Classroom-based Research and Evidence-based Practice - An Introduction

Keith S. Taber

Reviewed by SANDRA NICOL

Structure of the book:
The forewords in this book give a clear indication as to its purpose and the author’s stance on education. Thereafter the book is set out in three sections with a synopsis at the beginning of each part. Each chapter is headed up by bullet points as to the aspects explored and includes questions for reflection. Further suggested reading is given at the end of each chapter and a comprehensive reference list is given at the end showing a wide range of materials that has been drawn upon as support for the author’s suggested journey towards becoming research active in a classroom.

Scope and aims:
The foreword from the first edition is included in order to give clarity as to its original conceptualisation of it being a resource for those new to educational research which is still central to this second edition. The central theme of the book is about research on teaching and learning and the audience aimed for is that of Initial Teacher Education students, particularly those doing the one year course following achievement of a degree, Master’s level education students and classroom teachers interested in carrying out research in their own context. Taber wishes to equip his readers with the skills and attributes necessary for small-scale research and give them confidence in adopting a critical stance to educational research. It is made clear that this is an introduction to give guidance to those who wish to embark upon this process and that such researchers will need to use further texts to deepen their knowledge and understanding about the research process depending on its context and the requirements specific to their study in order to make it a competent one.

Interestingly, Taber uses the second foreword to make commentary about the politics of education in England and the impact of government policy. He talks about the government being ‘ideologically driven’ and those policies and organisational approaches are not based on evidence. He defends the need for universities to play a significant role in the training of teachers and that these institutions are best placed to drive the research agenda in order to produce evidence-based enquiry in education. Taber states that the one thing that is
constant in education is continuous change but because the fundamental nature of teaching and learning does not change therefore, research can help to better understand and support learning.

One other interesting point is that Taber is not overly worried how research is categorised (as action research, case studies etc), particularly as the former seems to be used in many research studies when it is clearly not the case. He is much more centred on the nature of the research, that it is well detailed and carefully considered with a clear rationale behind any decisions taken.

The three sections focus on:

- Learning about educational research
- Learning from educational research
- Learning through educational research

The synopsis at the beginning of each section is particularly useful as readers may wish to focus in on a particular area whilst seeing it in the context of surrounding chapters as opposed to reading each chapter in chronological order.

Taber is certainly mindful of the needs of students embarking on small-scale research studies. Each chapter comprises questions for reflection and there is detailed exploration of several aspects such as paradigms of research, varying methodological approaches, data collecting instruments etc. There is detailed consideration of research ethics Another significant inclusion is the interrogation of the evidence which is central to the critical analysis of the competence of any study. There is also sound advice as to the dissemination of the findings which should be done openly and honestly. This aspect is often ignored in comparable texts.

However, the division of the book into three sections appears a little imbalanced. The first two chapters would have merited a section of their own as the focus is on what educational research entails. This would allow the next three chapters to be linked together as a focus on the early researcher.

In this first part he explores the understandings of what is meant by educational research and outlines three levels of researcher;

- The executive – basic assumptions become established
- The manager – strategies adopted and the research design set
- The technician – where the data is collected and analysed

I would suggest that there is a fourth stage where the analysis becomes crystallised into generalisations and suggestions of impact and where dissemination of the outcomes can be crucial to professional development both for the researcher, their colleagues, pupils and work context. Although this is clearly explored in Part 3, it would have been helpful to the reader to emphasise that this exercise is not merely for the outcome of an essay or institutionally-driven exercise and that increased sharing of experience would help to legitimise the merit of carrying out research in the educational field. This would sit well with his earlier comment in Chapter 1 where talks about the common argument against educational research is that it only has meaning within the context in
which the research is carried out. Taber argues that what has been learned in one context ‘is often if not always’ of great value in other contexts.

Some of the diagrams included are quite complex and difficult to understand but are accompanied by written explanations. It is always difficult to place information on this topic within the understanding for a range of readers and I suspect those on the PGCE course may find the book quite challenging. However, I would suggest it is very nicely positioned for those who are undertaking a Master’s degree as this would allow them to build up knowledge of how to carry out educational research.

Education and International Development: theory, practice and issues

Clive Harber

Reviewed by ALAN BRITTON

The relationship between education and international development is complex, and vulnerable to over-simplification of the issues, and misrepresentation of the facts. Yet it is essential that this relationship is adequately understood if young people are to acquire the global dispositions and critical mindsets that are increasingly seen as 21st Century ‘survival skills’.

There is an ignoble history of well-intentioned but ill-judged interventions relating to international development within the education sector; including persistent stereotyping by some developing countries that ultimately reinforced discourses of dependency and post-colonial donor-recipient relationships. It is still possible to find some markedly asymmetric ‘partnerships’ between schools in the UK and the developing world, although a number of development education NGOs have produced materials that promote a much more nuanced and politically sophisticated account of the underlying issues.

The relationship between development and education has been further complicated in Scotland by her constitutional liminality in the post-devolution era: responsibility for education itself is of course fully devolved, while international development remains reserved to the UK – and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future in the light of the Referendum outcome. A number of tensions have arisen between Scottish and UK departments and quangos since 1999 due to the financial contribution that the Department for International Development (DFID) has made to policy, curriculum and resource development within the Scottish educational system. Moreover both Labour/Lib Dem and SNP administrations at Holyrood have been adroit at pushing the legislative boundaries of the Scotland Act to assert a uniquely Caledonian approach to international development, most notably in relation to links with Malawi. In the post-Referendum era, it would not be surprising to see an SNP government in
Scotland continue to promote this distinctive and divergent approach to international development, for both philanthropic and political reasons.

Despite this rather chequered history and the underlying political tensions there are many examples of more thoughtful approaches to education around international development that address the field’s complexity, and that encourage teachers and young people to engage in this area in a compassionate yet critical fashion. The gradual evolution in terminology and policy in Scotland (see for example the genealogy provided by Priestley et al., 2010) from ‘Development Education’ to ‘Education for Global Citizenship’ reflects a more sophisticated contemporary presentation of these issues. Contemporary resources are more likely to challenge young people’s preconceptions, and to reflect more deeply on the purposes and consequences of different forms of development funding. Many schools have also successfully refocused their global schools partnerships towards more educational dimensions.

This new book by Clive Harber is suffused with the knowledge and indeed values of a longstanding advocate and practitioner of this more nuanced approach. It sometimes reads like a valedictory undertaking to draw together all the intellectual strands that underpin a distinguished career in this field; indeed Harber himself notes wryly (p.9) that he has only been able to complete a book such as this in his retirement, as beforehand it would have been irrelevant to the requirements of the REF.

Being liberated from such restraints allows Harber to explore freely a range of perspectives, drawing upon much of his own work, as well as collaborations with others within the UK and globally. Another advantage arising from his disdain for ‘returnability’ is that Harber can consciously pitch the publication as an accessible ‘textbook’ for students, while at the same time articulate and exemplify the need to grasp the complexities alluded to above.

The book is structured around an introductory overview, a theoretical section, a section on ideology (thus acknowledging that development and education are rarely values-free where they intersect), and a series of specific issues in development, including gender, corruption, religion, and HIV/AIDS. A particular strength is the use of evidence from empirical and contextualised case studies in the global South; these are deployed effectively to frame many of the most contentious aspects of theory and practice.

The spectre of colonialism haunts the field of development and lies at the heart of many of the dilemmas, paradoxes, and moral conundrums of development itself. Harber confronts these head on, using theoretical frames such as the ‘prismatic society’ (p73) to describe the transitional nature of many developing countries which are often caught between traditionalism and ‘modernisation’, as much in their educational systems as in their economic development. He recognises that this prismatic status often means that education itself plays a key role in reinforcing and reproducing ‘traditional’ cultural norms that can inhibit improvements in key educational, health and economic indicators.

Harber describes the negative impact of corruption on education in developing countries, and he also makes clear the essential connections between political and democratic development on the one hand; and broader social and economic
development on the other. Some theorists, following Fanon (cited in Dei, 2008) for example, might suggest that he does not go far enough in addressing the pernicious legacy of empire and colony and the social, political, economic, cultural and educational dislocations that continue to linger in its wake. However Harber’s principle concern appears to be informed by a pragmatic approach which is always balanced by alertness to the dangers and unjust consequences (both historic and contemporary) of attempts to impose external ‘solutions’ on indigenous issues.

As noted above, ‘development education’ has fallen somewhat out of favour as one of the myriad ‘adjectival educations’, however this book ought to be of considerable value to students and practitioners of the policies and practices that are its inheritors; global citizenship, and education for sustainability.

REFERENCES


Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault

Donald Gillies (2013) Oxon: Routledge
ISBN 978-0-415-63312-3 (pp. 160, £85.00 pb)

Reviewed by STEPHEN DAY

Educational Leadership and Michel Foucault is a surprisingly easy read, considering its subject matter. This book would be of interest to university academics, PhD students in education and the social sciences, as well as practitioners looking to enhance their understanding of leadership. In general, Gillies has produced a highly accessible introduction to the work of Michel Foucault and its relevance to education. In particular, he has managed expertly to distil the main concepts that many Foucault enthusiasts would recognise in a manner that renders them meaningful to the layman.

Chapter 1 presents the reader with a brief biography of Foucault and contextualises his work. This is helpful as it allowed me to get a feel for how Foucault’s personality and interests steered his academic career and influenced his thinking. In addition, it provides a skilfully written, yet brief, synopsis of
Foucault’s seminal works. This was particularly helpful to me as an academic new to the works of Foucault since it provides the necessary academic context for the arguments that Gillies subsequently advances in later chapters. Some may argue that this chapter could easily have been sacrificed without being detrimental to the focus and synthesis of Gillies’s thesis. However, I would suggest that Gillies has carefully considered his audience and has included this chapter to help the uninitiated.

Chapter 2 sets the main context for the arguments advanced in the remainder of the book. It also contains a neat rationale for the utility of a Foucauldian perspective focused on an analysis of educational leadership. It also offers a short synthesis of Gillies’s own thinking on how Foucauldian theory might be directed towards educational research. I really like his conceptualisation of ‘Foucault’s trident’ that is scepticism as stance, critique as the activity and problematization as the purpose of critique. I can see its utility as an analytical tool in many educational research contexts, particularly my own field of controversial socio-scientific discussion. Personally, I would have liked to read more about the ‘trident’, but I can see how this may have detracted from the main arguments being offered on educational leadership.

Chapter 3 offers an interesting discussion on educational leadership as discourse in which Gillies contextualises the literature within a Foucauldian perspective, providing a useful challenge to the concept of leadership. Gillies suggests that Foucault saw certain types of discourse within education as privileged while others are not and that certain types of individual become privileged and others not. I would suggest that this view of educational leadership is readily applicable to all forms of leadership regardless of context. I particularly identify with the critique of educational leadership from the analysis of related elements such as the formation of objects; concepts used to validate leadership; strategic choices made by leaders; processes of exclusion exercised by leaders; and the procedures of controlling and delimiting within the sphere of influence of the leader. I can see how these elements would be useful to scholars and leaders alike when theorising and analysing leadership within different educational contexts. The one thing that struck me was the possibility that this type of analysis could be useful for unpacking the complex nature of how educational leadership impacts upon educational outcomes. It might also offer a useful perspective for researching how the leadership culture impacts on the culture and ethos of different educational settings. However, the one aspect of educational leadership that was absent is a Foucauldian perspective on the leadership of learning (as opposed to organisation and management of education).

For a self-confessed novice to Foucault, Chapter 4 provides an easy to navigate discussion on power and educational leadership, drawing on Foucault’s suggestion that parallels exist between education, military training and prisons. Personally, I found this chapter to be enlightening and challenging in equal measure. Furthermore it stimulated a deep personal reflection regarding my own views as to the purpose(s) of education more broadly. Gillies’ unpacks Foucault’s conceptualisation of discipline and how discipline leads to docile bodies and synthesises how this perspective influences and impacts on how we view
educational leadership. I found the discussion on how educational leadership involves both the exercise of power and the application of disciplinary methods as well as how leaders themselves come to be subjected to disciplinary control and surveillance to be informative.

Chapter 5 presents a constructive discussion on how Foucault’s concept of governmentality can be employed when reflecting upon the discourse of educational leadership. Gillies argues that the educational leadership discourse has been shaped in such a way as to render leadership as relevant by suggesting that ‘schools, teachers pupils and students need to be constructed in particular ways for leadership to be an issue at all’. In addition, he suggests that the application of the concept of governmentality recognises that government exercised within leadership, the attempt to shape others’ conduct can differ depending on the governmental rationality that underpins the conduct. Foucauldian ethics opens up new perspectives on leadership helping to explain why leadership can be (and presumably is) practised in a variety of ways that may be diametrically opposed. It also provides a rationale for the argument that leadership cannot be reduced to a simple list of skills and tactics to be deployed since this would lead to some disturbing and even amoral approaches to educational management. Upon reflection, the main purpose of this chapter is to lay the conceptual groundwork for Chapter 6, written by Glenn Savage, which presents an empirical perspective for the concept of governmentality.

In this chapter, Savage argues that governmentality provides a useful analytical lens for understanding and connecting the macro and micro realms of government. The concept could be used to bridge these realms since it offers a broader conceptualisation of governance that does not focus solely on state structures, institutions and policies but frames governance as a more complex and pervasive set of processes. Savage illustrates this by examining and drawing parallels from interview data gathered from teachers and senior managers situated within two secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The interesting thing to note about these two schools is that they represent the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of reputation and pupil attainment amongst other objective measures. In my view, Savage skilfully draws upon the extant literature regarding the neoliberal positioning of education within a market narrative. Interestingly, he uses the term ‘advance liberal governance’ rather than neoliberal since he sees a clear distinction between these two terms. While I understand the distinction that he draws, I would suggest many academics would use the terms interchangeably. Throughout the reading of this chapter, I found myself asking the question does this illustration ring true with my experience within secondary education in Scotland? I recognise the themes that emerge from this research and the issues expressed by the interviewees and sympathise with their frustration. However, I do not think that the quasi-marketization of education expressed in this example is as prevalent in Scotland as it appears to be in Australia. This notwithstanding, the illustration exemplifies how the concept of governmentality can be applied by academics looking to scrutinise educational policy, practice and leadership in general.
Chapter 7 finishes off the book nicely with an interesting discussion focused on the criticisms of Foucauldian theory. It also provides the uninitiated with a useful synopsis of the main philosophical criticisms levied at Foucault. I personally found this chapter to be illuminating as it appealed to my sense of completing the circle. I can honestly say that I enjoyed reading this book and I would heartily recommend it.