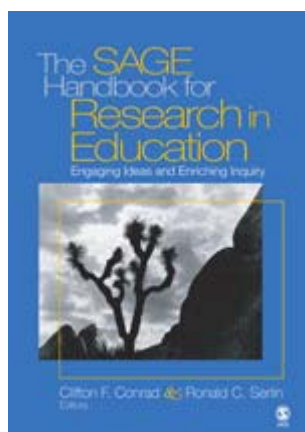


Book Review



Sage Handbook for Research in Education: Engaging Ideas and Enriching Inquiry

by Clifton Conrad and Ronald C. Serlin (Eds)
London: Sage Publications (2006)

Hardcover £95.00 (ISBN 9781412906401)

Review by **Spyros Themelis**

Clifton Conrad and Ronald Serlin, the editors of the 'Sage Handbook for Research in Education' (2006), set themselves a difficult challenge: to present 'detailed accounts of successful episodes of scientific activity in a variety of fields, from a variety of perspectives, in a manner that highlights the difficult exploration of ideas and actively involves the readers' (p xiii).

Their key aim is to promote the quest of educational inquiries that are driven by the pursuit of ideas. In other words, they want to see ideas permeating all stages of educational research and not as isolated episodes in the course of an inquiry. The different ideas that can inform each stage of a research project are discussed in the six sections of the handbook.

In the first section, an intriguing yet often neglected issue in educational inquiry is discussed: the consideration of the prospective audience(s) and the key stakeholders in the inquiry. This is examined in relation to the purposes of the study and the influence exerted by the stakeholders concerned, not least the policy community and the educational research community.

The second section of the book deals with a variety of issues from different areas of educational inquiry ranging from educational leadership, counselling psychology, higher education and comparative education. The aim of the chapter is to provide an understanding of issues pertinent to equal educational opportunities as well as to inform the reader about the structures that may impede or promote these opportunities. It is in this section that some of the most interesting chapters of the book are to be found, such as Chapter 11 about students' and parents' 'unheard voices'.

The third section of the book is dedicated to issues relevant to formulating and framing research problems. Each one of the three chapters gives insights to areas that are familiar to most doctoral students: the researcher's position in their inquiry, how to develop ideas that are interesting to explore and how to turn a 'burning problem' into a researchable issue.

Section four aims to challenge some of the orthodoxies in educational research. All four chapters highlight crucial epistemological and methodological issues. These range from the quest for 'truth', to identifying and framing research problems, from conceptualising and conducting educational research to the role of sampling and its importance in achieving rigour.

All those actively involved in educational research might find section five very useful. It deals with key stages in the conduct of an inquiry and discusses, quite vigorously in my view, some salient issues that researchers face. One of them pertains to the researcher's various roles that surface in empirical research. Thus, from researcher they become the inquirer, the data collector and, ultimately, the person responsible for constructing data, producing inferences

and turning their findings into conclusions. All these aspects are critically discussed in order to problematise and inform the reader about possible tensions and challenges.

The final part of the book, section six, deals with the end stage in research process: writing and disseminating its findings. This is approached from the viewpoint of the 'voices' that are represented during the writing up of the study and the intricacies of communicating research, especially when the media is involved. Finally, the book reconsiders some of the issues posed in its first chapters, such as the role of ideas in writing, representing and disseminating findings.

Overall, this book makes a timely and much welcomed contribution to empirical educational research. It is timely because currently researchers find themselves between two unnecessarily competing approaches to researching educational topics: on the one hand, inquiries that give preponderance to the primacy of methods and, on the other, studies that endlessly deconstruct the possibilities of social scientists reaching some understanding of reality. The publication of the book is to be welcomed because it attempts to put ideas at the forefront of educational inquiry rather than merely to discuss methods and tools in conducting research. For ideas and theories are paramount in understanding (educational) reality and have to be constantly revisited, challenged and reformulated if we are to achieve such an understanding.