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Bronx Community College's Education and Reading Department's Catalytic Research Programs

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Abstract

Faculty driven research is central to the intellectual integrity and financial viability of any college community. Greenwood and Levin (2005) highlight how colleges and universities have increasingly professionalized and commodified investigative practices in such a way that they no longer benefit the communities that they were created to serve. Bronx Community College's (BCC) Education and Reading Research Program is designed to question and interrupt research tendencies which propel self-fulfilling education and learning paradigms to produce and reify inter-generationally lived-realities and socio-economic reproduction of the least-advantaged communities. It is anticipated that the research efforts will also break the continuity of unintended effects of biased social policies, which evolve from socially-distant research careerism, by inaugurating a robust approach to action research. Our faculty action research program centers on the three pillars of investigative practices 1) qualitative inquiry 2) quantitative research and 3) action research centered on community development. Similar to Lincoln and Guba's (1989) authenticity criteria, our faculty research programs center on a notion that all research should primarily benefit the lives of those researched. The proposal that follows is a concise summary of our research programs and their central aims. Additionally, this paper provides the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings, which inform each approach. Lastly, this research summary outlines the community beneficence goals that each group of faculty researchers share; and it proposes how these research efforts will be financially self-sustaining.

Keywords: authenticity criteria, careerism, community beneficence, faculty research, research programs

1. Education and Reading Department's Catalytic Research Programs

The word catalytic is Greek in origin and relates specifically to an agent that increases the speed of a chemical reaction. In social research terms, the word catalytic has been used to describe how action research could be used to intervene in complex societal problems. Vidich and Lyman (2000) eruditely describe how research has a history of centering on social problems. This research tradition focused on benefiting the community, and is a distinct product of the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology, from which many of education's ethnographic research practices emanate. Following in a long tradition of social reformers, the Bronx Community College's (BCC) Department of Education and Reading put front and center the idea that research is centrally conducted to benefit our students and to improve their lives. This is not a unique notion. The Belmont Report (1979), to which all human subject research must conform, highlights that human beneficence is central to all research. Therefore, BCC's Department of Education and Reading will continue to add to the long history of conducting research with the aim of improving our community.

BCC's Department of Education and Reading also realizes that research is being conducted within different epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks. Therefore, our faculty focused research programs are eclectic and pragmatic while simultaneously centering on improving the lives of our students and the Bronx community. Our faculty research groups are broken into three different types of work: 1)

qualitative inquiry, 2) quantitative research, and 3) action research centered on community development. Each of these groups are connected to our broader goal, yet we recognize that distinct methods and research approaches must be differentiated due to the rigorous demands of each research domain.

2. Distinct Research Approaches

Qualitative Inquiry Program

Qualitative methods provide insight into the multi-logicality of lived experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) underscore how important an alternative research frame is during a time of standards-based educational reform. Often, qualitative research methods may best capture the complexities of lived experience. Wolcott (2008) described qualitative methods as a type of looking and seeing, giving insight into complicated social phenomenon. Garfinkel (1991) and Roth (2006) both describe qualitative methods as having a ‘sense making’ quality that grounds research by providing a lens through which to understand numerous data resources.

BCC’s Education and Reading Department employs the most current qualitative methods to understand complex social problems in our fields of education and academic literacy. Researchers frequently meet to discuss their current projects and strategize on how to best intervene. One major goal is to have our faculty members present their work at leading educational conferences. Additionally, our program seeks to train and develop its faculty in order that they will be component scholars and effective grant writers in the broadening field of qualitative research.

Quantitative Research

Often, educational researchers work in a vacuum, untouched, and unconcerned about the changing world around them. Greenwood and Levin (2005) discuss how the academic world is increasingly separate from the governmental procedures that dictate the very policies by which these researchers must adhere. As neo-liberal educational reforms sweep across the country, many academics have purposefully disengaged with the governing structures which are implementing these changes. This is a mistake. We are not in favor of the neo-liberal policy changes which are affecting public schools, colleges and universities, yet we are obligated to respond. In this case, BCC’s Education and Reading Department has developed an expert quantitative research program that purposefully centers on positivism and positivistic methodologies. This research program engages state and national policy makers, community stakeholders, and grant providers by providing them with an alternative perspective that centers on the life-worlds of the people these policies are designed to serve. We are decisively not against positivism, but ardent critics of reductionism. Positivistic reductionism tends to make knowledge claims without relevant understandings of the social contexts of the studied. In no small way, this type of reductionism creates a type of knowledge production which disenfranchises large sections of the population that the research is claiming to serve.

Going further, Greenwood and Levin (2006), in their book on action research, claim that colleges and universities employ a form of “Taylorism” by promoting faculty members who engage in arcane forms of research which will never influence the world. In our current educational climate, BCC’s Education and Reading Department recognizes that quantitative measures are the “gold standard” of research in our current zeitgeist. We believe it would be gravely imprudent to avoid quantitative research, although the knowledge constructions of positivism often are counter to our dispositions.

We purposefully, therefore, set out to write grants and conduct research that solely employs the research language of quantitative measures. We have assembled an expert team to conduct quantitative experiments and to write grants for the high levels of funding from organizations such as the National Science Foundation, National Institute of Health, United States Department of Education, and other funders. We cannot hide behind antiquated notions of research and, thereby,

passively accept neo-liberal constructions of knowledge through statistical language without contesting these claims in the same language.

Action Research centered on Community Development

Lastly, our department is fortunate in that we have many expert faculty who came to our department with a diverse array of community experience. For example, we have experienced full and part-time faculty who have served in varied other professions, who have been certified career teachers and administrators, social service consultants, and others. Nearly all of our full-time and adjunct faculty endeavor to have a positive impact on our students and the larger community. Informed by our faculty's expertise and experiences, it is incumbent upon us to help expedite these research ideas through action research.

Our department believes in action research. We have designed our third research program for action in our academic community in tangible and direct ways. For example, we plan to partner with other departments to study the "success strategies" employed by our students. This type of partnership allows faculty to engage with the academic and support needs of our community of students while proposing solutions to on-going problems in the larger social context which foster academic under-preparedness of children and youth.

We believe that action research, in addition to deeply rooted partnerships with community organizations, may help to identify and develop diverse effective responses to institutionalized patterns that create unintended consequences which reproduce limited academic and socio-economic life chances for this population.

3. Summary

This proposal outlines a faculty driven research program that is to be enacted by BCC's Education and Reading Department. We based our conceptual framework on Greenwood and Levin's (2005) notion of revitalizing colleges and universities through faculty research. We have underscored how the Education and Reading Department will conduct research applying the designs of qualitative inquiry, quantitative research, and action research centered on improving education and pedagogy within and without the academy as well as for community development. This proposal also summarizes our research programs and how they will benefit both the college and the broader community. Finally, this research agenda emphasizes and is framed solely with the notion of community beneficence as its primary goal.

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Authors

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