Researching Inclusive Education in Albania:
Using Mixed Methods in School/Educational Psychology

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of the art of the debate on mixing methods in education and social sciences. A brief review of the philosophical debate is presented, followed by an illustration of mixed-methods research in inclusive schools in Albania. The author argues for the benefits of mixing qualitative and quantitative research not only for pragmatist researchers conducting academic research, but also for school/educational psychologist who have embraced a scientist-practitioner approach in their everyday practice.

Keywords: *qualitative; quantitative; mixed methods; paradigms clash; pragmatism; inclusive education*

1. Introduction

The qualitative–quantitative distinction is built into nearly everyone's vocabulary in the social sciences, and it serves as a common point of reference for distinguishing different kinds of work. Quantitative methods are better known, and the quantitative culture is, no doubt, the more dominant of the two cultures within most social science fields. Nearly all scholars speak of qualitative versus quantitative research, though they may not understand that contrast in the same way. Furthermore, social scientists have organized themselves—formally and informally—into quantitative and qualitative research communities (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

There is growing interest in the possibilities, as dissatisfaction grows with the limitations of traditional mono-method studies – all very well in their way but unable to address fully the most complex research questions – and with the methodological schism and internecine 'warfare' that divides educational and social science research (Gorard & Taylor, 2004).With qualitative research now accepted by educational researchers, and with quantitative research long established as an approach, mixed methods research has become popular as the newest development in research methods and in approaches to "mixing" quantitative and qualitative research. The basic assumption is that the uses of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself. Also, mixed methods research is not simply collecting two distinct "strands" of research—qualitative and quantitative. It consists of merging, integrating, linking, or embedding the two "strands." In short, the data are "mixed" in a mixed methods study (Creswell, 2012).

Quantitative data, such as scores on instruments, yield specific numbers that can be statistically analyzed, can produce results to assess the frequency and magnitude of trends, and can provide useful information if you need to describe trends about a large number of people. However, qualitative data, such as open-ended interviews that provide actual words of people in the study, offer many different perspectives on the study topic and provide a complex picture of the situation. For example, by assessing both academic (e.g. grades) and social outcomes (e.g., pro-social behaviour, bullying, friendships) of children with SEN in the general education classroom using archival data, teacher reports and questionnaires, (i.e., quantitative) as well as the process of inclusion by means of observations and interviews (i.e., qualitative), we can develop "a complex" picture of social phenomenon (Greene & Caracelli, 1997, p. 7). Qualitative data can be collected simultaneously or in different phases, depending on the aims of the researcher (for details see Creswell, 2012).

2. The debate on mixed-methods

According to King, Keohane, and Verba, "the differences between the quantitative and qualitative traditions are only

stylistic and are methodologically and substantively unimportant" (1994, 4). These two traditions, according to them, share a single logic of inference that characterizes all social science. The differences between the two traditions that they identify concern surface traits, especially the use of numbers versus words. Researchers from various fields in the social and behavioral sciences have advocated the combining of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Campbell and Fiske's (1959) seminal article is credited for formalizing the idea of using multiple research methods. By 1973, Sieber suggested the combination of in-depth case studies with surveys, creating a "new style of research" and the "integration" of research techniques within a single study and a few years later, Jick (1979) used the combination of surveys, semistructured interviews, observations, and archival materials to provide a "rich and comprehensive picture" of anxiety and job insecurity during organizational mergers (cited in Creswell, 2012). In designing a questionnaire, standard textbooks advocate the prior use of in-depth approaches, such as focus groups, to help identify and modify the relevant questions (Oppenheim 1992). Qualitative work has traditionally been used in several fields as the basis for the preliminary phases of other quantitative studies, perhaps to generate hypotheses to be tested by subsequent larger-scale work (Erzberger and Prein 1997).

However, mixing methods is not considered by many "traditionalists" a good idea, or even scientifically acceptable, especially among qualitative and quantitative researchers which try to preserve qualitative and quantitative traditions that exhibit all the traits of separate cultures, including different norms, practices, and tool kits (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). According to Sale et al. (2002: 43) such a mixing is not to be recommended: 'Because the two paradigms do not study the same phenomena, quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be combined for cross-validation or triangulation purposes'. These traditions contrast across numerous areas of methodology, ranging from type of research question, to mode of data analysis, to method of inference; these differences are systematically and coherently related to one another such that it is meaningful to speak of distinct quantitative and qualitative research paradigms or alternative cultures, each with its own values, beliefs, and norms, each associated with distinctive research procedures and practices. At its core, the quantitative–qualitative disputation in the social sciences is really a clash of cultures. (Geortz & Mahoney, 2012). Despite this powerful statement, these authors concede that, "the two cultures are not hermetically sealed from one another but rather are permeable and permit boundary crossing."

Another reason supporting the scepticism regarding mixing methods in social sciences is that the epistemological assumptions of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are radically different. A quantitative research perspective assumes that knowledge is "out there" to be discovered; there is a physical, knowable reality that can be observed and measured, whereas, a qualitative perspective assumes that knowledge is constructed through communication and interaction; as such, knowledge is not "out there" but within the perceptions and interpretations of the individual. In short, knowledge is constructed or created by people; you cannot analyze and understand an entity by analysis of its parts; rather, you must examine the larger context in which people function and socially construct their reality (Van der Stoep & Johnston, 2009). In fact, the increased popularity and acceptance of qualitative methods in the social sciences in the past 25 years is to some extent the result of a reaction against quantitative research assumptions.

Quantitative and qualitative methods could "just" be possible choices, chosen to tackle certain psychological problems; instead they have become rather entrenched ideological or epistemological positions, also called paradigms. From the standpoint of those who choose quantitative methods, which are themselves modelled on and compatible with methods used in the natural sciences, using qualitative methods means debasing psychology as a "science". From the standpoint of those using predominantly qualitative methods, modelled on and compatible with methods used in the humanities, those who adhere to the quantitative "camp" devaluate the human being which should be at the centre of psychology as a discipline (Todd, Nerlich & McKeown, 2004). Many psychologists seem to remain entrenched in their respective positions. Whereas qualitative researchers accuse quantitative ones of positivism, reductionism, determinism, and objectivism, quantitative researchers accuse qualitative ones of fuzziness and subjectivity (Todd, Nerlich & McKewon, 2004).

However, this worldview incompatibility argument—also called the paradigm debate—has largely diminished – there are researchers that contend that mixed methods research has its own philosophical worldview, pragmatism, which philosophically justifies the use of various procedures that "work" for a particular research problem (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), for example, when one type of research is not enough to address the research problem or answer the research questions, or you want to provide an alternative perspective in the study (Creswell, 2012) . It makes sense that a mix of methodologies, maximizing the benefits of both approaches, will provide the richest and most complete understanding of the phenomenon under study (Van der Stoep & Johnston, 2009).Combined approaches can be particularly useful when the background theory for an investigation is minimal, and where one of the main purposes of the study is to generate useable theory. In addition, other philosophies have emerged as a foundation for mixed methods research, such as the

transformative research perspective advancing the need for addressing issues of social justice for underrepresented groups (Creswell, 2012). This supposed distinction between qualitative and quantitative evidence is essentially one between the traditional methods for their analysis rather than between underlying philosophies, paradigms, or even methods of data collection (Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

3. Illustration of a mixed methods study of inclusion outcomes in Albanian primary schools

This author (in press) conducted, for more than a year, a mixed-methods study focused on the academic and social outcomes of children with SEN in 7 Albanian primary schools. The study had quantitative components (social outcomes survey for teachers, a teacher-student relationship scale, observation of academic engagement in the classroom, archival data of progress on maths and reading), and qualitative components (structured conversations with teachers, descriptive observation of the classroom climate and physical characteristics). A fully mixed concurrent equal status design was adopted – i.e. quantitative and qualitative phases occured at approximately the same point in time, with both phases being given approximately equal weight and mixing occurring within or across the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages (Powell et al. 2008).

Most children with SEN (n=30) who participated in the study did not have a SEN statement, that is, they were not officially identified by the teachers, school psychologists and/or the school medical staff as having additional needs or needing an IEP (individual education plan). Identifying them accurately was an important task, related to the sampling procedure and data collection. Teachers were asked to describe the academic and behaviour difficulties of the students without statements in their classes that stood out, in their view, as "atypically behind" and/or "problematic" compared to their peers' academic progress and social behaviour.

At least two reasons, contribute in the Albanian context to the problem of (non) identification of the students with SEN: (a) stigma associated with labelling in general in the culture, and; (b) hesitation of school staff to identify more children with SEN than they can actually accommodate (e.g., reduce number of students per class, etc.). These two factors may be considered as serious neglect, considering that the additional needs of the child are not addressed and dealt with professionally. There have been cases when school psychologists have been threatened by influential middle-class parents with losing their job, for "approaching, or talking to" their normal children. Such children do not receive additional support not only at school, but even at home or in special centres. Three selected cases are given below to illustrate the utility of using mixed-methods during the data collection and analysis phases

A.B, a 7 year old Albanian boy with ADHD and problematic behaviour. A.B. was initially labelled by his 1st grade teacher, who had recently read a book on autism, as having Asperger's. After a brief description of his main difficulties and a 30 min direct class observation, the Asperger's label was dropped and he was considered to be displaying hyperactivity (moving around the classroom, chasing the teacher around, approaching and talking one student sitting at the opposite end of the room) associated with poor attention, especially after the first two hours in class, and occasionally aggressive behaviour (verbal and physical) towards his peers.

The structured conversation with the teacher revealed that she had given up on him a few weeks ago and asked the head to either get someone to help her in the classroom, or ban him from her class. She talked about a climate of fear among the other students who would relax and resume normality, only after he had left the classroom. The mother agreed to sit with him, in a seat in the last row - in a position where his movement could be more easily controlled, in order to reduce disruption of the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. After a few days of trial, the teacher considered the situation as acceptable.

The social outcomes survey completed by the teacher, showed that A.B. showed a high level of aggression (which has been reduced since the mother joined him in class), however, no sign of pro-social behaviours towards no-one but another student with attention problems (without hiperactivity) whom he probably considered as the only friend. Progress in reading and, especially, maths was very poor.

The teacher displayed an authoritative style, she was very experienced in managing disruptive behaviour or conflict in the classroom, using verbal and nonverbal skills very efficiently. She tried to design a "special educational" plan for A.B., which never materialized though, due to his mother's refusal to collaborate.

The mother of A.B, told me while leaving the classroom, that 'this (referring to her child condition) is a death sentence for me'. She hadn't admitted to anyone before, such feelings of desperation and possibly shame – she desired and insisted that her son be educated in a "normal" school with other "normal" children, however, upon the condition that no-one considered her son "abnormal". Understanding stigma in a certain cultural context is as important as measuring the academic and social progress (or the lack of it) of A.B. and students like him in the general education classrooms in

Albania. In the UK, a mother might go to court to ask for a statement of SEN for her child which means additional funding and support in an inclusive classroom – in Albania, a mother, because of the stigma, may deny her child whatever additional help that may be available, such as an assessment of needs by the school psychologist and/or the family doctor.

Using only quantitative methods to assess outcomes, most likely, inaccurate values would have been obtained regarding A.B's outcomes. Without further investigation (using qualitative methods), this participant would have been classified with Asperger's, with poor outcomes in reading and maths, as well as high level of aggressive behaviour at the end of the 1st grade, after spending a year in an "inclusive" setting. This assessment would not be sensitive to significant facts such as the recent change of the level of aggressive behaviour due to the mother's presence (and support) in class, as well as, the poor progress in academic subject, probably due to the mother's resistance in being consulted by the teacher for a special plan to implement at school and at home, or seeking help in special education centers.

R.B, a 7 year old Roma Albanian boy with serious emotional/behavioural disturbance and poor academic skills. In the same school hall as that of A.B.s, only a few doors away, I was introduced to the case of R.B. a Roma boy, with fair skin and long blond hair. He was enrolled in school when he was six, initially displaying wild unrestrained behaviour (running away from teachers in class, through the halls screaming, swearing), physically attacking peers in and out of class, and inability to pay attention to teachers, as well as making very little to nothing academic progress in reading and maths.

Quantitative observations (measuring academic engagement) revealed that he spent a considerable time off task, moving around the class to get the attention of the teacher, by showing his work to her or to other children. However, further qualitative observation revealed that his kind of off-task behaviour was the norm in that class, rather than the exception. Most students, boys in particular, would finish their work, leave their seats to follow the teacher around, begging for her attention. Most pupils would speak without raising their hands first. A few would hit and kick each other, while the teacher was busy checking the work of other children.

According to the teacher (she was interviewed after the observation), after spending 8 months in different classes at the school, his behaviour seemed to have improved considerably; during my observation, he would raise his hand to answer the teacher's questions, or to ask a question, he didn't display any sort of aggressive behaviour. He paid attention to the tasks assigned by the teacher in class, put real effort to complete them as quickly as possible, and tried to get involved with other pupils nearby in group work.

The teacher interview revealed a few important data: (a) the teacher had only a few months of experience of working with children and wasn't very skilled at managing the disruptive behaviour of so many students at the same time; (b) her class received the most problematic (in terms of academic performance and social behaviour) pupils of the 1st grade – this phenomena is well-known in the Albanian context- established teachers choose most of their pupils, while the new teachers are "given whatever is left". This is not the same as ability grouping, since children have not yet displayed their skills or behaviour, rather decisions are made on socio-economic status (parent education, migrant rural v.s. urban background), ethnicity (e.g., Roma) or simply on first impression.

The teacher reported (in the completed outcomes survey) that R.B. would bully other children (often girls) and be bullied (often by boys of Roma background, or others from a low SES rural-migrant background). He wasn't liked by other children and was not admitted in group work (e.g. reading, drawing), especially by girls, since his behaviour was often unpredictable. However, his behaviour towards the teacher was (recently) always positive. This relatively positive behaviour with adult figures, apparently, was not transferred outside the classroom – R.B. would display extremely aggressive behaviour towards his mother (e.g., throwing things at her, screaming and cursing/swearing at her in public).

His progress in maths and reading was very poor, as reported by the teacher; in the interview, she said that she had set some minimal learning objectives, such as learning all the letters of the alphabet, reading simple sentences slowly but correctly – however, she had had neither training, nor any help whatsoever from the school psychologist, or any other specialists. In addition, R.B. would also attend an after-school club for Roma children (with some of his class bullies), where with free lunch, support with academic subjects was offered in small groups. This club could be seen as a protective factor, where more socializing opportunities and academic support were offered, contributing to modest, but nevertheless positive, changes in social behaviour and learning of basic skills such as reading.

This mix of quantitative and qualitative methods illustrate, in the case of R.B., on the importance of understanding the impact of various factors (e.g., teacher experience, class climate, additional support) on the academic and social outcomes. If qualitative data are ignored or neglected, these outcomes may be seen as static values (objective indicators of the (in) efficacy of inclusion), whereas, the opposite is true. Gains in academic skills, however little, should be appreciated and valued as significant, especially if the type of "classroom" is considered – i.e., a dumping space in the

school for low achievers and problematic children– and despite the fact that these skills could have been partially developed outside the regular classroom (i.e., in the afterschool club). Social outcomes have gradually become less negative (those related to adults, in particular), despite, and their non-transferability outside the classroom (i.e., with mother) and the continuity of bully-victim roles of R.B. in the classroom.

D.S. a 11 year old boy with dyslexia and serious behavioural problems. Another case, from a different primary school – a 4th grade boy identified for more than 3 years with dyslexia who displayed serious behavioural problems in the classroom (stealing lunch from his peers, damaging the property of other children and the teacher's). According to the teacher, he would steal food from his peers, because his family was so poor that they couldn't provide enough food for him. Occasionally, he would steal food only to share it with other children, as an attempt probably, to make friends and be liked by his peers.

His academic progress was very poor – he could recognize most of the letters of the alphabet, however, he could not read or write. An IEP was designed by the school psychologist when he was in 3rd grade, without consulting the parents or teachers. He passed the grade with no progress at all, and the IEP was passed on, in the same identical form and content to the 4th grade teacher, who didn't even hold a copy of it in her classroom.

At first look, this boy should have been considered advantaged in comparison to the previous cases discussed, he had a statement and an IEP, and was assessed/supported by the school psychologist. As a matter of fact, an interview with the teacher clarified that accommodations (such as the IEP), were of no use at all, i.e., being identified as having SEN and having a statement proved to be, in this case, of no advantage at all. In fact, this could be a perfect illustration of the lack of accountability in the inclusive education project of children with SEN in Albanian primary schools.

4. Conclusions

For practitioners of school/educational psychology, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is not a new or unique concept. In fact, by definition, assessment, whether for purposes of program planning or treatment, necessitates the consideration of multiple sources of data, such as measurement tools such as standardized tests, rating scales, self-reports, symptom checklists, or personality inventories that typically entail the assignment of numbers in order to quantify certain attributes. Alternatively, they may take the form of direct observations, interviews, social and medical histories, analyses of permanent products, or various informal strategies, techniques that could be characterized as being primarily "qualitative" in nature. Indeed, only such a comprehensive approach permits the practical evaluation of the infinite array of biological, cognitive, social, and interpersonal factors affecting an individual's behaviour (Powell et al., 2008).

When researching complex processes, such as inclusive practices, academic and social outcomes of children with SEN in the general education classroom, mixing methods, can become a necessity. In the same school, two children with SEN, may experience different types of inclusions: different classroom climates, teaching styles, accommodation of the curriculum and forms of additional support. All these factors (which are analyzed qualitatively) contribute to the academic and social outcomes, which in the author's study were measured quantitatively. Besides this academic pragmatist argument, a school/educational psychologist should take the role of the problem-solving scientist-practitioner, a role which requires open-mindedness, flexibility and critical thinking regarding diverse philosophical and theoretical traditions, and is facilitated (where necessary and/or possible) by an eclectic approach to research methods and professional practice.

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