Chapter 12
Undertaking Commissioned Research in Education: Do Research Paradigms Matter?

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ABSTRACT

The place and challenges of identifying and working with research paradigms in the context of commissioned research is addressed in this chapter. The characteristics of commissioned research and commissioned evaluation are discussed. The role of Invitation to Tender (ITT) documents in commissioned research is explored using a conceptual continuum from looser to tighter specification of parameters. Consequences for the selection of a research paradigm are considered. The chapter concludes with an imperative: Communication to develop understanding of each other’s perspectives needs to be better recognized for its value to all parties in meeting their intended purpose in engaging in a commissioned research undertaking.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on research paradigms related to research commissioned by governments and government agencies. The chapter is intended to be of interest to researchers and policy-makers who wish to develop their understanding of the place and challenges of research paradigms applying to commissioned research. It will also be of interest to students in assisting their understanding and critique of policy-related research publications.

The characteristics of commissioned research are explored and distinctions between research and evaluation are considered. Different views about the purpose and outcomes of commissioned research are discussed, as are some possible reasons for the lack of attention given to research paradigms. This discussion is framed by consideration of different ways of viewing reality (ontology), differences in views about the nature of knowledge and processes of knowing (epistemology) and differences in values, beliefs, motivations and intentions (axiology). The difficulties caused by lack of conceptual clarity and different
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views about the relationship between epistemology, learning and teaching are addressed. Examples drawn from experience of commissioned educational research are used to illustrate potential differences in opinions that can arise in views about whether research paradigms have a place in commissioned research reports. Examples are also used to explore reasons for different views about the purpose of research and to confront implicit messages, and sometimes contradictory messages, that are communicated in the commissioning documentation prior to the research and in the subsequent research reports.

To suggest that the views of the world of research and the world of commissioning bodies can be understood as two distinct and easily defined perspectives is too simplistic. While reference is made throughout this chapter to a “commissioning body” as if it “speaks” with one voice, it is acknowledged that decisions, such as the purpose of research, its ongoing management and the actions (if any) to be taken from the research report, are seldom made by one person. Many voices are likely to have an input. However, while the individual views of those involved in commissioning the research may differ, the government policies and/or direction are likely to set the agenda for research. The complexity of the context in which commissioned research is undertaken and the many voices that may seek to influence the initiation, implementation and reporting or post-reporting stages of the research are discussed. In the concluding section, the paradigm of supercomplexity is considered for its potential as a way of opening up opportunities for researchers undertaking commissioned research in challenging and shifting circumstances that are impacted by multiple influences.

As Gardner (2011) indicates, educational research covers a variety of areas from the organization and structures of education, to policy formation and its effectiveness, trends and innovations and such themes as social justice, inclusion, multiculturalism, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. He also points out that the educational research community represents people from diverse backgrounds (for example, from teaching, vocational and higher education) and disciplines (such as the social sciences, humanities and the natural sciences). This means that the educational research community does not “speak” with one voice either. Researchers hold various theoretical perspectives and may favor different methodological approaches. Heilbronn & Foremann-Pack (2015, p. ix), drawing from Ellis (2012) argue, “the practice of education does not fall within the boundaries of neat and discrete packages; critical and systematic reflection on education stems from many traditions, voices and modes of enquiry.” The views of researchers undertaking commissioned research are likely to vary widely and they are likely to have different experiences of commissioned research. The views I express in this chapter are formed from my own particular range of experiences as a university researcher (leading and writing tenders and undertaking commissioned research for governments, government agencies and non-governmental educational organizations) and as a Director (with responsibility for commissioning research, chairing and participating in teams of staff members evaluating the tenders submitted) in a non-departmental governmental body that became a government agency.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMISSIONED RESEARCH

One of the strong messages put forward by Lorraine Ling in Chapter 2 is that it is the paradigm within which the research is undertaken that allows the researcher to decide on the purpose of the research, for whom it is likely to be valuable or beneficial, how it will be conducted, from whom or what to obtain the data, how the data may best be analyzed, the rhetoric or discourse appropriate throughout the re-