

Doing Research in Education: Theory and practice, edited by Ioanna Palaologou, David Needham, and Trevor Male

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This book seemed written for me. As an EdD research student, I am part of its declared target audience of education students on undergraduate, postgraduate, and research degree education programmes. Now in my third year, I'm putting together my final research proposal, at this stage suitably floundering about with how I can keep it focused without skipping off into fields of tangential delights. So Palaologou *et al.*'s *Doing Research in Education: Theory and Practice* comes as a welcome read – both as a reminder of theoretical issues to consider when writing my research proposal, as well as (hopefully) providing some practical advice.

The 'overarching aim' of the book is 'to provide advice and guidance to successfully engage in a research project in education' (p.x). In this, it is positioning itself at some distance from other weightier SAGE tomes, such as *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), which monopolize the bookshelves of my university library and have acted as inadvertent stumbling blocks around the floor of my house. Yet this notion of being for 'advice and guidance' is one of two paradoxical cruxes the book faces: short enough to produce helpful broad brushstrokes of the terrain, but – at 288 pages – not long enough to develop the detail and analysis that, at times, feels missing. The other paradox: it contains a significantly useful and rich range of writing styles and substantive content, but also a difference between chapters that, on occasion, seems a little too blunt.

An instance of this is in the contrast between the first two chapters. Needham's chapter, 'The purpose of research', which opens the book, has a welcoming, reassuring tone, peppered with exclamation marks (p.2), and with the word 'exciting' popping up to gee the reader on. This contrasts with the second chapter by Ma, 'Making sense of research methodology', where the tone and content lurch into a language of ontology and axiology. It's a far cry from Chapter 1, no less welcome for me, but one that may disorientate those new to research. In contrast again, Needham's tone in Chapter 4 seems to reflect his business background; it is infused with the language of 'project management' (p.81), 'audit' (p.83), 'benchmark' (p.87), and 'outputs' (p.95), to the point where I felt I was consulting a business report. This sense of differing voices is stark at times, containing both a richness of different perspectives, and an underlying need for a unifying editorial voice to moderate them.

There are many highlights – with some things that I actually went on to try myself – and, taken as a whole, there were enough areas of new knowledge and ideas to keep me reading. Palaologou's 'ethical helix' model (p.48), for instance, helpfully reinforces the idea of ethics being embedded throughout the research; and the 'risky shift phenomena' (Connolly: 142) in working with focus groups was interesting to consider. Some of the 'Activity' suggestions were framed well; I found the discussion around 'What makes a good research question?' (Sood: 103) an instance of this, with different possibilities provided, and the idea of looking at them further through different lenses, such as feminist, cross-cultural, and the notion of justice, really intriguing. In practical terms, I also found the suggested Gantt chart (Beauchamp: 269) helpful in providing a structure for planning and managing my own research, leaving other plans I had started to draw up discarded in its wake.

But some areas are more problematic. There is a consistent tone throughout to reassure researchers, but at times this seems to say little more than what is common sense, sugar-coating ideas, and only dipping a tentative toe into the complexity of research. On p.93, for instance, we are invited by Pinnington-Wilson and Needham to 'attempt a critical path analysis, albeit a simple

one'. Why not something more complex and purposeful? A number of chapters also contain a bulk of text referencing things that students at this stage should already be familiar with; obvious statements such as 'a milestone is a key checkpoint in a project' (Pinnington-Wilson and Needham: 87) are a recurring feature. In fairness, this perhaps reflects the book's attempts to speak to both undergraduates and doctoral students; but, even so, some of this 'common sense' text could have been edited.

Chapter 12 on 'Analysing quantitative data' seemed the most difficult to engage with, dealing with an area that is markedly different to most of the rest of the book in just a handful of pages. Spencer reassuringly identifies an issue of 'quantiphobia', a fear of working with quantitative methods, but then descends into using capital letters at one point, as if speaking very slowly or shouting at the reader for not comprehending: 'COUNT UP THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE OF EACH HEIGHT...' (p.218) it starts. For me it seemed patronizing, but others may find this style helpful. The chapter isn't helped by a graph with data clearly missing from it (Figure 12.4 on p.217) – making the discussion about it a little superfluous – or by the name-dropping of a variety of statistical measures, such as the Chi square test, with little explanation or development: not so helpful for quantiphobes. My own research is following a mixed methods approach, so for quantitative methods I had previously picked up a copy of *Statistics for Dummies* (Rumsey, 2011) – which, despite its title, was actually very useful, treading a line between complexity and accessibility for beginners in 370 pages in a way that a 36-page chapter in this book cannot reach. But maybe this isn't the intention.

Other more niggling issues include occasional typos, a tendency to repeat ideas between chapters (e.g. on Questionnaires), and a need to be more structurally consistent, such as in the use of highlighted definitions that occur on several occasions in some chapters and none in others. But this isn't to belie some sections that were both theoretically and pragmatically helpful and informative, and made me feel that time was worth spent reading them. Palaiologou's Chapter 3 on 'Ethical issues' and Male's Chapter 10, on 'Analysing qualitative data' were two such standouts; the latter's use of the first person felt as if the reader was being helpfully guided by an experienced researcher, and it contained some really useful advice about the flexible use of language (p.181).

All told, the start of Beauchamp's final chapter seemed to summarize one of the key tensions of this book; it makes clear that 'In this chapter, it is only possible to consider key ideas and approaches ...' (p.264). As an outline, especially for first-time researchers, and for nuggets of really useful advice and considerations on a range of issues, this book is a helpful addition as a starting point; but to explore ideas and issues in more depth will require searching in other directions.

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References

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