods approach emerged. Following from this, I will undertake an assessment of what constitutes combined methods research, bringing out the assumptions and weaknesses seemingly built into it. Finally, I will draw on my personal first hand research experience to illustrate and buttress the criticisms of this methodology. As will become clear, I believe this methodology carries with it some excess baggage for which reason care should be taken particularly when using it in the research methods literature.

While the paper focuses on combine methods research, it is not to be taken that the contributor is cynical about this methodology for any hidden personal agenda. Rather, the methodology is used merely as a lens through which the complicated and often distorted discussions about what constitutes social reality and how it is possible to discover or construct it, is simplified and made easily comprehensible, especially for research students and novice researchers who are enthusiastic about doing research but are held back due to the intricacies involved in the process. The theoretical approach taken in this paper thus falls in line with the view of Crotty (1998) who argues that any meaningful discussion of theoretical perspectives underpinning social science research is, or should be a scaffold, not an edifice. "Its aim should be to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own building; that is, as they move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suite their particular research purposes" (p.2).

The paradigm wars

The philosophical debate that social science research is engulfed in is deep, complicated and, sometimes abrasive between researchers who hold different beliefs about the nature of social reality (ontology) and competing visions about the ways humans create their knowledge about the social world (epistemology). In this section, this controversial debate is simplified and discussed along the lines of 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' - two

alternative theoretical perspectives which adopt contrasting positions about what the social world is like and how it is possible to understand phenomena in it. The rationale for this is that such an endeavour could provide insights which could deepen understanding of the tenets of what has come to be known and accepted as combined methods research.

By definition, positivism is described generally as an approach to social research that seeks to apply the natural science model of research to investigating social phenomena. It is based on the view that "it is possible to develop knowledge systems which avoided theology, speculation and metaphysics, and which rely exclusively on what can be observed" (Brown & Baker 2007, p.34). In other words, positivism is concerned with uncovering truths and facts conceived in terms of specified correlations and associations among variables (Gephart, 1999; Denscombe, 2002).

The notion is based on a number of premises which distil its key features. One of these basic premises is the belief that there is an order to events in the social world which lends itself to discovery and analysis just as there is in the natural world (Denscombe, 2002, p.4). From the positivists' viewpoint, events neither occur at random, nor are they pre-ordained by fate. The social world, like the natural one, is best explained in terms of causes and effects, one thing leading to another, a fact which according to the positivists is quite obvious and uncontroversial since the idea of the social world governed by chaos and unpredictability might almost be regarded as a contradiction in terms. Closely related to the above is the presumption that researchers do not by themselves create the patterns and regularities of social life but rather, they discover them. This assumption is premised on the belief that there is an 'objective reality' 'out there' waiting to be discovered and that this reality exists independently of whether or not the man or woman on the street has knowledge of it, and whether or not the social researcher has yet discovered its existence. Positivism also adheres to the idea of 'methodological monism' which portends that the scientific method of research is applicable as the best possible method of investigation across all disciplines, and that the purpose of social science research is to use this method to reveal and analyse the reality of social life. It assumes that social reality is made up of objective facts that value free researchers can precisely measure and use statistics to test causal theories (Neuman, 2004, p.41).

Thus, through its emphasis on the patterns set by the exact natural sciences as an ideal for a rational understanding of social reality (unity of methods), on the mathematical ideal type of science (causes and effects, one thing leading to the other), and on the importance of general laws to explanations of social life, positivism is linked with that longer and more ramified tradition in the history of ideas, which von Wright (in Hammersley, 1994, p.10) calls 'Galilean'. Whilst this scientific method continues to be used widely in many forms and guises in social science research, it does not, and has never enjoyed total hegemony. Some of the world's greatest philosophers, researchers and historians (which include Droysen, Dilthey, Simmel, Max Weber, Windelband, Ricket, Croce and Collingwood) have disagreed with, and criticised the tenets of positivism contained in scientific method. These criticisms challenge the idea of replicating the success of science in the natural world by transposing the research methods used by natural scientists over to the studies of the social world.

The interpretivist theoretical perspective, on the other hand, is a reaction against positivism. The perspective is based on the philosophical doctrine of idealism which maintains the world view that what we see around us is the creation of the mind, and that we can only experience the world through our personal perceptions which are coloured by our preconceptions and beliefs. In other words, interpretivism rejects the methodological monism of positivism and refuses to view the pattern set by natural sciences as an ideal for a rational understanding of reality. This anti-positivist philosophy is represented by a diversity of approaches (constructivism, symbolic interactionsm, ethnomethodology, phenomenology and the like) and are characterised, among other things, by: a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular educational phenomenon rather than testing hypotheses; a tendency to work with unstructured data (data that has not been coded at the point of collection); investigating a small number of cases in detail; and employing explicit interpretations of meanings and functions of human actions which take the form of verbal descriptions and explanations.

One of the criticisms of positivism on which the interpretivist theoretical perspective is built reflects a growing awareness and acknowledgement that scientific knowledge has boundaries and limitations. It has for instance been argued that natural science and its approaches to research do not answer all questions. As contended by Denscombe (2002, p.16) for example, this does not mean that science has yet to discover all the answers, but rather that there are certain areas or realms where science cannot provide answers. According to him, in matters of art and aesthetics, it is highly difficult for what constitutes good and bad tastes to be reduced to laws of science. Equally, he argues that when it comes to matters of religion and faith we can see some boundaries to the application of science. Put simply, the argument of interpretivists relate to the fact that science and other aspects of social life such as religion, tradition and the family system have different areas of discourse, as such, each adopts a different approach to constructing knowledge. Science for its part lays claim to expertise in the understanding of 'material things', the physical and natural world which is studied in terms of chemistry, physics and biology. By contrast, spiritual well-being, morality, the meaning of life and social well being are things upon which religion, philosophy and sociology continue to shed light.

It has also been argued by interpretivists that although the numerical evidence produced by scientific research using a quantitative approach has the appearance of 'hard data' used in natural sciences, there are fundamental doubts about its validity. In other words, there are serious doubts about whether it represents accurately what it claims to capture or represent. This position is strongly supported and reiterated by Mehan (1973, cited by Hammersley et al., 1994) who points out how educational test results derived from the scientific approach may be interpreted in ways different from those intended by the researcher(s). She writes:

> In a language development test, children are presented with a picture of a
> medieval fortress — complete with moat, drawbridge, and parapet — and three
> initial consonants: D, C, and G. The child is supposed to circle correct initial
> consonant. C for 'castle' is correct, but many children chose 'D'. After the test,

when asked what the name of the building was, they responded, 'Disneyland'
(cited by Hammersley et al., 1994, p.10).

According to Mehan, those children used the same line of reasoning intended by the tester, but they arrived at the wrong substantive answer. The score sheet showing a wrong answer does not therefore document a child's lack of reasoning ability. It only documents that the child indicated an answer different from the one the tester expected. This, according to her, shows that there is, in fact, a variety of interpretations of what is involved in a scientific approach to research and how it should be applied to the study of human beings and their behaviour. To the critics of positivism therefore, "the search for the authentic, or the 'real' in the social world, is a misguided venture" (Williams & May, 1996, p.70).

Thus unlike positivism, the interpretivist theoretical perspective looks for "culturally and historically situated interpretations of the social world" (Crotty, 1998, p.67). It portends basically that the world we see around us is a creation of the mind, and "there is no objective knowledge which is independent of thinking, reasoning humans" (Gephart, 1999, p.4). In spite of this 'commonsense appeal', the paradigm is subjected, just like its positivist counterpart, to a number of criticisms.

First, the critics attack interpretivism because it tends to exemplify a common belief that it can provide a 'deeper' and more 'meaningful' understanding of social phenomena than that which is obtained from scientific data. For the critics, just as the natural science researchers would resist the charge that they are all positivists, interpretivism has failed to provide any agreed doctrine underlying all qualitative social research. Instead, there are many '-isms' (for example, interactionism, feminism, postmodernism, constructionism) which appear to lie behind and dominate qualitative methods (Silverman, 2003, p.8). Viewed from this perspective, critics tend to refer to, and treat the interpretivist theoretical perspective as a relatively minor methodology admissible only at the early or exploratory stages of research to familiarize one's self with the setting before a serious sampling and counting of events or before the 'hard nose' research begins.

Interpretivism is also criticised for producing findings which lack reliability. This criticism takes credence from its inherent subjectivity. Since interpretivism is very much concerned with issues of subjectivity, that is, understanding the way people make sense of the social world, there is every propensity that contradictory and inconsistent explanations are, or would be, advanced to explain social phenomena. This, according to the critics stems out of the failure of interpretivists to record and take note of trivial but often crucial pauses and overlaps which count towards giving accurate and balanced views about the aspect of social life under investigation, as positivists do.

Thus, the dichotomies between the positivist and interpretivist theoretical perspectives underpinning social science research undoubtedly centre on the issue of the nature of social reality and how to construct it. That notwithstanding, the arguments put forward implicitly (if not equally) challenge the orientations of avowed 'mono-methodic researchers' who often choose methodological approaches to research based merely on

their personal allegiance to such methodologies. This thus raises the issue of the possibility or justification for combining both theoretical perspectives, and in particular, whether the claim that this is the best possible approach to researching social life (Creswell, 2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003; Gorard & Taylor, 2004) actually has any credence. This issue is addressed next.

Towards a third methodological approach

The dichotomies between positivism and interpretivism (and in some cases the methodological schisms between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research) alluded to in this paper has led to what was referred to previously as 'paradigms wars'. Many social scientists (methodological purist most especially) regard the two stances as incompatible with each other and argue that it is impossible to combine them as part of one research (Sale et al., 2002).

Outside this research purists' school of thought however is another group of researchers who represent a third methodological movement (Gorard & Taylor, 2004) referred to in the literature by different terminologies, such as 'multiple research strategies' (Burgess, 1982); 'multi-methods research' and 'integrated research (Cresswell, 2003); 'mixed-methods research' (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003), 'combined methods research' (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). This latter group of researchers believe that the divide between positivism and interpretivism (and perhaps what many authors erroneously infer as their respective underlying quantitative and qualitative approaches) is overstated and overdrawn, and that a common ground can be found. Citing from relevant research sources, Gorard and Taylor (2004, p.4) for instance traced the root of 'combined methods research' to 1855 and the early nineteenth century work of the 'Hawthorn factory'. They claim that the recent increase in its use is linked to concerns about improving both the skills base of educational researchers and the quality of educational research. Others (for example, Brannen, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) argue that the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the positivist and interpretivist perspectives lie at separate ends of a continuum rather than simply a dichotomy and that the practical application of both perspectives is possible.

Put into context, the crux of the argument of adherents of the third methodological movement appears to rest in the contention that although positivism and interpretivism adopt different approaches and discourses for knowledge construction, there is an opportunity for both perspectives to be mixed with the view to balancing out any of the potential weaknesses in each perspective. They view combined methods research as adopting a 'pragmatic philosophy' (Creswell, 2003), based on the premise that the researcher in order to answer complex research questions must make use of all the tools and methods at his or her disposal, thus an interplay of methods as opposed to a compromise.

From such illustrations, combined methods research appears to offer a basis in social science research in which different forms of data are put together to make a more

coherent, rational and rigorous whole (Gorard & Taylor, 2004, p.4). Brannen (1992, p.11) for example puts this succinctly. Citing Burgess (1982), she contends that the central argument of those who subscribe to the third methodological movement is that researchers ought to be flexible, and in doing this, they ought to select a range of methods that are appropriate to the research problem under investigation. Pleasing as this sounds to the ears, the contention nonetheless begs the empirical question as to how or the extent to which the third methodological movement does help to resolve the epistemological issues of objectivity, validity and reliability that social science research is engulfed in? The converse question may also be posed, namely whether or the extent to which it can be said that the use of a particular method or methodology invariably means that a particular epistemological position has been adopted?

Gorard and Taylor (2004, p.7) provide us with answers to both of these intriguing questions. Firstly, they contend that combined methods research and the combination of data derived through the use of different methods, among other things, produce research claims that are stronger; create research with an increased ability to make appropriate criticisms of all types of research; and has increased the potential of persuading policy makers. Secondly, they argue that the approach can be particularly helpful in confirming, explaining, verifying and generating theory all at the same time. Thirdly, they portend that if social phenomena tend to have multiple empirical appearances, then using only one method in each study can lead to the unnecessary fragmentation of explanatory models, and that in circumstances such as this, using combined methods research is most appropriate. Gray (2004, p.33) adds that the use of 'multiple methods' enables 'triangulation' to be used. Denzin (1970) adds to these points. He points out that the combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods can add reliability and depth to the research data. For him, qualitative methods are unable to tell us how variables interact or which of them has a stronger relationship to the phenomenon under investigation whilst quantitative methods are also unable to tell us about the complexity of a phenomenon within a particular situation and environment. As such, he contends that by using both methods, we can learn from one what we cannot learn from the other.

From the above explications, the premise of combined methods research appears to relate directly to the point that research methods are nearly always more powerful when used in combination in research than in isolation (Brannen, 1992, pp.12–37; Gorard & Taylor, 2004, p.4). Interesting as these explanations are, there are however serious limitations which suggest that perhaps the debate about what constitutes social reality and how it is possible to construct this reality using an appropriate methodology has been attenuated and skewed towards the qualitative versus quantitative debate, as opposed to a consideration of the epistemological, theoretical or philosophical presuppositions underpinning research.

One of the limitations concern what appears in the literature to be the inability of the adherents of combined methods research to adopt a clear cut philosophical or theoretical stance on research. Although it is claimed that this form of research (i.e. combined methods research) adopts a 'pragmatic' philosophy to researching social issues, adherents of the model are either unable or fail to engage in epistemological debate about what

constitutes this kind of philosophy, how this philosophy constructs social reality or how it is possible to construct knowledge of this philosophy. Rather, what one often finds explicated in the literature is the setting of both qualitative and quantitative researches against each other as if they are theoretical perspectives at polar opposites. Crotty (1998) for instance elucidates this point when he points out that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research occurs not at the levels of epistemology or theoretical perspective, but rather at the level of methods. He goes further to point out that what actually does occur at the exalted levels of epistemology and theoretical perspective is a distinction between objectivist and positivist research, on the one hand, and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other. Writing further on how the debate about the construction or discovery of social reality has been attenuated (mostly by the so called pragmatics) and skewed towards qualitative versus quantitative research, he notes:

> Our model suggests that this divide — objectivist research associated with quantitative methods over against constructionist or subjective research associated with qualitative methods — is far from justified. Most methodologies known today as forms of 'qualitative research' have in the past been carried out in utterly empiricist, positivist manner … On the other hand, quantification is by no means ruled out within non-positivist research. We may consider ourselves utterly devoted to qualitative research methods. Yet, when we think about investigations carried out in the normal course of our daily lives, how often measuring and counting turn out to be essential to our purposes … (Crotty, 1998, p.5).

Closely linked to the above criticism is the question about whether combined methods research does have its own epistemological grounding? (that is, in the face of the claim by many adherents of the approach that it adopts a pragmatic philosophy which amalgamates the positivist and interpretivist theoretical and philosophical stances). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 95) buttress this concern. Although they do not answer the question directly, they contend that the combination of both the positivist and interpretivist theoretical perspectives (which many infer as 'pragmatic philosophy) amounts to a compromise between the two perspectives, and that such an idea is akin to "… a compromise between the view that the world is flat and the view that the world is round". Crotty (1998, p.15) endorses this view by reiterating that any attempt to be at once objectivist and constructionist (or subjectivist) is indeed problematic. He argues that on the face of it, to say that there is objective meaning and, in the same breath to say that there is no objective meaning, falls short of nothing but contradiction, or in other words, a trade off between generalisability and specificity. Brannen (1992) adds to these comments. She noted that the assumption that combining approaches ensures the validity of data is naive, and that:

> … the idea that data generated by different methods can simply be aggregated to produce a single unitary picture of what is assumed to be the 'truth' (i.e. valid) is often encountered among positivists. Rather data can only be understood in relation to the purpose for which they are created, for example the production or testing of theory. If the purposes differ, the data sets cannot be integrated (p.13).

This same sentiment is what Sale et al. (2002, p. 43) emphasise, and not what Gorard and Taylor (2004, p.1) describe merely as a 'sweeping statement', and quoted Sale et al. (2002) as having said that "because the two paradigms do not study the same phenomena, quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be combined for cross validation or triangulation purpose".

These epistemological criticisms levelled against combined methods research above thus beg a further fundamental question regarding what the purpose of the model is or should be. Although the origin of combined methods research has been traced successfully to as far back as 1855 (Erzberger & Prein, 1997), and the 'Hawthorn experiment' of the early 19th century (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), it is argued that the approach is being popularised in recent times, owing to criticisms, notably the lack of rigour, theoretical incoherence, ideological bias and irrelevance to educational issues (Hammersley, 2002; Whitty, 2006) levelled against and laid at the doorpost of educational research. Gorard and Taylor (2004, pp.1–7) may have subscribed to this view when they commented in one context that in education mixed methods research "has been linked to concerns about improving both the skill base of educational researchers and the quality of research". They may have also endorsed this same view when they contended in another context that, combined methods research often has greater impact, because figures can be very persuasive to policy makers. The point is if Gorard and Taylor's words are to be taken seriously, then, two key issues will further crop up regarding the purpose of social science research. First, the question will arise as to whether social science research should serve political purposes solely or it should be oppositional to it? Whitty (2006) appears to have answered this question rightly when he points out that the frequent charge from politicians over irrelevance of education research to schools in terms of helping to raise achievement is both inaccurate and irrelevant to the work of educational researchers. Elaborating this further, he notes:

> … while some of our work will be aligned in various ways to the Government's
> agenda, some of it will necessarily be regarded by government as irrelevant or
> useless. Furthermore, some of it may well be seen as oppositional. Such a range
> of orientations to government policy is entirely appropriate for education
> research in a free society (p.162).

The second question that Gorard and Taylor's (2004) suggestion brings to light concerns whether or not what I refer to as the 'political function of research' supersedes or should take pre-eminence over epistemological concerns reverberated in the purpose(s) of a particular research? The answer particularly to the second of these questions, in my view, is in the negative. What constitutes an appropriate methodological approach to research (in my view) does not lie solely in the methodological orientation or allegiance, or who commissioned or has control over research outcomes, but essentially the purpose and the use to which the research outcomes are to be put. Gorard and Taylor (2004) may have shot themselves in the foot when they appeared to have accepted this by saying that:

> …there is a pressing need for education researchers to overcome any rigid methods identities supported by the terms like 'qualitative' and 'quantitative'…we therefore need to reconfigure our methods classifications in some way to make it clearer that the use of qualitative and quantitative methods is a choice, driven largely by the situation and the research questions, not the personality, skills or ideology of the researcher (2004, p.2).

In my view, and in summary of the points discussed in this section of the paper, there is not a necessary or one to one correspondence between 'epistemology' and 'methods', as such, and the view that combining qualitative and quantitative methods can strengthen research claims against criticisms of 'objectivity', 'reliability', 'validity' and 'generalisability' is misleading, frivolous and fortuitous. A good or appropriate methodological approach to social science research, in my view, is one which gives pre-eminence to the purpose of the research, the use to which the findings are to be put and the philosophical or theoretical perspective the research is grounded in, as opposed to such other matters as who commissions or who has control over the research outcomes, the skill base of the researcher or the extent to which the outcomes serve the whims and caprices of external agencies.

Choosing an appropriate methodology in practice

My first hand encounter with the dilemma of having to choose an appropriate methodological approach for research, as a novice researcher, occurred through my engagement with my PhD research. This research focused on understanding the causes of the apparent policy phenomenon I described as 'the policy implementation paradox' (that is, the disjuncture between policy intentions and purposes in theory and outcomes in practice). Given that the aim of this research was to use the conception of policy as both 'text' and 'discourse' (Ball, 1994) as a conceptual framework, and the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (fCUBE) policy in Ghana as an exemplar, to examine the extent to which the policy provisions encapsulated in official policy documentations are reflected in the implementation process, the interpretivist approach was adopted. The 'fCUBE' policy implementation process was taken as a 'case' and studied within its real life context using more than one source of evidence.

Again, given the theoretical underpinnings of the interpretivist theoretical perspective adopted, the methodological approach for this research involved the critical discourse analysis of a range of the fCUBE policy texts which was complemented by semi-structured opened ended interviews with Ghanaian educational elites who by virtue of their position are involved in mediating policy between policy makers and actual implementers in the Ghanaian education system. The rationale for this methodological approach stemmed from three main concerns. First, it stemmed from the need to question the discourses and assumptions made in the fCUBE policy documentations concerning the policy intentions and purposes. Second, the rationale was grounded in the need to find out how the assumptions made in these documentations were conceptualised and interpreted by the Ghanaian educational elites who act as mediators of policy. Thirdly,

the decision was based on finding out the extent to which this process of mediation (by the Ghanaian educational elites) impacts on the implementation of the policy. The decision to employ this complementary method of data collection and analysis thus rested essentially in the need to explicate how the policy intentions were encoded (via struggles, contestations and dialogues) and decoded (based on the history, traditions, beliefs, orientations and motivations of the actors of policy) and what this suggested about the implementation and institutionalisation processes.

Whilst the research reported here adopted the case study approach and its interpretivist theoretical undertones, it is not to be taken as an implication that this approach supersedes all other research methodologies. The decision to follow this methodological path was intended to reinforce Denscombe's (2002) view (expressed earlier in the discussion) that there are certain aspects of social life that are difficult, if not impossible to research using particularly the scientific or positivist approach, and that for these aspects, different or alternative interpretivist approaches (and perhaps their underlying qualitative practices) are much more helpful in discovering and generating knowledge. To put it much more succinctly, the decision is a reiteration of the crux of this paper that the definition of a good or appropriate research methodology is not based on the primacy of which research traditions are utilised, the skill base of the researcher nor who has control over the research outcomes, but rather how a particular approach might be purposeful for answering the research questions posed.

The findings of this study indicated that owing to its commitments to giving step-ups to the educationally underprivileged in the Ghanaian society, the fCUBE policy was deeply rooted in the political ideology Trowler (1998) refers to as 'social democracy'. However, the advent of globalisation of capitalism (a global phenomenon which occurred particularly in Ghana during the late 1980s early 1990s) and its associated neo-liberal rhetoric of 'skills for the world of work' appeared to have triggered the neutralisation of these progressive ideological ideals of the policy. This, the study suggested, has led to a significant discursive shift in both policy direction and language of implementation. As such, it was concluded that as long as there are both private and public costs of funding education, and above all, a significant blurring in meaning of the components of the fCUBE policy title, the 'free', 'compulsory', 'universal' and 'basic education' provisions and intents cannot be said to be adequately reflected in the process of implementation. Turning to what was described as the policy implementation paradox, the study concluded that the phenomenon is a common and natural one, occurring as a result of the discursive changes that occur as policy gets enacted and that this has to be acknowledged and concerted efforts made to deal with its effects on policy processes.

So, while adherents of combined methods research for instance would want to have us believe that a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a research of this kind would open up space for a less dogmatic view of the philosophical issues underpinning the methodological debate that social science research is enmeshed in, this paper thinks otherwise. The paper emphasizes the view that it is primarily the research purpose that determines or takes pre-eminence over the conduct of methodological approach. In other words, the choice of methodology is, or should be informed by

practical considerations such as the research questions driving the study, the operational definition of research variables, the philosophical or ideological underpinnings of the issue(s) under investigation and the reasons for which the research is conducted and its intended use among others.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the ontological and epistemological issues whic social science research is engulfed in. Firstly, I juxtaposed the positivist and interpretivist theoretical perspectives. This was done with the view to unmasking the complicated philosophical debate (about what constitutes social reality and how to construct knowledge of this reality) from which emerged what is referred to in the context of this paper as combined methods research. Positivism adheres to the use of the natural science model of research to investigating social issues, and is thus criticised for assuming social life is made up of objective facts that value-free researchers can use statistical methods to measure. Interpretivism on the other hand, is based on the philosophical doctrine of idealism which maintains the world view that what we see around us is the creation of the mind, and that we can only experience the world through our personal perceptions which are coloured by our preconceptions and beliefs. The perspective is criticised for producing findings which lack reliability, validity, representativeness and generalisation, owing to its inherent subjectivity.

These perceived criticisms of both positivism and interpretivism open up opportunities for the discussion of the obviously difficult and yet inescapable issue of an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life. Using the contributor's own PhD research experience, the paper examines critically the claim (by combined methods researchers most especially) of a growing affection for combined methods research owing to its potency for addressing fully most complex research questions (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). The paper discredits this claim on the basis of the following three key points. First, combined methods research appears to have attenuated the crucial philosophical issues of 'objectivity', 'validity' and 'reliability' that social science research is engulfed in and has skewed the debate towards qualitative and quantitative research as if they are in themselves theoretical perspectives that are opposed to each other. Second, the supposedly underlying 'pragmatic philosophy' of combined methods research (which some adherents misconstrue as mapping both quantitative and qualitative research onto positivism and interpretivism) inherently amounts to giving a conflicting and contradictory suggestion that on the one hand that there is objectivity in social science research, and on the other, that there is no such thing as 'objective reality' as far as social science research is concerned. Third, the qualities of a good research neither lie in how the research outcomes are aligned to the ulterior motives or agendas of external bodies which commission or have control over research findings, nor do they rest on the skill base of the researcher(s). Rather, (and most importantly) an appropriate methodological approach to social research is one which gives pre-eminence to the purpose as well as the philosophical realm into which the issue under investigation fits.

So, while the focus of the paper has been on the nature of social reality and how it is possible to construct this reality, it is argued that an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life is one which gives pre-eminence first and foremost to the research purpose (which entails giving considerations to the philosophical or ideological realm into which the issue under investigation falls) before such other issues as the skills base of the researcher and contributions to wider political discourse. The point to acknowledge though is that this discussion is not relatively new. It has been going on for some time now. That notwithstanding, the paper is useful in the sense that the issues discussed are relevant and timeless. In this regard, researchers will be able to cite this paper as a recent up date on methodological discussions.

Acknowledgements

References

Ball, J.S. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach.* Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Brannen, J. (1992). Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches: an overview. In J. Brannen (Ed.), *Mixing methods: Qualitative and quantitative research* (pp. 3–38). Aldershot/Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Brown, B.J. & Baker, S. (2007). *Philosophies of research into higher education.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Burgess, R. G. (1982). *Field research: A sourcebook and field manual.* London: George Allen and Unwin.

Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspectives in the research process.* London; Thousand Oaks; Carlifornia; New Delhi: SAGE Publications Limited.

Denscombe, M. (2002). *Ground rules for good research: A ten point guide.* Milton Keynes: The Open University Press.

Denzin, N. (1970). *The research act in sociology: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods.* London: Butterworth.

Erzberger, C. & Prein, G. (1997). Triangulation: validity and empirically-based hypothesis construction, *Quality and Quantity,* 31, 141–54.

Gephart, R. (1999). *Paradigms and research methods.* London: Research Method Forum. [verified 28 Jul 2009] http://division.aomonline.org/rm/1999_RMD_Forum_Paradigms_and_Research_Methods.htm

Gorard, S. & Taylor, C. (2004). *Combining methods in educational and social research.* Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Gray, E.G. (2004). *Doing research in the real world.* London/Thousand Oak/New Delhi: SAGE Publications Inc.

Hammersley, M., Gomm, R. & Woods, P. (1994). *MA in education: Educational research methods (Study Guide)*. Milton Keynes: The Open University Press.

Hammersley, M. (2002). *Educational research: Policymaking and practice*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing/ Thousand Oaks, California/New Delhi: SAGE Publications Inc.

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage.

Neuman, W.L. (2004). *Basics of social science research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Pearson Education Inc.

Popper, K.R. (1959). *The logic of scientific discovery*. New York: Basic Books.

Sale, J., Lohfeld, L. & Brazil, K. (2002). Revisiting the quantitative-qualitative debate: implications for mixed-methods research, *Quality and Quantity,* 36, 43–53.

Silverman, D. (2003). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. London: Sage Publication Limited.

Teddlie, C. & Tashakkori, A. (2003). Major issues and controversies in the use of mixed methods. In A. Tashakkori and C. Teddlie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioural research* (pp. 5–27). London: Sage.

Trowler, P. (1998). *Education policy: A policy sociology approach*. Eastbourne, East Sussex: The Gildridge Press Limited.

von Wright, G.H. (1993). Two traditions. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *Social research: Philosophy, politics and practice* (pp. 9–13). London; Newbury Park; New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Whitty, G. (2006). Education(al) research and education policy making: Is conflict inevitable? *British Educational Research Journal,* 32(2), 159–176.

William, M. & May, T. (1996). *Introduction to the philosophy of social research*. London: UCL Press Limited.

Dr Hope Nudzor currently holds an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Post Doctoral Research Fellowship with the University of Strathclyde, where he obtained both his MSc. in Management and Leadership in Education and PhD in Educational Studies in 2004 and 2007 respectively. Prior to the ESRC fellowship award, he worked as a primary school teacher in Ghana, as a Tutor in Educational Studies at the University of Strathclyde, and as a Post Doctoral Teaching Fellow with Liverpool Hope University.
Email: hope.p.nudzor@strath.ac.uk

Research Approach: Inductive and Deductive Research. There are two major approaches to a research development namely induction and deduction. Deductive approach is similarly to that of the scientific research. It involves the development of a theory which is subjected to a rigorous test. (Collis and Hussey2003). Data Collection Methods: This research is based on a realistic philosophical stance based on inductive approach, the research strategy being a case study, the purpose of the research being exploratory using both qualitative and quantitative analysis but mainly emphasising on qualitative analysis. Data collection methods are simply how the information is gathered. Second, combined methods research attenuates the crucial issue of objectivity in social research and skews the debate towards qualitative and quantitative research as if they are in themselves theoretical perspectives opposed to each other. It is concluded that an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life is one which gives pre-eminence first and foremost to the research purpose before such other issues as the skills base of the researcher, who commissions the study and contributions of the research to wider political discourse. Educational and re-educational ethnography is ground in philosophical assumptions, tradition and legacy of the antipositivist movement in social sciences. An introduction to research & research methods. This workbook is a short introduction to research and research methods and will outline some, but not all, key areas of research and research methods Many research projects combine a number of approaches, e.g. may use both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Effective Learning Service. 2. This method could be used, for example, to trace the influences of variables, such as social class, gender and educational experiences on career development and career progression, or lack of it, within an organisation. It can be, however a time consuming process as it requires trust to be built between researcher and the people concerned.