

Book Review



Key Issues for Education Researchers

By Diana Burton and Steve Bartlett
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Reviewed by **Maria Savva**

Those in the early part of their research career will find *Key Issues for Education Researchers* to be an ideal supplementary text. This 168-page book is particularly user-friendly when compared to the voluminous content of many education research books currently on the market. Chapters are logically organized and provide explanations which are easily understood. Each chapter also offers both examples and student activities intended to facilitate understanding. This interactive component makes the book a particularly good match for the teaching of undergraduate or postgraduate students preparing to conduct small-scale research studies.

This text does not take for granted any prior knowledge and thus begins by defining research and its varied purposes. A British context is used to explore key movements in the education research field, including the rise of action research, school improvement and practitioner research. In addition to providing a historical context, chapters in the first half of the book explore fundamental research concepts related to social perspectives, research paradigms and ethical issues. The initial chapters, therefore, establish the essential foundations necessary to make informed choices about research methods. For example, the commonly used but sometimes confusing terms of 'ontology' and 'epistemology' are clarified. Additionally, individual perspectives and their role in framing research studies are examined. While the first half of the book deals largely with historical foundations and conceptual frameworks, the second half of the book is largely aimed at exploring the various research tools which can be deployed to gather data. Four chapters cover some of the more commonly used research methods of experiments, questionnaires, interviews and observations. Two additional chapters address some of the less explored methods, including research biographies/logs and the use of existing documents. All methods chapters provide visual examples and student activities that are intended to prompt critical thinking through practical opportunities. While research methods are presented separately by chapter, suggestions are provided throughout the book on how multiple approaches can be linked to add both depth and breadth to research studies.

Questionnaires are one of the more commonly used research methods. Reasons why researchers choose questionnaires and the multiple forms they may take on are explored. Multiple strategies and techniques aimed at gaining high response rates are reviewed within the parameters of required ethical standards. The appearance, design and placement of questions on questionnaires is also reviewed, particularly the role such features play in encouraging participation and completion of questionnaires. Interviews are explored next, with a look at differences between structured or unstructured interview formats. The importance of interview skills including the quality and nature of questioning, listening skills,

body language and the setting are addressed as well as the various methods that can be used to record interviews. These methods may involve the use of digital recorders, which often require lengthy transcription of audio or they may, alternatively, involve handwritten notations which risk losing potentially important interview details. The process of selecting respondents and the analysis of interview data are also discussed. Another commonly used instrument in research is that of individual and small group observation. Information on how to structure different types of observations and gather data are discussed in detail, with sample forms of observation schedules provided. These forms include a classroom layout plan as well as individual and small group observation schedules. Analysis of observations, in addition to the strengths and weaknesses of data collection using this method are also explored.

Some of the less commonly used research methods are also presented in this book. One chapter is dedicated to the use of research biographies and logs to conduct research. Biographies are presented not as factual accounts but as reconstructions of the self and others via the process involved in choosing particular elements over others, emphasizing certain actions over others, and generally inferring motive and meaning within the broader context of a person's life. An example of a research biography and how it is used to synthesize and present data is provided. Along similar lines, research diaries and logs (which are shortened forms of diaries) are also examined as a way of creating written accounts of people's feelings, reactions and changes over time. Such diaries or logs can be written at various intervals by students, teachers or the researcher and can provide interesting accounts of developments. Finally, using existing documents as sources of data for education research is also discussed. Examples of documents are policy statements, mission statements, published curriculum, inspection reports, student grade-reports and textbooks. This section provides multiple examples and case studies, including an example of a textbook analysis. It further provides an outline of the research process when using such a method. Advantages and disadvantages of using extant documents are also addressed in this section.

The book closes with a chapter on the writing up of research work and final conclusions. Key areas of a research paper are covered including the construction of an abstract, research questions and title. Other parts of a research paper such as the research design, sample and methods are also discussed along with the analysis of findings and conclusions. Finally, the aesthetic appearance of final papers, including proof reading, spell checks, font-size, line spacing and correct formatting are also discussed as important aspects of research which will aid the reader in focusing on the research content as opposed to distracting aesthetic errors.

While this book is ideal for undergraduate and graduate students, researchers in more advanced stages also stand to benefit from its content. This book offers a chance to 'go back to basics' which can be a refreshing exercise even for the most seasoned professional. This text may also prompt more experienced researchers - often set in their preferred methods - to consider some of the less common methods as a way to compliment and add new dimensions to their research.