Leadership and a Critical Spirit of Resistance

New Ways to Conceptualize Qualitative Research on Leadership and Spirituality

Michael E. Dantley, Miami University–Ohio

The field of educational research is replete with celebrated methodologies, procedures, and, in fact, a hegemony that prescribes what is considered to be genuine and valuable research. Scholars have engaged in numerous philosophical and ontological debates focusing on the efficacy of quantitative and qualitative research. In recent times, a discourse has emerged in research that salutes the poly-voiced character of researchers and the researched, celebrates culturally sensitive and relevant research, and endorses transformative and emancipatory research (see Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002; Tillman, 2002). But all of these ways of positioning scholarship, it seems, are grounded in some sedimented notions of what “legitimate” research actually is. Within these prescriptions for scholarship is the idea that the purpose of research is to disclose some truth or truths and that these discovered truths are only legitimate if they have been unearthed through traditional or “accepted” forms of research methodology. Some positivist scholars argue that there exists what is called a grand narrative or some celebrated truth that purportedly essentializes the human condition—that research, it is argued, always either leads to or confirms its existence. The grand narrative is “a script that specifies and controls how social processes are carried out” (Stanley, 2007, p. 14). The grand narrative in education has been established through years of substantiating research. But what is more germane to this discussion is that not only does the grand narrative specifically locate or position education...
in a particular ontological and teleological discourse but also the research methods to sustain the tenets of the grand narrative are essentialized and cast in some reified notions of proper or vaunted research.

The purpose of this chapter is to call into serious question the hegemony perpetuating exigencies of the traditional and even the more progressive notions of qualitative research where spirituality is concerned; to use the work of Dillard (2000), Tillman (2002), Lather (1991), and Milner (2006) to deconstruct traditional notions of qualitative research; and to project a new way to conduct, consume, and evaluate the efficacy of qualitative research when exploring the mysteries of educational leadership and spirituality. This chapter will examine each of the scholars’ contributions to the discourse on qualitative research and will then draw conclusions regarding how their conceptions of epistemology and research can contribute to the construction of an epistemological position that best grounds research in spirituality, leadership, and social justice. I begin with a brief discussion of my own ideological position concerning qualitative research and then explore the essence of the other scholars’ contributions to this discourse starting with Milner’s work.

**Ideological Position on Qualitative Research**

From my perspective, qualitative research in education and specifically educational leadership must be able to accomplish a number of objectives. First, qualitative research must be grounded in an effort to uncover the myriad ways schools and their leadership marginalize and perpetuate undemocratic practices particularly against poor and African American students. The goal of uncovering the instances of racist and classist malfeasance in educational leadership is not merely to expose such practices but rather to achieve a second project, which is to rectify the systemic procedures and practices that have allowed this disenfranchisement to exist in the first place. When perceived through this lens, scholarship and research then have a political agenda to fulfill. The knowledge gained through research exists not merely to fulfill the career aspirations of academicians but also to serve as a catalyst for the radical reconstruction of schools (Foster, 1986) and ultimately the broader society. This research calls into question the tenets of education’s grand narrative and places the functions of the educational process in a broader social context.

To me, research must not only be individually sustaining and fulfill personal probative predilections but also be motivational for democratic communal reforms and societal reconstruction grounded in equity and a