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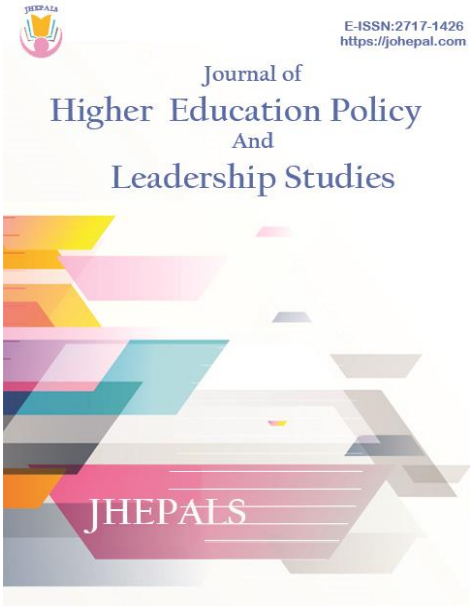
Empirical versus Theoretical?: Education Faculty's Scholarly Publications without IRBs



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Abstract

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) play a vital role in education research by upholding ethical standards and protecting human subjects. However, critics argue that many IRBs lack the expertise to properly assess social science research and may favor quantitative methods. This article engages with the ongoing debate between empirical and theoretical literature in education, drawing on studies such as Carpenter et al. (2023), who analyzed the balance of these types of scholarship in academic journals. Research shows that theoretical and empirical works often cite within their own domains, highlighting their distinct but complementary contributions. The importance of practical, practitioner-focused articles is also emphasized, as they help bridge theory and real-world application despite sometimes lacking empirical data. Systematic and scoping literature reviews further contribute to educational knowledge through rigorous analysis and synthesis of existing research. Overall, a balanced, methodologically pluralistic approach that values both empirical and theoretical work in teaching and learning.

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Keywords: Academic Culture; Faculty Scholarship; Knowledge Exchange; Methodological Pluralism; Interdisciplinary Collaboration; Institutional Review Board (IRB)

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Introduction

In education research, IRBs are essential for maintaining ethical standards, protecting human subjects, and ensuring research integrity (Dyrbye et al., 2007). Critics highlight various concerns with Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) (Green et al., 2006). They argue that IRBs often lack the expertise to evaluate social science research effectively. They also raised issues regarding potential influence by bias toward quantitative research in many IRBs (Tod et al., 2002). While we acknowledge the significance of IRBs in educational research and scholarship, this article positions itself within the ongoing debate between empirical and theoretical/conceptual or non-empirical literature in the academic field of education, drawing insights from several studies. Carpenter et al. (2023) conducted a content analysis on the Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership, providing insights into the distribution of empirical and theoretical content within academic publications in education. They found that the division between theoretical and empirical articles is pivotal, as highlighted by studies conducted by Clair et al. (2017) and Buela-Casal et al. (2009), which explored contrasting citation patterns between theoretical and empirical articles. These studies indicate that theoretical papers primarily reference other theoretical works, while empirical papers cite empirical research, emphasizing the unique contributions of each form of scholarship.

Minkowitz et al. (2020) reviewed recent research in the nonprofit sector, emphasizing the importance of understanding the evolving research landscape and its practical applications in education and related sectors. Meanwhile, Angervall et al. (2020) explored the conflicting demands faced by Swedish teacher educators, uncovering difficulties in balancing theoretical knowledge generation through research with the practical requirements of teaching.

Practical articles in education scholarships play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, as discussed by Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) and Perry et al. (2015). These articles offer insights into implementing theoretical frameworks in educational settings to enhance teaching methods and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, they may be subject to criticism for overlooking empirical data, which could undermine their robustness and credibility.

Regarding systematic literature reviews, they are considered a form of empirical research, involving a rigorous analysis of existing empirical studies and data to draw comprehensive conclusions (Kitchenham et al., 2009). They are essential for summarizing and synthesizing empirical findings to provide insights and contribute to the body of knowledge in various fields (Mohamed & Abdul-Talib, 2020). Systematic literature reviews are known for their methodological rigor and systematic approach in selecting, analyzing, and interpreting empirical studies, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings (Phelps et al., 2012). Scoping reviews, in contrast to systematic reviews, prove invaluable in research endeavors characterized by expansive and diverse literature, facilitating comprehensive exploration of a specific topic by delineating foundational concepts and primary sources of evidence across a broad spectrum (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Tricco et al., 2016).

Literature reviews also address the importance of ensuring that articles contain substantial academic content, whether theoretical or empirical, as underscored by Harris

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(2005). They can discuss the symbiotic relationship between theoretical and empirical research, with empirical studies often drawing on recent theoretical contributions, highlighting the interconnected nature of theoretical and empirical work in advancing knowledge within a discipline (Anauati et al., 2016).

Moving forward from the discussion on empirical and theoretical literature in education, the article's subsequent sections will explore specific approaches adopted by University of Northern Iowa scholars for their scholarly publications not needing IRB approval. These include scholarly inquiry into pragmatic application, practitioner-focused articles, methodological pluralism and advocacy, critical inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration, and scoping reviews.

Navigating the Intersection of Inquiry and Pragmatic Application: A Reflective Analysis by Mason

When considering how scholarly findings are communicated to practitioners through publications like academic journals and books, Mason reflects on the challenges faced by faculty, new scholars, and students engaging in scholarly work. Mason emphasizes the importance of grounding initiatives aimed at practitioners in strong methodology and empirical evidence to avoid speculative efforts.

Mason focuses on rigorously acquiring data, balancing doctoral research with securing funding, and maintaining ethical standards. After gathering data, Mason and colleagues interpret the findings for scholarly publication, refining their methods through feedback from academic conferences. This iterative process results in a diverse range of scholarly works that address various questions through different methodologies.

While some works are published in traditional academic venues, Mason also adjusts strategies to disseminate findings effectively to practitioners, even if it means reaching a smaller audience. The impact of these practitioner-focused publications is confirmed through feedback and citations.

Collaboration is crucial, as seen in joint efforts with grant collaborators and researchers, especially in mixed methods research that enhances the depth and breadth of scholarly endeavors.

One specific project explores elementary educators' cognitive processes in teaching science through interviews and video analysis, linking educators' thinking patterns to their teaching practices. These insights improve both academic discussions and teaching methods.

Recognizing the importance of practitioner-focused scholarship, Mason and colleagues strive to bridge the gap between scholarly inquiry and practical application, publishing in practitioner-oriented periodicals that draw from empirical evidence to inform educational practices.

Crafting Practitioner-Focused Articles: A Framework for Enriching Educational Practices by Wu-Ying

Wu-Ying's research focuses on inquiring about the attitudinal and skill factors that can better prepare teachers to educate young children. A particular area of interest is coaching teachers to enhance early literacy proficiency among children. Additionally, Wu-Ying delves

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into scrutinizing the perceptions and competencies of early childhood educators in mathematics through cross-cultural comparative analyses. Within Wu-ying's scholarly pursuits, a diverse array of methodologies is embraced, including statistical analyses such as regression, coupled with the utilization of single-case methodology, a prevalent approach within the domains of special education and communication disorders research.

A discernible transition in Wu-Ying's scholarly trajectory is evident, traversing from a predominantly quantitative orientation to a more comprehensive adoption of qualitative methodologies, driven by the exigencies inherent in specific research inquiries. Wu-Ying advocates for students who are interested in research to explore a spectrum of methodological approaches to enrich their scholarly pursuits.

Transitioning to the focal point of discussion, Shelley proposes outlining a framework for crafting practitioner-focused articles, grounded in experiential insights. This framework comprises several phases. Wu-Ying's method for crafting practitioner-focused articles starts with an immersive exploration of real-world classroom dynamics, examining the complex pedagogical challenges teachers face. Drawing on experiential and observational insights, Wu-Ying identifies key questions for further inquiry. Through narrative vignettes, Wu-Ying vividly illustrates educational complexities and highlights teacher challenges. They then articulate the article's purpose and navigate through a comprehensive literature survey, advocating for strategies that support teachers and improve student outcomes. This process involves elucidating instructional approaches, integrating empirical insights and mnemonic devices for clarity. Wu-Ying demonstrates the practical application of these strategies in classrooms, effectively bridging theory and practice. The endeavor concludes with a summary of expected outcomes, envisioning a positive impact on overcoming educational challenges and enhancing learning experiences.

Additionally, Wu-Ying underscores the significance of pertinent journals such as "Young Children," "Young Exceptional Children," and "Teaching Exceptional Children" as conduits for disseminating practitioner-oriented articles, holding considerable promise in enhancing teaching practices.

While crafting practitioner-focused articles requires concerted effort, it is often less temporally intensive compared to empirical studies and holds significant potential in fortifying teaching pedagogies and practices.

Exploring Methodological Pluralism and Scholarly Advocacy: The Scholarly Journey of Shelley

If asked about her self-definition, Shelley would identify as a practitioner-researcher with a strong affinity for methodological diversity. Her doctoral dissertation, using mixed-methods, exemplifies her desire to exceed expectations. Though not required, she chose this path. Later, she joined a panel discussion where, after reviewing the agenda, she saw a chance to discuss the importance of book chapters in postsecondary education, a field where she's developed expertise for two decades before her academic tenure. This practical background deeply influences her teaching and research direction.

Shelley's research focuses on the complex dynamics of student transitions and success in higher education, highlighted by her doctoral study on self-efficacy and sophomore persistence. Lacking formal pedagogical and publication training at a research-intensive

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institution, she navigated academia's challenges independently. With limited mentorship, she depended on collaborations, especially with her colleague Pietro Sasso. Together, they have led various scholarly initiatives, including conference presentations and joint publications.

The genesis of Shelley's book chapters can be traced back to reimagined iterations of research papers birthed during her doctoral coursework. Each chapter, meticulously curated in collaboration with peers, represents a collective effort aimed at advancing scholarly discourse in the field. Notably, her foray into interdisciplinary research culminated in a rigorously scrutinized book chapter, underscoring the arduous journey toward scholarly validation.

Navigating the realm of academic publishing in higher education necessitates familiarity with specialized journals and publishers catering to the discipline's unique exigencies. Platforms such as listservs serve as fertile grounds for networking, collaboration, and solicitation of contributions for scholarly projects. These avenues democratize access to publishing opportunities, thereby fostering inclusivity within scholarly circles.

The symbiotic relationship between scholarly productivity and career advancement within academia is not lost on Shelley. Engaging in scholarly activities while navigating the competitive landscape of the job market underscores the indispensable role of publications in shaping academic trajectories. Collaborative endeavors, such as the book series she co-edits with Pietro Sasso, serve as conduits for amplifying marginalized voices and fostering inclusive scholarly ecosystems.

Furthermore, Shelley's scholarly trajectory has recently pivoted towards exploring the concept of organizational justice and structural equity within higher education, as evidenced by ongoing qualitative and quantitative inquiries. Embracing a pragmatic approach to research design allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics permeating the higher education landscape.

The significance of scholarly activism in advocating for marginalized communities underscores the ethos underpinning Shelley's editorial endeavors. Collaborative book projects, such as those spotlighting identity-affirming narratives, exemplify a concerted effort to amplify underrepresented voices within academia.

Navigating Critical Inquiry and Interdisciplinary Collaboration: The Scholarly Journey of David

David has a keen interest in engaging in scholarly discourse surrounding the what, how, and why of his colleagues' bodies of work. David emphasizes the significance of individual autoethnographies within the academic sphere, particularly within the contexts of vocation and personal-professional journeys, both locally and globally. His passion for education blossomed during his undergraduate years, leading him to delve into lines of inquiry focused on the emotional impact of learning disabilities, the role of emotion in teacher learning about social justice issues, and examining violence against marginalized scholars within the academy, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

David's methodological approach is rooted in critical disability studies, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary and intersectional frameworks that bridge traditional special education paradigms with broader critical perspectives. He underscores the importance of

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systematic literature reviews, particularly critical ones, in generating new knowledge and challenging established paradigms within the field.

In elucidating the process of conducting systematic literature reviews, Eli emphasizes the importance of transparency, generativity, coherence, and contextualization. He advocates for a holistic approach that integrates theory, conceptual frameworks, and personal identity within the research process. Furthermore, David underscores the significance of methodological rigor, including defining inclusionary and exclusionary criteria, data collection, analysis, and synthesis, all while remaining reflexive and responsive to competing paradigms and interpretations.

Drawing from his own experiences, including recent collaborations on international inclusive education policy research, David highlights the iterative nature of scholarly inquiry and the need for ongoing dialogue and reflexivity in knowledge construction which includes the role of positionality and relationality to the research processes (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). He emphasizes the interconnectedness of theory, research, practice, and policy, advocating for a nuanced understanding of paradigms and their implications for research design and interpretation.

Crafting Scholarly Narratives: Methodological Rigor and Analytical Acumen in Matt's Scoping Review

Matt detailed the methodology of their scoping review, highlighting a collaboration with a colleague. They aimed to thoroughly investigate school administration and physical education, carefully selecting keywords and establishing stringent criteria, focusing on peer-reviewed English literature. From an initial pool of 1937 articles, their careful screening refined the selection to 29 relevant articles. They focused on understanding perceptions and partnerships between school administrators and physical educators. This curated set of literature, marked by methodological rigor and strategic synthesis, demonstrated a clear scholarly effort.

In explicating the nuanced dimensions of their endeavor, Matt underscored the utility of their prescribed methodology, resonating with the broader academic community. Emphasizing the potential for this structured approach to facilitate the crafting of exemplary literature reviews, Matt alluded to the overarching utility of their findings. Moreover, the discourse seamlessly navigated towards the domain of physical education, wherein Matt, an educational leadership scholar, acknowledged a personal learning curve, buoyed by the insights gleaned from their collaborative exploration.

The ensuing exchange delved into the finer nuances of research synthesis, encapsulating queries pertaining to temporal bounds and methodological robustness. Matt cogently delineated the rationale underpinning their time-bound criteria, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between research questions and methodological scaffolding. In this discourse, the Northern Star of inquiry served as a guiding beacon, anchoring their analytical trajectory amidst the vast expanse of scholarly terrain.

Transitioning towards a comparative analysis, the delineation between systematic and scoping reviews emerged as a focal point of discussion. Matt elucidated the divergent foci of these methodologies, wherein systematic reviews foreground themes and patterns, while scoping reviews pivot towards methodological and contextual considerations. This

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elucidation underscored the flexibility inherent within research methodologies, foregrounding the researcher's prerogative to tailor their analytical lens to suit the contours of inquiry.

A subsequent inquiry navigated towards the reception of practitioner articles within educational circles, highlighting the perceived impediments to their assimilation. Matt's discourse probed the intrinsic biases embedded within such narratives, juxtaposing the authenticity of firsthand observations against the perceived remoteness of secondhand knowledge. This nuanced dialogue underscored the intricate interplay between research dissemination modalities and their reception within practitioner communities, foregrounding the imperative of bridging this epistemic lacuna.

Matt's articulate explanation underscored the epistemic journey undertaken in crafting their scoping review, offering a compelling narrative that resonated with the broader academic community. Their collaborative enterprise, marked by methodological rigor and analytical acumen, bore testimony to the transformative potential of scholarly inquiry within the realm of educational research.

Conclusion

The ongoing debate between empirical and theoretical literature in education highlights the importance of a balanced approach that values the contributions of both types of scholarship. Such a balance is essential for a deep understanding of educational phenomena and for driving progress in the field. As educators work to connect theory with practice, the importance of practitioner-focused articles is becoming increasingly recognized. These articles are crucial for translating theoretical insights into practical strategies that can improve teaching practices and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. To encourage educators to engage with this type of scholarship, institutions can promote methodological pluralism and advocate for scholarly diversity within teacher education programs. By fostering diverse research approaches and interdisciplinary collaboration, institutions help create a scholarly ecosystem that accommodates a wide array of perspectives and methodologies. Additionally, a focus on methodological rigor and analytical precision ensures that research is robust, bolstering the credibility and impact of educational research. Faculty included here remain committed to fostering a dynamic community and mutual learning by embracing a variety of research methodologies.

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