
Book Reviews

'Observing and planning in early childhood settings: Using a socio-cultural approach'

Marilyn Flear & Carmel Richardson, *Early Childhood Australia*, Watson ACT, 2004, 60 pages, ISBN0-9751935-2-X, AUD\$37.95.

Observing and planning in early childhood settings: Using a socio-cultural approach both affirms and problematises 'usual practice' within Australian early childhood education settings. It focuses in particular on observation of individuals as the basis of planning. Practices associated with observation based planning have their roots in 'scientific' theories of child development that promulgate progress from childhood to adulthood as movement through a uniform and compartmentalised, linear sequence of stages. As they have in much of Europe, the United Kingdom and North America, these theories and the practices that have grown out of them, have achieved a taken-for-granted status within Australian early childhood education settings. 'Early childhood curriculum focuses on observations of the individual child. ... Individual programming is commonplace in most childcare centres and many preschools throughout Australia' (p. 31). Attending to current concerns and trends and bringing together the authors' research 'on the theory and practice of observing and planning from a socio-cultural perspective', 'this book is about re-framing how we observe children' (p. 6). 'Socio-cultural assessment' the authors claim 'moves the focus from a deficit view to a much more powerful and useful assessment practice for informing teaching and learning practices' (p. 23).

Clearly familiar with the origins, intentions and pitfalls of existing practices within early childhood settings, the authors use this familiarity as a well prepared canvas on which to illustrate a much needed shift from an often exclusive focus on individuals to a focus on the interpersonal and socio-cultural dynamics of groups. Significantly, these groups include the teacher and other participating adults. This shift of focus to include the speech, actions and decision-making of the teacher, gives what the authors call a 'socio-cultural approach', implicit resonances with 'critically reflective practice'.

The authors' call for a shift in the observational gaze to the way adults interact with the child – 'what they say, suggest, support, model or do for the child' (p. 20) is explicitly linked to Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development. While having effective pedagogical implications this link could well prove to be a limitation. Vygotsky's theory, like those of his counterparts, is focussed on the development of

‘the individual’. This enabling limit seems evident in the observational exemplars provided throughout the book. Even as these exemplars contain evident differences from what might be considered ‘usual’ they do not fully illustrate how, ‘our observations need to include the “fluid nature” of the learning sequence – the context and the activities over a sustained sequence’ (p. 20). In part this appears to be an effect of using observational formats that are framed by restrictive predetermined categories.

Of particular interest throughout this text are the excerpts from the authors’ research with Indigenous Australians. These excerpts not only highlight and attend to some of the assumptions that underlie ‘usual practice’ in early childhood settings – particularly teacher-child interactions, they illustrate the efficacy of direct transcription of reflective speech episodes as a form of observational data collection.

Teachers are well intentioned and, within particular circumstances and historico-social conditions apply a common raft of generalised practices. Combined with high levels of compliance with legislative guidelines, it is usual for teachers to assume that the quality of their intentions adheres to the quality of their practice. The research and propositions of this treatise provide a timely ‘scaffold’ for undoing our resistance to questioning, problematising and changing what is familiar, common and seems to work.

Reflection, self-reflection and critical reflection require and inspire courage and confidence. When teachers are operating within their comfort zone rather than their ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ and children, parents and validators are happy and approving, to suggest that change is needed, that there is room for improvement, is likely to be met with some resistance. ‘Applying a socio-cultural approach to observing children requires teachers to change their world view’ (p. 26). Correspondingly, it challenges teachers to recognise that their worldview is not universally shared. This concise monograph will be of interest to teachers and teacher educators who are interested in revitalising practice and changing perspectives.

Dr Sharn Rocco
School of Education
James Cook University

Doing Quantitative Research in Education with SPSS

Daniel Muijs, Sage Publications, London 2004, 228 pages, ISBN: 0-7619-4382-X/0-7619-4383-8 (pbk), AUD \$41.95

The perspective that I bring to this book review is shaped by my studies in education and psychology, school-based classroom teaching, and more recently my early-career experiences of both educational and psychological research (particularly using SPSS).

Research methods are typically not an integral component of teacher education programs, even in the final years of study when some students are preparing to extend their studies to Honours and/or postgraduate research projects. Indeed, some undergraduate education students are not aware of the relevance and importance of research in education, believing that it has no purpose in the school or classroom context. In discussions of the particular needs of their communities, school- and faculty-based educators often formulate useful research questions but the capacity to develop and answer these questions can be limited by the deemed complexity of quantitative research methods and moreover the language used to explain them.

Muijs' text is appropriate as an introduction to quantitative research, particularly for students and researchers in education with little or no experience of quantitative methods. It would be suitable as a key reference for introductory research methods courses, and as recommended reading for research students early in considerations of research design. For beginners, it is a concise and practical introduction, and for researchers with some experience it is a useful resource for refreshing and referencing one's knowledge.

This book boasts a number of intended – and successful – features. Firstly, Muijs' practical approach, with realistic examples from educational settings and real databases, will be warmly welcomed by students and school-based researchers. Secondly, the language of the text is clear and uncomplicated, with minimal emphasis on mathematical formulae, countering the many misconceptions that quantitative research is 'all about the numbers'. Thirdly, Muijs' user-friendly guide to using SPSS is accurate in its instructions and in its translations of the various output, and is not laden with jargon, excessive figures and page cross-referencing. Fourth, but not finally, the interactive nature of the text, which comes with online databases that allow users to experiment with the concepts and techniques and find answers to the questions at the end of each chapter, allows the reader to create their learning experience. As suggested these are just a few of the features this book has to offer. This review will proceed through an overview of the text, and will highlight further points of conceptual and methodological interest.

Chapter one provides an introduction to the two dominant paradigms with regards to research methodology, with a clear and easy-to-read summary of the general arguments, techniques, assumptions and common misconceptions surrounding research methodology selection. Chapter two clearly describes the differences between experimental, non-experimental and quasi-experimental research including the advantages and disadvantages of each, and it also delineates the steps and considerations involved in designing an experimental or quasi-experimental project. Chapter three covers the techniques, considerations and assumptions involved in non-experimental designs such as survey research, observational research and analyses of existing databases. Chapter four addresses the important concepts of validity and reliability, introducing the reader to notions of generalisability, conceptualisation, construct and model development, and latent and manifest variables. This chapter also explains the procedures of hypothesis testing, and the role of probability and statistical significance, and balances these techniques and the associated assumptions with further techniques for consideration such as confidence intervals and effect size measures. Chapter five provides an introduction to SPSS and the database that will be used through the remainder of the text to demonstrate the various data and statistical analyses.

The following chapters of the book proceed through the various statistical techniques involved in analysing data. Chapter six explores the early descriptive stages of 'eyeballing the data', such as using frequency distributions and univariate statistics. This chapter also discusses the levels of measurement involved in data analysis, briefly highlighting the debate surrounding the strengths of continuous variables and Rasch analysis. Chapter seven explains the fundamentals of bivariate analysis, including cross-tabulations, chi-square tests and t-tests, with special mentions of the importance of, and techniques for, measuring effect size particularly when considering statistical significance. Chapter eight refers to analyses of the relationships between continuous variables and between ordinal variables, succinctly explaining correlation coefficients, and associated limitations. Chapter nine extends from earlier chapters the notions of modelling and prediction in its discussion of multivariate analyses, highlighting different strategies for testing models. Chapter ten focuses on the use and assumptions of ANOVA, along with the utility of post hoc testing and the measure of effect size. Chapter eleven picks up the threads of chapters four and nine, extending the theory of data modelling to multilevel modelling (MLM) and structural equation modelling (SEM). This chapter is effective as a culmination of the various concepts and analyses discussed in the book, as it re-addresses notions of sampling, standard error, prediction, relationships, direct effects and latent variables and places these in the context of path analysis, MLM and SEM.

Overall, this book addresses the underlying theories relating to quantitative research methods in a compact manner, moderating the complex language of research design, methodology and statistics. The chapters are supported by useful summary sections, enthusiastic recommendations for further reading, and examples and exercises that functionally relate to school issues and contexts. This text invites beginners into educational research in a light-hearted and at times humorous manner – just what is needed at some of the more overwhelming moments in the learning curve!

Carissa Donovan
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney

The Untested Accusation. Principals, Research Knowledge and Policy Making in Schools

Bruce Biddle & Lawrence Saha, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland, USA, 2005, 320 pages, ISBN 1-57886-193-4, \$30.95US

This book is a well written and timely defense of educational research and the levels of impact research has on practice and what some call 'the real world'. Educational research is under attack again in Australia with the national government set to limit the independence of the Australian Research Council and strengthen the relationship between funding and productivity, a relationship full of tensions for social sciences like Education. The premise that these attacks rely on is that most educational research is a waste of time because no one outside small cliques of researchers read it, it has no relevance to what happens in schools, it is too slow to have any meaning for policy making and educational research has serious flaws. These 'untested accusations' are shown by Biddle and Saha to be 'largely nonsense' (p. 223).

The book is shaped around nine chapters, supported by extensive tables and figures. The research arises from a project that explored whether research knowledge use differed among various types of schools or experiences that impinge on the lives of principals. After conference presentations and journal articles on the early analysis, Biddle and Saha were awarded a Rockefeller Foundation joint fellowship to the Bellagio Conference and Study Centre on Lake Como in Italy to draft this book. The chapters move through a series of questions about whether research on education has an impact, focusing on exposure to knowledge sources, opinions about research and innovation, and research knowledge that principals volunteer, recognise and use.

The interview schedules and other protocols are helpfully provided as appendices. However, the interview group was 120 for both Australia and the United States of America which, despite the authors' structure to be inclusive and representative, is not a large sample. Also, the interviews are at least 13 years old (completed in 1992) which raises the question whether things have become better or worse given that the data are now older than the length of time that most principals would hold down their job.

Of particular interest is Chapter Nine, 'Findings, Conclusions and Implications'. In this chapter the authors set aside a lot of the detail to draw big picture scenarios about 'typical principals' (p.222). As noted above, these findings provide a sound basis for challenging current claims about the lack of impact of educational research. Biddle and Saha conclude, with some caution, that most principals are frequently exposed to information sources where knowledge about research is regularly displayed and

discussed; most principals hold positive views about research on education; are rarely concerned about supposed flaws in educational research; easily volunteer examples of useful educational research; have a broad range of topics that are latent in their thinking; and, serve in schools where research knowledge has an impact on policy decisions about educational practices. Effects of national context are interesting too. Australian principals are more likely than their American counterparts to find out about research in face-to-face contact, and more likely to be thoughtful about that research; while American principals are more likely to retain more details and examples about research knowledge. These differences arise mainly from Australian school links to systems and large bureaucratic institutions that support professional development and pupil-free time.

However, there are dangers in how principals take on board research. One of the more challenging cases I encountered was during a research project in a school where teachers felt at a loss about what to do, how to teach, what to tell parents and what direction the school was following. The principal had taken up so many different, and often contradictory, pieces of information from high profile research (mostly North American) that good intentions had become unworkable. No-one on the staff was brave enough to tell the principal – although they told the researchers – so the principal enthusiastically and in great detail explained all that the school was attempting without any sense that a crisis was lurking outside the office door.

This is where a central guiding hand, or third party interest such as a tertiary partner, is able to help the principal take a step back and assess what the research is saying, and how to focus on what is useful for the local and specific issues facing each school. And what to ignore. It is too much to expect principals to do this without time to read, plan and reflect and it is heartening to note the conclusion drawn by the authors of this book that this happens more in Australia than America, though probably still not enough.

I hope you get a chance to read *The Untested Accusation*. I will certainly add it to my reading lists for 2006.

Stephen Crump
Centre for Regional Education Orange
University of Sydney
