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# The leeway of qualitative educational research: a case study

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This article presents a case study into the question of how research-internal and research-external factors influence the leeway of qualitative research, and ultimately determine which questions can and cannot be addressed in research. First an overview is presented of the position of qualitative research in the field of education in The Netherlands. This position is then analysed by situating educational research in the particular research political context. In the second part of the article the authors focus on effective schools research, one of the strongest research programmes in Dutch educational studies, in order to show the consequences of the lack of a qualitative tradition.

## Introduction

Educational research has changed since . . . 1982. A field that was predominated by measurement, operationalized definitions, variables, hypothesis testing, and statistics has made room for a research mode that emphasizes description, induction, grounded theory, and the study of people's understanding. We refer to this approach as "qualitative research." Dependence on qualitative methods for studying various educational issues is growing. Most educational researchers are positively disposed to the changes that have occurred in research strategies, and many have incorporated the qualitative approach in both their teaching and their research. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. ix)

The present picture of Dutch educational research is one in which qualitative research methods still play second fiddle to the increasingly dominant quantitative research methods. There is virtually no integration and no real attempts have been made to achieve this. Researchers are still trained in one style only and the arguments used do not differ at all from the arguments used earlier. Someone who insists on using quantitative techniques at all times and for all purposes in the research forum certainly does not lose credibility. This would happen in the opposite situation. (Smeyers & Levering, 1998, p. 177)

Qualitative research in the educational sciences appeared to be widely accepted and well regarded in the United States of America and in Europe at the end of the 1990s. The first citation comprises the opening sentences of the second edition<sup>1</sup> of an American introduction to qualitative educational research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Other authors have also identified a rapid increase in the use of qualitative methods in the educational sciences since the 1960s (Erickson, 1987). This is supported

by publications surveying the nature of educational research in different countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995) or describing national and regional trends in the place of qualitative research in the spectrum of educational research (special issue of the *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education*, 1994).

In addition to a rapid growth in qualitative research, observations have increasingly been made in recent years that competition between “quantitative researchers” and “qualitative researchers” is now less hostile and that there is increasing dialogue between these two groups (e.g. Eisner & Peshkin, 1990). There is also evidence of a certain degree of institutionalization in the 1980s – a Special Interest Group on Qualitative Research was set up by the American Educational Research Association, and several introductions to qualitative research were compiled (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The foundation in 1988 of the *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education* is another manifestation of institutionalization.

Qualitative research not only increased and became more institutionalized, it became more respectable as well. Renowned educational journals began to publish qualitative research in the 1980s (e.g., Smith, 1987) and editorials called for the submission of manuscripts based on qualitative studies (e.g., *American Educational Research Journal*, 1987). The first surveys of qualitative methods were published as chapters in educational handbooks (e.g., Erickson, 1987).

Nevertheless, in some countries qualitative research does not experience the development sketched above, owing to the local context. In this article we analyse the place of qualitative methods<sup>2</sup> in Dutch educational research, to which the second citation refers, by situating it in the particular research political context in which educational research is done in The Netherlands. The analysis is presented as a case study into the question of how research-internal and research-external factors influence the leeway of qualitative research, and ultimately determine which questions can and cannot be addressed in research. In the analysis we make use of the “Fleck-Elias” model, as developed by Harbers (1986).

To begin with, we will describe the situation in The Netherlands. This description is based on secondary literature about developments in educational research and on our own analysis of five volumes of the four most important Dutch-language journals on educational studies. Then we explain the Fleck-Elias model and interpret the situation described in terms of the model. In the second part of the article we focus on effective schools research, one of the strongest research programmes in Dutch educational studies, in order to show the consequences of the lack of a qualitative tradition in Dutch educational research. The Fleck-Elias model predicts that, if debate between research programmes is lacking, dominant programmes will soon meet their own limits. We will reflect on how this comes to the fore in the case of effective schools research. In the concluding section we outline the possibilities for further developing qualitative methods in the described case. At the same time we think that our case makes something clear, which in the enthusiasm about the coming together of qualitatively and quantitatively oriented researchers possibly deserves more attention: the fact that the place, nature, and meaning attributed to qualitative research differs according to the research tradition with which researchers feel affiliated. This aspect deserves more attention in the dialogue between qualitatively oriented researchers.

### Dutch qualitative educational research

The surveys of research that have been published in recent years are a good starting point for an analysis of qualitative research in the educational sciences. In 1995 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published a study on several individual countries entitled "Educational research and development". This showed that qualitative research had a substantial place in nearly all these countries. The study of The Netherlands included a survey of all ongoing research in the period 1992–93. It was categorized by type of education, sort of research (fundamental, diagnostic, design experiment, evaluative), orientation (discipline oriented, policy oriented, practically oriented), and research methodology. The latter showed the following percentages: experimental and quasi-experimental methods 10%, survey methods 46%, qualitative methods 35%, simulations and modelling 11%, other 24%. (Some research projects used more than one method.) Unfortunately the data do not indicate which methods "belong" to which type of research. For example, what is the place of qualitative research methods in fundamental research? Moreover, the term "qualitative" is not defined.

A Dutch survey of research was compiled as part of the European project "Inventory of Research in Education" (Scheerens, 1994). This study also provides an inventory of the methodological characteristics of research in the period 1991–93. As many as 57% of educational researchers in The Netherlands said they used qualitative methods either alone or in combination with quantitative methods. Although a differentiation was made between discipline-oriented, policy-oriented and practically oriented research, again no link was made with the type of research, hence making it difficult to evaluate the meaning and status of qualitative research in The Netherlands.

A concrete source for measuring the extent to which qualitative research methods are used in The Netherlands is academic journals: how many articles published in these journals are (predominantly) based on qualitative educational research? We checked the articles published in five volumes (1993 to 1997) of the four most important academic journals on education published in Dutch: *Pedagogische Studien* [Pedagogical Studies], *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsresearch* [Journal of Educational Research], *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift* [Pedagogical Journal] and *Comenius* [Comenius].<sup>3</sup>

Bearing in mind that it takes a couple of years for most research to be published in academic journals, in principle we should have come across the research included in the surveys mentioned above when checking the five volumes of journals. Yet our analysis of the journals shows a different picture. Very little research based on qualitative methods is published in Dutch-language academic journals. Only 17 of the 470 articles published during the period 1993 to 1997 were based on qualitative research. If we include articles about research using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, the total number of articles is 31. Quantitative research accounts for almost half of the articles published. The ratio of quantitative to qualitative research did not vary greatly during the course of the five years analysed.

There were differences between the periodicals in the amount of qualitative research published. The journal with the most articles on qualitative research had a total of 7 (out of 106) (*Comenius*) whereas the journal with the least published just one article during the entire five years (out of 120) (*Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsresearch*). Differences between the periodicals can mainly be accounted for by the ratio of articles on quantitative research on the one hand and review, philosophical and

historical articles on the other. While two of the periodicals (*Pedagogisch Tijdschrift* and *Comenius*) published relatively few articles based on empirical research on current issues in comparison with both of the other journals, articles in the latter are predominantly empirically oriented. A predominance of contributions based on quantitative research is typical of these two journals (*Pedagogische Studien* and *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsresearch*) in particular.

To ascertain whether qualitative research is more widely used in certain fields of educational research than in others, various themes have been differentiated. These are based on the categories of the Dutch Educational Research Association.

In connection with the relationship between research themes and the use of qualitative methods, we found that articles discussing the results of qualitative research were on topics in the following research themes: “teacher training and behaviour” (5 articles out of 26 on this theme), “education and society” (3 articles out of 75), “policy and organization” (1 article out of 28), “pedagogical theme outside the domain of education” (4 articles out of 120), “vocational and company training/higher education/adult education” (1 article out of 41) and “learning and instruction/curriculum” (1 article out of 110). The authors of these articles mainly used in-depth or biographical interviews and participatory observations. A number of authors used case studies and one article was based on a qualitative analysis of thinking-aloud protocols for pupils.

### **Interpretation: the Fleck-Elias model**

Harbers (1986) developed the Fleck-Elias model in order to analyse the development of particular fields of research in the social sciences. The Fleck-Elias model is a sociological model which focuses on both research-internal and research-external factors for explaining knowledge growth in science. Typical for the social sciences is that they have to defend their claims to a scientific forum and simultaneously are involved in a societal discourse. Thus developments in the social sciences are influenced by both new theoretical and methodological insights and changes in the social context in which research is carried out. The Fleck-Elias model assumes the existence of collectives with certain styles of thought in which the development of knowledge takes place. Such collectives not only include scholars/scientists (the experts) but also policy makers, journalists, practitioners, and financiers.

The optimal condition for the development of the sciences is the existence of several competing research programmes<sup>4</sup> in the same area of research, which each produce their own (qualitative and quantitative) empirical research. In the social sciences this would imply the existence of several collectives, disagreeing with each other but still in debate with each other. The scholars/researchers in these collectives would disagree about theoretical assumptions, knowledge ideal, appropriate research methods, etc., but they would recognize and acknowledge each other’s work as scientific. This idea situation, however hardly exists in the social sciences. More common is a situation in which differences between styles of thought are defined as differences in scientific quality. Often, one research programme dominates, without alternative programmes. When the research-external actors also belong to the same collective, and thus support the dominant research programme, alternative programmes hardly have a chance to get off the ground. They are qualified as nonscientific, their ways of thinking will not influence policy and practice and they will acquire little research

funding. In such a situation not only do the alternative research programmes disappear, but also the dominant programme is deemed to be extinguished after a while (cf. Lakatos, 1970).

We think that the situation described above is typical of Dutch educational research. Competing research programmes hardly exist. On several domains within educational sciences small research programmes exist, and a few larger programmes (e.g., the effective schools programme, see the second part of the article). All these programmes are nomological in character, and strongly favour quantitative methods (see for an analysis of Dutch sociology of education, Wesselingh, 1996). Moreover, they are embedded in collectives with similar styles of thought. This implies that most research-external agents who exert influence on decisions concerning research support quantitatively oriented research.

Quantitative research is supported in several ways by research-external agents. First, Dutch researchers are in the unique position of having access to statistics collected centrally by government institutions such as the Central Bureau of Statistics, the Social and Cultural Planning Board, and some ministries, in particular the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. There are, for example, extensive data banks on school careers of different cohorts of pupils which can be used for all kinds of research questions and analyses. This is a strong impetus for quantitative research programmes.

The comparatively small impact of qualitative research on the development of the educational sciences in The Netherlands is also related to a second external factor. A large part of Dutch educational research is commissioned research (about half in 1991, see Scheerens, 1994). This type of research focuses on questions that are current in the educational field and policy. As in many other countries it is predominantly financed by the government. What is unique in The Netherlands, however, is that until 1997 policy-oriented, commissioned research was programmed and financed by one central institute, the Institute for Research on Education (SVO). One of the most important reasons for the existence of this institute was to translate the requests for research into "more researchable questions" (Scheerens, 1994, p. 3). Naturally, the resultant expenditure followed the general line of government policy, but during this translation process the questions were more or less separated from the direct policy context and/or practical context from which they originated. It was considered essential that the research results could be applied generally. As a result, "knowing" came more to the foreground than "agency." In the tradition of the Institute for Research on Education, "researchable questions" are predominantly questions that could produce general statements on the effects of education and educational measures. This knowledge ideal, which is compatible with the nomological perspective from which the translation of policy and practical questions occurred, is linked to the use of quantitative methods and techniques of research.

Smeyers and Levering (1998) propose an explanation for the dominance of quantitative methods in the other half – the academic part – of Dutch educational research. They hold the centralism in the organization and financing of Dutch research responsible for this situation. Only large, internal, consistent research programmes are being financed, which implies that all research has to fit into such a programme. This prevents the plurality that is necessary for qualitative research.

Besides research-external factors, the Fleck-Elias model aims at identifying research-internal factors that influence the development of a field of research. In The Netherlands, where the internationalization of academic research only emerged

on a large scale in the late 1990s, research-internal means predominantly Dutch-research-internal. In research in the field of educational psychology, the Dutch culture of the basic discipline psychology is accompanied by an empirical-analytical, scholarly orientation using mainly quantitative methods and techniques. Since the beginning of the 1960s there has been virtually no hermeneutic tradition in Dutch psychology which could be used in research on learning and development processes. The same holds true for Dutch research in the domain of sociology of education. Leune (1994, see also Wesselingh, 1996) characterizes the dominant research programme as quantitative oriented. He states that academic goals once more hold a prominent place in Dutch sociology of education since the 1980s; the research agenda is not determined any more by societal commitment. "One is particularly concerned with knowing, not or less with agency," (p. 272). The sociology of education focuses predominantly on providing explanations; especially distance – and not so much participation – is pleaded for.

An analysis of the characteristics of Dutch educational research in terms of the Fleck-Elias model can explain the discrepancy between the data from the surveys of research (OECD, 1995; Scheerens, 1994) and the results of our analysis of five volumes of academic journals. According to the data from the surveys of research, qualitative research had a substantial place in Dutch educational research in the 1990s. Yet this research does not appear in article form in the academic journals. Qualitative research would hence seem to have a marginal position. Research which does use qualitative methods tends to fall within research programmes with a preference for quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are "acceptable," even essential in the preliminary phases of research, for example, in the formulation of hypotheses and development of research instruments. However, they do not result in products that comply with the knowledge ideal of the programmes. This is also a reason why qualitative research is not published separately. The discrepancy cannot (only) be attributed to editorial policy. It seems rather the case that qualitative research is carried out but that the results are not submitted for publication.

A strong accent on quantitative research in the educational sciences in The Netherlands has been identified above. What does this mean in terms of which research themes are dealt with and which are not?

The question "Which questions are not dealt with?" is in fact unanswerable. Most unasked questions are not asked because they cannot even be thought of. We will therefore divide this question into a number of steps to make it as manageable as possible. To begin with, we will reformulate the question as follows: "What *sort* of questions are not dealt with?" Moreover, the Fleck-Elias model points at the interdependence of methods, theoretical orientations, and research traditions: not asking certain sorts of questions is not a matter of methodology in itself. The use of methods and certainly the choice between qualitative and quantitative methods is partly determined by research traditions and more specifically by theoretical orientations within those traditions. Theoretical orientations in which people are seen as mechanisms regulated by general laws, typical of the nomological tradition, demand nonparticipatory methods, involving distance. Theoretical orientations in which people are seen as the providers of meaning, which is typical of the interpretive tradition, are more likely to require participatory methods.

The emphasis on quantitative methods and the sort of questions that are mainly asked in Dutch educational research, questions which can be formulated in terms of independent variables that influence dependent variables, are both expressions of the

fact that most research is carried out from a nomological/empirical-analytical approach. Qualitative methods do not produce the sort of knowledge that is sought; qualitative forms of data collection may be feasible if the analysis of data is carried out in a quantitative way.

A different type of question is asked in the interpretive tradition. In this tradition there is less interest in the laws of objective reality than in reality as it is experienced and interpreted by individuals. Hence research questions are formulated in terms of meanings and interpretations which people and groups of people give to specific situations. A third position is sometimes differentiated in the literature. Some researchers refer to poststructuralism as such, with its associated, qualitative discourse analysis, as a method. In this context other researchers mention action research or collaborative research, in which the improvement of educational practice forms part of the research (Wardekker, 1998). Neither an interpretive tradition nor a "third approach" has developed clearly in Dutch educational sciences. Questions associated with such traditions are, therefore, rarely asked.

### **Effective schools research: the limits of a quantitatively oriented research programme**

In the second part of this article we will consider one of the strongest Dutch educational research programmes: the research on effective schools. Limits to the programme have increasingly been formulated from within the programme itself in recent years. We think this can be accounted for in terms of the Fleck-Elias model. Most authors talk of "questions which cannot be answered." We will analyze to what extent this is also a matter of "questions which cannot be asked" within the dominant collectives with their styles of thought.

The "effective schools research" is a strong research programme in Dutch educational sciences that aims to explain the degree of success of pupils and groups of pupils in terms of classroom and school characteristics (Creemers, 1994). This question on the characteristics of effective schools is a theme that has attracted a lot of attention internationally. Research in this field started relatively late in The Netherlands (at the end of the 1980s) but Dutch researchers now play a prominent role in the international discussion.

The research programme has developed rapidly in the last 10 years. First, there has been an increasing differentiation between the groups of pupils about whom questions are asked (in terms of socioeconomic status (SES), gender and ethnicity). Second, there has been a development in the independent variables that are at the centre of attention. Initially the answer to the question "which differences between schools could explain the different levels of achievement by pupils?" was sought in the characteristics of the school as a whole. In recent years there has been a shift in emphasis towards the classroom and instruction levels; characteristics at the classroom level in particular provide an explanation for differences in pupils' achievements (see for example, Creemers, 1994; Wang, Haertel & Walburg). Factors at the level of the school are now mainly seen as conditions for effectiveness at the classroom level. As a result, three levels are now usually differentiated in models of educational effectiveness: the level of the individual pupil, the level of the classroom, and the level of the school. A third development is the refinement in statistical techniques, which can process data with this kind of triple-level structure in a very advanced way.



From the very beginning the researchers have discussed the limits of the effective schools programme. We will discuss these briefly so that we can then relate them to the empirical-analytical roots of the programme. It very quickly became clear that the pretensions of the research were limited; the margins for the influence of the school and the classroom are small. Variations in pupil's achievements are largely accounted for at the individual level: the pupil's background such as intellectual ability and SES. The proportion of variance in pupils' achievements that can be explained by school and classroom factors, when pupils' background is taken into account, is now generally estimated to be 12–18% (Creemers, 1994).

A more serious limitation is that although some "effective" factors have been found which are generally accepted, research results often conflict. For example, there are international differences and even contradictions on various factors. In American research, the factor "instructional leadership" repeatedly comes to the fore as promoting effectiveness in primary education whereas this is not the case in Dutch research. Sometimes it has even been found to have the opposite effect (Brandsma, 1993; Reynolds & Packer, 1992). Many studies have found scarcely any connection at all between school, classroom, and individual variables and when there is a connection it accounts for only a very small proportion of variation. Moreover, effectiveness is not consistent. It fluctuates with time and there are differences within schools in their effectiveness for different school years.

As a result, it has increasingly been pointed out from within the programme itself that individual factors at the level of the classroom and the school are not really the issue. What is important is the interaction between what happens in the classroom, between classes, and between the school and classroom levels. This is expressed in the following terms: consistency (referring to the subject content, grouping and instruction), cohesion (referring to the extent to which teachers follow the same principle), and constancy (time) (Creemers, 1994). Likewise it is emphasized that it is difficult to give general guidelines for effectiveness; what is effective varies. Hence, in addition to the pupil, classroom, and school levels, the importance of the context of the school, for example the regional or national context, is increasingly emphasized (Scheerens & Creemers, 1989).

A step further is the remark that the meaning of factors may differ from context to context. Reynolds and Packer (1992) give the example of the characteristic "collegiality," which can be achieved in different ways and in different forms depending on the personality of the school head, the dynamics of the local context, and the stage of development of the school. Recognizing that factors may have a different meaning depending on the context and that particular constellations of factors rather than individual factors are the issue, we are confronted with the limitations of the programme. This is also manifested in the methodological solutions proposed for the problems that have been found. Methods which are more compatible with the interpretive tradition have been suggested. Reynolds and Packer (1992), for example, argue for case studies on good practice in which, "data would be 'sliced' horizontally rather than vertically, thus permitting the proper picture of the effective school processes in interaction with each other within one school" (p. 176).

Lastly, a restriction formulated from within the programme is that the question "*how* (via which processes) do the factors that have been identified exert their influence?" cannot be answered on the basis of the research. This restricts the use that can be made of the results of the programme (Reynolds & Stoll, 1997). These results produce no suggestions, for example, for improvements within a particular school.

Recommendations “to implement” the effective factors ignore the complexity of specific school situations and innovation processes. School improvement is affected by the local meanings and interpretations which teachers and pupils attach to the existing situation and possible changes to that situation. Such themes are usually approached from the interpretive tradition and can be answered for example with the help of qualitative case-study research, including biographical methods.

The knowledge ideal of the effective schools research has broadened over the course of time. As well as effectiveness in terms of pupils’ achievements in the basic skills, a wide range of outcomes at pupil level are now considered to be relevant. These include other subjects, other types of outcomes (for example, at the level of higher cognitive skills) and other domains (for example, the affective and social-emotional domain (Creemers & Reezigt, 1996)). Research on the attribution of meaning by pupils, however, for which qualitative methods are used almost by definition, does not fall within the scope of this programme.

In a study on the development of the research domain “gender and education,” which we carried out a number of years ago (Ten Dam, Van Eck & Volman, 1992, 1997), we found that in The Netherlands research questions in this field were increasingly formulated in terms of the characteristics of “effective schools for girls.” This applied for example to research on the choice of an achievements in science and mathematics, on the careers of girls from ethnic minorities and on women head teachers. Qualitative data were collected in some of this research but the analysis, in accordance with the knowledge ideal of the effective schools research, was qualitative. Just as in other fields,<sup>5</sup> a clear answer could not be found to the question of characteristics of effective schools and classes for girls. As in other themes, no effects on pupils’ careers were identified of factors which could be expected to be related to effectiveness for this group, for example in this case measures aimed at equal opportunities or at the elimination of sex-stereotyping. On the basis of the Dutch research results one is tempted to conclude that educational factors scarcely contribute to gender differences in education any more. This is strengthened by the fact that vertical gender inequality scarcely exists now. As a result this research theme virtually disappeared from the research agenda in the second half of the 1990s.

The disappearance of vertical gender differences in education does not mean, however, that equality between girls and boys has been achieved on all fronts. Differences in educational choices remain; these are difficult to eradicate and are considered a problem, yet they are the subject of little research. In addition gender differences exist on a less visible level. Think of gender identities, of the images girls and boys have of themselves, of their competences and of their present and future position in society. It is in the transition from school to the labour market that such differences are translated into inequality. The ideas and conceptual framework, which have been used to study the issue of gender inequality within the contours of the effective schools research until now (school careers, disadvantage, achievements), are not geared towards the analysis of inequality at the identity level and hence the formulation of initiatives for appropriate strategies for equal opportunities. We are of the opinion that research on gender inequality today must focus on gaining insight into the meaning of gender, gender difference, gender inequality, and equal opportunities for the present generation of pupils (Volman & Ten Dam, 1998). As already stated, such research (qualitative research) on the attribution of meaning by pupils does not fall within the field of the “effective schools programme”.

Looking at the international literature, we see that there is a much stronger tradition than in The Netherlands of research on the intentional and unintentional learning processes of pupils. This research analyzes learning processes in connection with the subject matter, the pupils themselves and their relationship with the subject matter, and the role of school, classroom, and lesson factors such as the actions of the teacher, the teaching methodology, and materials used etc. Such research is on processes that fall outside the perspectives of the question as to which school/class characteristics influence gender differences in pupils' outcomes.

In various contributions to the special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* on international trends in qualitative research, feminist research is named as a field in which qualitative methods are strongly represented (Bartlett, 1994; Kelchtermans *et al.*, 1994; Maguire & Ball, 1994). Scores of processes and mechanisms which explain why education often does not function "gender inclusively" have been analyzed and discussed on the basis of qualitative research since the end of the 1970s (e.g., Stanworth, 1981; Whyte *et al.* 1985). This is mainly small-scale research focusing on the experiences of pupils, including for example a detailed analysis of the interaction between teacher and pupils and between pupils. These are not methods one would normally expect in a strongly quantitatively oriented approach. The measurement of effects in terms of achievements and choices does not form part of this research.

Feminist research from a poststructuralist approach in the 1990s was mainly on the role of education in the development of gender identity (Davies, 1989; Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, & Rennie, 1994; Weiner, 1994). Collaborative research has a place here. Researchers, teachers, and pupils cooperate in equal opportunities projects in which not only do the researchers help the teachers to improve their project and the pupils learn something from the teachers, but all those involved in the project participate in studying how gender functions in the school (Davies, 1993, Kenway, 1993).

## Conclusion

We opened this article with a description of the extent to which qualitative methods are used in Dutch education research. Next, we analyzed this local situation in terms of the role of research-external and research-internal factors that influence the development of educational sciences. In the course of this analysis it has become clear that it is not so much the use of qualitative or quantitative methods that is of interest. The main issue is the particular theoretical orientation and the underlying research tradition associated with a method. We concluded that although a fair amount of qualitative research is done in The Netherlands, qualitative methods have a limited position, namely in the formulation of hypotheses and in the context of developing research instruments. Most research is carried out from a theoretical orientation in which conclusions must be based on quantitative research. Hence very few articles based on qualitative research are published in Dutch academic journals. Moreover, the dominance of quantitatively oriented research is supported by external participants of the collective – financiers, organizations such as the Central Bureau of Statistics or the Social and Cultural Planning Board – and by the way research and its funding is organized. The lack of a "qualitative tradition" probably means in turn that those researchers who prefer qualitative methods will "migrate" to other countries with their publications. Thus, both research-internal and research-external fac-

tors account for the dominance of the nomological/emprical-analytical tradition in Dutch educational research. Using the effective schools research programme as an example, we have shown what type of questions have remained unanswered owing to the programme's nomological conception of research. These questions mainly concern the attribution of meaning by pupils and teachers, and questions which position effectiveness and the improvement thereof in the context of a specific school.

In this concluding section we not only summarize the issues raised in this article but also look forward to the future. One of the explanations we have given for the Dutch situation concerning qualitative methods is the organization of educational research: commissioned research accounts for approximately half of the research carried out in The Netherlands. The organization of educational research, however, has changed recently. Since 1997 part of the research budget has been administered by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). This means that the NWO defines the research fields and evaluates research proposals. Owing to the review system employed in this evaluation, radical changes in the sense of more leeway for qualitative research are highly unlikely (see also Smeyers and Levering's (1998) analysis mentioned earlier). Another part of the budget is administered by the National Educational Advisory Centres and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. These institutions are responsible for research on questions from the field (e.g., schools) and on policy. The fact that these are brokers *outside* the academic research world may perhaps result in more leeway for qualitative research, thereby facilitating a more balanced representation of research methods. Without playing down the opportunities created by the changes in the organization of educational research, we would rather not promote the fact that qualitative research should only be developed outside of the field considered to be scholarly research. It is essential that qualitative research is not restricted to responding to questions from the field but that a deliberate effort is made to develop research programmes within the space that has been created. Following the example of the English-language handbooks on qualitative research (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), the academic journals should then function more as a forum where researchers with a preference for qualitative methods can communicate with their more quantitatively oriented colleagues. Thus, a contribution would be made to creating a more ideal situation in term of the Fleck-Elias model.

Whereas there is perhaps too much emphasis on the differences between quantitative and qualitative research in The Netherlands, this may not be taken seriously enough at the moment elsewhere. The increasing popularity of qualitative methods can in our opinion never be explained conclusively, as for example Kelchtermans *et al.* (1994) suggest, by the fact that other questions have become topical. Both questions and methods are linked to research traditions. Our analysis of the situation in The Netherlands clearly shows that the place, nature and meaning attributed to qualitative research are linked to research traditions. The observation that qualitative educational research is "flourishing" intentionally would acquire more meaning, we feel, if related to the question of theoretical orientations and research traditions. The growing interest in the use of computers in the collection and analysis of qualitative data with a view to greater objectivity<sup>6</sup> (see also Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) raises the conjecture that qualitative research is sometimes judged from a nomological perspective. Whenever the statement is made that qualitative educational research "has come of age", in our opinion the criteria used to come to this conclusion should be explained. These criteria are derived from the research tradition on which the design and evaluation of research

is based (LeCompte, 1997; Wardekker, 1998). We feel that this aspect deserves more attention in the dialogue between qualitatively oriented researchers.

## Notes

1. The first edition was published in 1982.
2. We use the definition of qualitative methods given by Kelchtermans, Vandenberghe and Schratz (1994) who followed that of Smaling (1987): "those research techniques that imply more informal (not strictly structured in advance) and open data collection, as well as analyses, in which the data are not quantified" (p. 240).
3. *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift* [Pedagogical Journal] is a Belgian-Dutch periodical. Other journals also publish articles by Belgian authors fairly regularly.
4. We use the concept of research programme according to the definition of Hetebrij (1983) based on that of Lakatos (1970). It does not refer to a group of researchers associated with an institute or research school, but to the connective layer between research traditions and actual research projects. It is typified by research with a common theoretical orientation, knowledge ideal, and research methods.
5. Endeavours have also been made to identify the school characteristics which are related to school success for pupils from ethnic minorities; no clear results were found (see for example Hofman, 1993; Van der Werf, Weide, & Tesser, 1991; Van Erp, Deckers, Koopman, & Robijns 1992; Weide, 1995).
6. The formation of a new Special Interest Group on the "Objective Analysis of Qualitative Data" was announced in the August/September 1997 issue of the AERA periodical *Educational Researcher*. This group will focus on the use of computers in subject analysis. One of the new themes in the second edition of Bogdan and Biklen (1992) is the use of computers in the analysis of qualitative data.

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