Book Review

Researching Education: perspectives and techniques
G.K. VERMA & K. MALLICK, 1999
London: Falmer Press.
329 pp., ISBN 0 750705 30 2, £16.99

This book sits squarely within the genre of introductory methods texts written for those who have an interest in educational research. As such the book deals with and discusses the key issues that embryonic educational researchers need to address, whether undergraduates or professionals studying for a postgraduate qualification. The text is written with the novice researcher in mind and offers to steer them through the processes involved in educational research as well as introducing them to the dilemmas and methodological issues that they will face when carrying out and planning their own research. The book discusses methods of research, notions of theory, the nature of educational research and approaches to it, available research tools and so on. A good and valuable overview is provided, albeit one that is located very firmly in an empiricist orientation. By this I have in mind the recourse to empirical evidence to secure, test and check theoretical argument.

The book also attempts to map the field of educational research, with one chapter being dedicated to this purpose. In some respects this is a thankless task but for the novice researcher it may serve to delineate the field and thus help them firm up their ideas as to what counts as educational research. In this way the novice researcher will be helped to formulate their research project. However against this lies the accusation that any attempt to map the field of educational research will be at best limited and partial. Clearly the authors are well aware of this critique. Indeed, throughout the book they show an awareness of and offer the reader signals as to what they have left out of their account. Yet the book is marked by both a particular understanding of the research process as well as by a specific conceptualisation of what counts as educational research. Perhaps slightly unfairly, I think in both instances this is characterised by narrowness and closure.

In the closing chapter of their book Verma & Mallick bring together their discussion of the nature of educational research and comment on the role of the teacher in this activity. They call for a research practice that is attentive to the needs of teachers and that places this group’s agenda at the centre of the debate. Arguments drawn from David Hargreaves and Michael Bassey are used to support and legitimate their argument. They comment critically upon ‘academic’
researchers pre-occupation with the esoteric and the tendency for theoretical obfuscation and faddishness in such work. For the authors educational research is ultimately focused on:

issues and problems related to learning and the social, emotional and personal development in the classroom. (1999, p. 178)

Clearly such a standpoint is quite valid and can gather support not only from the strictures of Hargreaves and Bassey but from a wide range of educational researchers and writes. Nevertheless, I would suggest that such a categorisation of research is rather limited. This is particularly the case in the current conjuncture. The move towards understandings of lifelong learning, the blurring of institutional boundaries, the attempt to pedagogise family relations are all instances which to my mind are appropriate arenas for educational research. I would also suggest that our lived cultures are also sites of pedagogic relations. Clearly the authors recognise the debates and controversies surrounding our understanding of educational research, one only has to consider their discussion in chapter three. There is, however, a tendency within the book to understand educational research as being centred upon teaching and learning within educational institutions with an almost unstated assumption that these will be schools. This is unfortunate. Indeed, those of us who work in further and higher education will be aware of increasing interest in teaching and learning in these sectors. This could have been taken up in an interesting extension of their concluding arguments. In many of the new universities there is a real attempt to encourage academics to research their own teaching practice. This is echoed in further education where there is a call for research within and for the sector by practitioners. Such developments talk back to notions of the reflective practitioner, and the nature of educational research. It would have been valuable to signal these issues and relate them to the concerns of the book.

Within the book there is a recognition of methodological plurality, mention being made of positivism and allied scientifically orientated methodologies as well as interpretative paradigms and so on. Scant attention is given to issues derived from feminist research methodologies or from current debates derived from post-structuralism and post-modernism. On one level this is quite understandable given the orientation of the authors to educational research and their conceptualisation of the needs of their preferred readership. The book aims to be of use to teachers. However, there is a tension. The authors are well aware of the debates surrounding values, objectivity, the theory laden nature of research and so. These are matters that are raised and discussed in the text. Yet at one and the same time the call for rigour, reliability, validity, triangulation is present. I guess the authors’ position comes close to what could be described as post-positivist. Whilst the notion of objectivity is deeply problematic, through engaging in rigorous systematic research that addresses and takes steps to ensure reliability and validity, the results of such inquiry can be accepted. Even in the case of interpretative research a similar logic is present.

Regardless of our position on post-modernism, post-structuralism and feminism
I think it is incumbent on those writing this sort of introductory text to address the questions that such perspectives pose for the educational researcher. Clearly the way this is accented will vary but I do not think excluding such issues is appropriate as these perspectives offer a particular take and understanding of educational processes. A strategic refusal to engage with these offers learners an impoverished engagement with educational research. If nothing else these perspectives may serve to unsettle and challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions about research.

This is a useful introductory text that may be of interest to undergraduate and postgraduate student. I could see myself suggesting to students that they read various sections or chapters of the book. For example, those who need a brief and well-written introduction to the use of statistics could be directed to the relevant chapter, or those who are interested in an account of the history of educational research. The book also contains a valuable glossary of terms, but as with all introductory texts this would need to be complemented by a wider range of reading.

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