

Education Research: The Basics

Michael Hammond (with Jerry Wellington)

Routledge, London (2021)

The aim of this book is to give the reader insight into the work of education researchers. It looks at how education research is carried out; the purposes it serves; how the research literature can be read; and what kind of themes researchers cover. It is suitable for anyone studying education as a subject, for practitioners concerned with developing their practice and for the general reader who simply wants to know more about education and how it is researched.

The book is organised around a series of chapters which cover addressing problems of practice; generalising about education; describing and categorising actions and strategies; explaining and theorising in education; advocating educational change. A seventh chapter looks at the contribution of education research and sets out some present-day challenges.

We now describe each chapter in more detail.

The book proper begins with chapter two in which we look at research carried out by practitioners in order to address practical problems of teaching and learning. This research often falls under the banner of action research and we look at the strengths and limitations of action research as well as other approaches such as classroom study and reflective practice. We introduce three case studies to illustrate the action research tradition and look at other approaches to practice research including lesson study and action learning. In this chapter we look too at research methods including observation, interviewing and focus groups.

In chapter three we move to a very different research tradition, one offering generalisations about education very often based on the precise measurement of learning outcomes. We begin by looking at Randomised Control Trials which report on differences between groups who have access to an intervention and those that do not. We introduce further research methods including meta-analyses and systematic reviews, and outline how comparisons are made by measuring strength of correlation and effect sizes. We take in international comparisons in

student outcomes in the work carried out by The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Finally, we look at recent developments in Big Data research. Attempts to generalise about education give us a big picture but a limitation is that we can lose sight of the detail of classroom life.

In chapter four we look at smaller scale studies which aim to provide this detail. We illustrate the importance of categorising what we see (e.g. observations), what we hear (e.g. classroom talk) and what we are told (e.g. interviews). Through categorising it is possible to compare and contrast different classrooms and to see the consequences of actions for teachers and students. We introduce studies on teacher questioning, classroom talk and school leadership and conclude with a note on the varied nature of teacher knowledge.

In chapter five we look back at the previous chapters by discussing the different kinds of explanations put forward in education research. We recognise the contributions from different types of research tradition including small scale case study; practice research; large scale meta-analysis and systematic review. Each approach comes with distinctive strengths and limitations and we argue that using a mix of approaches will give us a fuller picture. We also introduce the idea of theorising about education as a way of organising ideas around more abstract concepts. Here we discuss the different meanings given to theory and we see the benefit of theorising as offering greater transferability. Finally we look at interdisciplinary research. We conclude that while researchers can learn from other disciplines, education research has a distinctive concern for addressing practical problems.

In chapter six we move on to look at those advocating change in how education is organised and how teachers do their work. We look at six kinds of advocacy neoliberal; conservative; liberal; reformist, progressive and radical. The first two of these are often seen as politically conservative, sceptical of the role of the state in education and in favour of a more directed, deductive form of teaching. However, there are important differences. Neoliberals focus more on the organisation of systems and the importance of free markets, while conservatives are more interested in cultural aspects of education, in particular the protecting of a common culture that can be handed down across generations. Liberal educationalists, meanwhile, see the wider goal of education as a preparation for living a good life while reformers concentrate their arguments on developing a more appropriate curriculum, one that carries greater creativity and relevance. Progressives are concerned to recognise the rights of the child and see education as a natural

unfolding while radicals draw attention to inequality in society and want education to play a role in addressing this.

Chapter seven looks back at the book as a whole. We recognise the varied nature of education research both in terms of what is studied and the methods used to study it, but argue that education researchers have a distinctive interest in how we can help learners to go from one way of understanding culture, society, or the physical world to one that is better. We reaffirm the importance of education and the value of education and set out some of the things that education research tells us. Finally, we raise five challenges for those conducting education research today.

We have written this book as we believe education matters. Education provides opportunities for better economic prospects and allows us as individuals to make more informed decisions as to how we want to lead our lives. We hope that by reading this book you will get a better idea about education research, how to read it critically; how to conduct it intelligently and how to contribute to wider discourse. We ask questions as to the nature of educational research, what it can and cannot achieve, how it has been carried out over the years, where and why it has had an impact. We discuss some of the questions which have pre-occupied education researcher for many years such as: What does good or effective teaching and learning look like? Why do some students achieve higher learning outcomes than others? What is special about educational research? How and why should students be assessed? What is the difference between informal and formal learning and which is more effective? Can practitioners carry out their own research? What relationship should teachers have with literature? Is there any such thing as a learning style? What does successful group work look like? Does progressive education represent a better or worse alternative to what many experience in school? However we are exemplifying these debates, we are not offering a comprehensive guide to each and every issue. In similar vein we cannot in a short book like this cover every context in which education takes place. We do present as wide a variety of contexts as we can, for example leadership in schools in Vietnam; classroom talk in England, early years education in Italy; the apprenticeship of tailors in Liberia; future studies in higher education in Germany. And, as far as it is natural to do so, we talk about the work of practitioners as well as teachers to indicate that we are interested in many different roles in education – lecturer, instructor, teaching assistant, administrator, mentor, trainer and so on – and we refer to students to cover early years and school aged children as well as learners in post compulsory settings. When we refer to classrooms, these could be teaching spaces in

school, seminar rooms in university or nursery settings.

We hope this book helps you see your educational experiences, and perhaps engage in your own research project, from a wider perspective.