ABSTRACT. We begin by examining the widespread scepticism about the value of empirical educational research that is found within sections of the philosophy of education community. We argue that this scepticism, in its strongest form, is incoherent as it suggests that there are no educational facts susceptible of discovery. On the other hand, if there are such facts, then commonsense is not an adequate way of accessing them, due to its own contested and variable nature. We go on to examine the claim that teaching is a moral enterprise whose successful pursuit demands the grasp of moral concepts and their implications. We show that while this is the case, it is a necessary, not a sufficient condition for successful teaching, which also requires a grasp of facts that are relevant to effective teaching and learning. Finally we examine some protocols for educational research.

KEY WORDS: empirical research, scepticism, common sense, protocols, teaching, learning

INTRODUCTION

Empirical educational research has been having rather a hard time recently. A survey conducted in 1998 found that much of this research, as sampled from the academic journals concerned with education, did not satisfy elementary norms of good practice (Tooley and Darby 1998, p. 6). However, it is one thing to believe that much of what is going on in a given field is without significant worth and quite another to believe that, such a field cannot possibly contribute anything worthwhile to our understanding of education. But some philosophers of education do seem to embrace, either indirectly or explicitly, this latter and much stronger claim. Partly, we suspect, this is to do with the badness of what generally goes on within the field; but partly, some philosopher’s...
impossibly high expectations must rule out any contribution of social science to the study of education. A good place to begin an investigation into the strong negative claim can be found in Barrow (1984). At one place in the book (p. 188), whilst dealing with the work of Kieran Egan, Barrow explicitly denies that he is against empirical research as such and suggests a possible focus for such research.

What he says here is admirably clear, reasonable and fair minded. And one’s admiration is increased when one notes that for most of this book, Barrow shows that much of the empirical educational research of the time was conceptually muddled, lacking in educational and scientific judgement and structurally flawed. However, there are parts of Barrow’s argument which seem to go beyond a fair minded call for proper procedures of research. So, for instance, he says (and we quote in full because of the importance of the claim):

Nothing has been done in this research to take account of other unmentioned factors that might well have a significant bearing on what, according to our observations, is going on. Perhaps one child responds to a certain kind of desist incident in one way, not because of the desist incident in itself, but because he is used to a certain kind of behaviour from his parents; perhaps another reacts differently because he has a different kind of relationship with the teacher; another because he is affected by the presence of the observer. Consequently, we are in no position to fully explain even that which we do observe.

This criticism of many empirical studies is by now very well worn and formally denied by few researchers. As a result it seems to have lost some of its edge. But in point of fact it is calamitous for the value of such research for, if only one or two possibly important factors are not taken into account, it makes drawing firm conclusions quite unwarranted. And the truth is that the list of factors not controlled in any research into reading runs, not to two or three, but into unnumbered hundreds; for, until somebody establishes otherwise, we must presume that, any and every facet of each individual’s nature, of each individual’s backgrounds, of every context, and of every conceivable combination of these various facets might be the sole and crucial element in explaining what goes on. It is therefore not possible to state simply whether this problem is contingent or necessary. Certainly some variables that are not controlled in any given piece of research might in principle have been; others such as the unique combination of this particular child with this particular teacher, interacting in this particular way, at this time in this context, cannot be as a matter of logic. (The uniqueness of the combination may be the explanation of what happens on this occasion, and, if it is unique, it cannot be generalised from).

In practice one might choose to take seriously repeated correlations of significance: ... But such unambiguous and informative correlations have not been established throughout more than 50 years of research, from which one is inclined to deduce that there are not any simple and important rules that always govern the teaching