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Alternative Paradigms in Education

by Brent Atkinson

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A new book will be released by Sage Publications this autumn (1990) titled, *The Paradigm Dialog* (edited by Egon Guba). The book contains papers given at a remarkable conference I attended last year called "Alternative Paradigms in Social Inquiry," which preceded the annual meeting at the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco.

As interest in qualitative research has mushroomed in the field of education, it has become evident that qualitative researchers vary widely regarding basic assumptions they hold about the nature of "knowledge," and the role that researchers play in the development of knowledge. This has made for quite a bit of confusion and frustration in conversations between qualitative researchers. The "Alternative Paradigms" conference was designed to clarify differences and generate dialogue between representatives of three paradigms that have emerged as alternatives to the conventional positivist paradigm: post-positivist, critical science, and constructivism.

Following keynote addresses given by Denis Phillips (representing "post-positivism"), Thomas Popkewitz (representing "critical science"), and Yvonna Lincoln (representing "constructivism"), a series of papers were given clarifying how each paradigm addresses the following issues: accommodation between paradigms; the accumulation of knowledge; criteria for addressing quality of research; values in research; ethical considerations in research; methodological considerations; strategies for implementing research; and implications for training future researchers. Each of these papers were then critiqued by other prominent qualitative researchers in education. Finally, discussion was promoted regarding issues raised in each paper.

Participating in this conference was a fascinating experience for me. Like many family therapists, in recent years I have recognized how deep, paradigmatic assumptions about knowledge inform and influence my practice. After attending this conference I'd say its possible that on the average, practicing family therapists may be more familiar with paradigm alternatives than practicing educators. However, it also seemed clear to me that family therapy researchers have devoted considerably less energy to the task of exploring research applications of alternative paradigms than have their colleagues in education.

While some qualitative researchers in education have made deliberate, informed choices to ground their research in positivist assumptions, many have incorporated qualitative methods into a positivist framework by default, because they have not had the opportunity to explore paradigmatic alternatives that have arisen in recent decades. *The Paradigm Dialog* will contribute much toward paradigmatic clarification and informed choices among qualitative researchers in education. This book may similarly aid family therapy researchers who are interested in qualitative inquiry.

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