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Liz Browne^a

^a Oxford Brookes University

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Review

Education policy research: design and practice at a time of rapid change. Edited by Helen Gunter, David Hall and Colin Mills. Pp 208. London: Bloomsbury. 2014. £75 (hbk). ISBN 9781472514394.

This book is current, relevant, has practical application, poses difficult questions and above all records the learning journey of a range of established and emerging researchers. In providing the introduction and conclusion to 11 very different chapters, which explore a wide range of educational contexts, the editors have produced a text that will fulfil a range of purposes. Each chapter represents the thoughts and research reflections of the doctoral learner, whether they have completed their study and are now rooted in a research career, whether they work as practitioners in a range of educational contexts including schools and higher education or whether their concerns are mainly associated with theorising research as process and product.

The book could be read from cover to cover, or dipped into and out of. It is divided into three distinct sections: part one presenting research carried out by four established researchers, part two records the work of those positioned as insider or outsider researchers and in some cases negotiating the terrain between these two localities and part three that focuses on researchers as the producers of new theory. This book is an essential read for the doctoral student as it maps the doctoral learner journey, offers new ideas and models for research and addresses a number of current challenges facing education in the current times of turbulence and change.

But, this is more than a 'how to do it' text. It is both practical and theoretical, it is challenging and critical, thought-provoking and innovative whilst at the same time offering new knowledge to support the policy research arena as it grapples with new challenges. This book illustrates why research matters. Each chapter offers a deep intellectual analysis of ideas and action, explores processes of thinking through ideas, testing out recognised theories and developing new models

In the foreword to the book, Michael Apple reminds us that the book reaches our shelves during a period of complexity in the field of education. The experiences of change and challenge recorded, critiqued and analysed in the text offer insight into professional lives of those working, researching and theorising during a time of rapid reform. Indeed, one of the strengths of this text is the insight it gives into the new relationships, new structures and new practices that are emerging as universities, schools, local authorities and students adapted to a changing educational landscape.

The theme of change dominates the chapters with Chapter 1 focused on new models of collaborative working in local authority organisational structures; Chapter 2 explores the role of the researcher within the research context, problematizing the role when research is carried by a researcher researching her own working context during times of change. A number of chapters explore emerging partnerships using a range of research

methods and addressing the role of the researcher. Chapter 4 highlights the dilemmas of a Finnish researcher researching as a legal ‘alien’. Chapter 5 identifies the complexity of gaining access for research purposes and the associated requirement for trust when developing research relationships.

Chapter 6 offers biographical evidence of the leadership journey travelled by a primary school lead teacher as she tries to gain the trust of her colleagues as they overcome a bruising Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection. The next chapter uses auto-ethnographic methods to map the career journey of a school-based practitioner, who works to inform the development of new policy and then becomes a critical education researcher.

In a third section of the text, the research recorded takes on a more theoretical approach to evaluate School–University Research Partnerships, the identity of the academic researcher and issues of virtue and ethics as part of a critique of New Labour’s modernising ideology. Chapter 8 in this section explores the role of master’s level study as part of the training route for ‘Teach First’ recruits into teaching. The policy context is delineated and a small-scale research project designed to investigate what value and benefits teachers identified from participating in M level research. This research identifies the benefits of M level study not only in the opportunity it provided to engage with issue and debate but for the resilience it gave the practitioners to deal with the growing pressures and tensions developing in schools as a culture of performativity takes hold.

This book represents a worthy endeavour in presenting the research interests of a range of practitioners and theorists. It is valuable not only for the insight it gives into the research journey of the 11 authors whose research is presented here, but it also offers concrete and research informed evidence of the changing educational landscape and the impact of policy iterations on the professional lives of those who work in the field of education. It should be a text that graces all university library shelves and one identified as compulsory reading for all Ph.D. and Ed Doctoral students as they plan their research design. I would also go so far as to say that it sets the standard for high-quality student research. Gunter and her fellow editors have produced a book that clearly delineates the quality and rigour that all universities should expect from doctoral-level research. They have set the standard to which all researchers should aspire when they start on their doctoral journey.

Oxford Brookes University

LIZ BROWNE

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