
Research Methods for Pedagogy is one book in a series of Bloomsbury publications providing research information, insights and guidance for those researching within a variety of educational contexts. The aim of the series, edited by Melanie Nind, is to be more than a textbook of ‘how to do’. Rather it aims to provide a range of accessible and authoritative possibilities to inform the research design and methodological decisions of those researching in wide-ranging social science contexts, regardless of their levels of experience as researchers, or those associated with research in practice-rich contexts.

Along with Melanie Nind, Research Methods for Pedagogy is co-authored by Alicia Curtin and Kathy Hall. Melanie is Professor of Education at Southampton, co-director of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods and also co-editor of the International Journal of Research & Method in Education. She has vast experience of teaching and researching and her research interests align to focus particularly to focus upon inclusive and interactive pedagogies. Alicia lectures at University College, Cork and she utilises her knowledge of sociocultural theories from her work to explore a range of issues connected to educational contexts, such as language and literacy and professional work-based learning. Kathy is Professor of Education at University College, Cork. Her long trajectory of research has focussed upon pedagogy in its broadest sense and this experience infuses the depth and reach of the themes explored. The book is beautifully written with a flow and continuity that allows for no disjuncture to awkwardly suggest where one authorial ‘voice’ might begin, and another end.

The book is set out in a highly accessible format, beginning with a rich and detailed glossary of methods and approaches for research which are indicated as either covered in considerable depth consistently throughout the book, or as dealt with for specific purposes within particular chapters for specific ends. The positioning of the glossary at the beginning, rather than the end of the book, recognises ‘the convenience’ (p.4) of this to the reader. The short Introduction provides a clear and purposeful rationale for the paying of attention to a sociocultural understanding of pedagogy as operational within the ‘constraints and affordances of different contexts, values, knowledges and ways of knowing’ (p.2) of learning. It asserts the value and importance of methods of research for pedagogy that take place within particular contexts ‘for specific purposes related to understanding pedagogy’ (p.3), highlighting the desire of the authors to produce a text that can provide readers with tools and debates for researching pedagogy both in terms of what it is and what it does.
The remainder of the book is divided into three sections, each of which has its own concise and clear Introduction. Part One deals with ‘Conceptions of pedagogy and implications of research’; Part Two with ‘Researching pedagogy in context’; and Part Three with ‘Researching the hidden and hard to know’. The Conclusion to the book reminds the reader of its ambition to interrogate the relationship between ‘theoretical stance, pedagogic context and research approach’ (p.236) by drawing upon a range of case studies from wide ranging educational contexts, spaces and places by way of exemplification. Within the Conclusion, the authors stress that their theoretical stance on pedagogy means they agree on the interconnectedness of ‘methods of teaching and learning and methods of researching them’ which are always ‘overlapping and blurred’ (p. 237). They assert that in producing the book they have worked to push the boundaries of understandings of pedagogy and pedagogical methods of research, recognising that, ultimately, ‘pedagogy is hard to know’ (p.238).

The comprehensive ‘references’ section at the end of the book is testament to the range of researchers and research examples that are threaded throughout the text of each of the nine chapters. Most references relate to research conducted within the last 20 years, and much research cited and explored has been carried out since 2000. There are some notable and important exceptions, of course, by way of reference to the pedagogic and/or theoretical work of ‘The Greats’, namely, those such as Bernstein (1977), Bruner (1996), Foucault (1980), Freire (1970), Hooks (1994), Luke and Gore (1992), Rogoff (1995), Schön (1983), Van Maanen (1990) and Wenger (1998). The reader, especially one who may feel less secure in their sense of their own knowledge and judgement, is therefore provided with two things. The first of these is a secure sense of being ‘in touch’ with significant and recent pedagogic research. The second is to be enriched by a breadth of ontological and epistemological paradigmatic framings for pedagogic research. The authors stress that this is always value laden, but also pertinent to a wide range of different research contexts and questions. This is particularly helpful for the less confident or experienced researcher who can feel assured of this text as a trustworthy source and serious way to engage with ‘the dynamic relationship between theory and method’ (p.7).

Each chapter is constructed similarly with well set out titles and subtitles that give clear indications of what the reader can expect from each section, as well as summarising bullet points; providing easily comprehensible summative tables; and offering illustrative case studies of research highlighting particular aspects the pedagogic premise under scrutiny. There is always introductory text that relates three central themes of the book which are first set out in Chapter One. These concern the implications of research methods for pedagogy as the authors have conceptualised them: that is, as either ‘specified’, ‘enacted’, or ‘experienced’ dimensions of practice within a sociocultural framework. The first, ‘specified’ pedagogy, relates to the ways in which assumptions are made within particular times, spaces and places about what ought to be taught and learnt, for example, in terms of the appropriateness of a curriculum for a particular age group within school. The second, ‘enacted’ pedagogy refers to the persons who edify and bring to life, through what they do
in their everyday reality, the specified pedagogy. In this context of ‘enacted’ pedagogy, the identity and power of the enactor becomes important, especially in relation to the other actors around them. The third dimension, ‘experienced’ pedagogy, concerns the subjective experience of all actors, touched and shaped by specified and enacted pedagogy (which might include researchers, teachers and learners at any given moment).

I have recently found myself drawn to the section of the book focusing upon ‘Researching Pedagogy in context’ (p. 74) and especially to Chapter Four which is about ‘Researching pedagogy in early childhood settings’ (p. 77). I had been discussing and constructing a research bid with practitioner colleagues within a UK nursery and family centre. I had wanted to find the language and a clear conceptual framework that would allow me to explore an inquiry approach to our research with them. I found that the ‘Methods to explore practice’ (p.87) section of the chapter helped me to shape and share some ‘enacted’ aspects of pedagogy in ways that had previously eluded me. This meant that armed with some common understandings and shared terminology, my colleagues and I were then able to proceed to shaping our research study together on ‘gendering’ and use of space in children’s play and learning in the everyday. Similarly, the exemplifications from the section of the same chapter on ‘Methods to change practice’ has proved popular with my MA in Early Years Education students, who tell me that they especially appreciate ‘hearing the voice of’ Melanie Nind (in this example) to guide them through the case study of a particular piece of action research as illustrative of ‘experienced’ pedagogy with which she was involved. They enjoyed its feeling of ‘being there’ and felt that this was something they could imagine being a part of themselves.

This is a gem of a research methods book that honours the research backgrounds of Nind, Curtin and Hall through its interactive, inclusive and pedagogic approach to engaging the reader in her various guises whether as practitioner, student, or less/more experienced researcher. It is a book to ‘have on hand’ at all times as an aide-memoire. Assumptions about pedagogy abound and it is a term that can be applied freely and with abandon on educational research methods courses. This book confronts ‘pedagogy’ head on in all its nuance and complexity and relates it clearly to ‘theoretical stance, pedagogical context and research approach’ (p.236). There is no sleight of hand: the authors ‘appear’ often and in their own voice within the text itself, reflexively and ethically leading the reader through decision processes that have to be made in any research project that is so centrally concerned with thinking, being and doing, where decisions that have to be made are always value-laden and never ‘innocent’ (p.236). However, the text avoids being over-directive. Indeed, one of its pleasures is the way it leaves the reader with the sense of new possibilities of approaches to pedagogy in ways that can enrich and illuminate the practice of social methods research.

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