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Review of

Conducting Research in Educational Contexts, Tehmina N. Basit, 2010: Continuum. Paperback, 256 Pages - ISBN: 9780826486899, £19.99

for ***Teacher Development***

Conducting Research in Educational Contexts claims to be “a definitive resource for new and early career researchers offering what they need to know before embarking on a research project” (Basit, 2010, p. 7). This is a worthy aspiration, as any introductory text that managed to be definitive would be very welcome by those new to reading about research methods. At first sight, Basit's volume has a number of attractive features. The typeface and layout are clear and pleasing on the eye. More significantly, it is a modest sized paperback, unlike some tomes on the topic. Basit covers the main areas, and the book takes the sensible approach of generally following the order in which newcomers will want to meet topics - general principles, discussion of the main approaches, consideration of data collection techniques, approaches to analysis and writing-up.

There is no doubt that someone selecting this book as their main introduction to research methods will find Basit covers a good deal of ground, and introduces the main topics that will be relevant. However, Basit's writing is not always as clear as might be hoped, and her treatment of ideas and topics is not always consistent through the volume. This is unfortunate, as clarity and consistency of approach are likely to be highly valued by the target readers. Part of this lack of coherence may come from the extent to which Basit draws upon the prose and definitions of others, with their voices sometimes replacing, rather than supporting, Basit's own.

The book contains small textboxes enclosing 'research spotlights' throughout the text. These appear to be designed to link the general ideas in the book to examples of specific research studies that provide suitable illustrations of these general ideas. In principle this was a good idea, but in practice the spotlights break up the text without offering much to the reader, mostly being much too brief to be of value, except at the level of 'look honestly, here's a study which used this'.

References to real published studies can have a very useful role as exemplars, but for them to do this, the reader needs to be given enough detail to consider something of the original author's rationale for research decisions (Taber, 2007). Later in the book the purpose of these devices seems to shift, to simply suggesting further reading without any attempt to describe the studies concerned (although a few of the later spotlights do contain more detailed and useful overviews of studies). Another device used is the 'activity' box. The author has no control over how a reader uses a book, or what type of study they are planning, so these activities have to be general, and can easily appear condescending. That is how I would have felt when I reached pages 58 and 59, on being asked to explain the ethical consideration in my qualitative, and then my quantitative, studies. The attempt to build pedagogy into textbooks, to make them more interactive, is presumably to encourage active learning - but what may be appropriate for school children may be less suitable in books aimed at intelligent professionals.

However, my main reservations about recommending the book to anyone new to research concern the treatment of some key ideas. Most approaches to explain research to novice researchers in education set out either three or four levels at which to think about research studies. Given the complexity of possible research designs, whichever choice is made, such a model can only offer a simplification of how different researchers understand their research - a kind of teaching model providing a suggested ontology to act as a first approximation to the diverse forms of research in education. Basit favours the four-level model, and gives her levels the labels 'paradigms', 'methodologies', 'approaches' and 'methods'. She refers to "the two main research paradigms: the positivist and the interpretive, and critical theory"; and to "the quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and the eclectic methodology" (p.8). Approaches, for Basit, include case study, ethnography, action research, experimental design [sic], and survey (p.8) - although, confusingly, Basit also describes survey as "the most widely used method [sic] of research in educational contexts and beyond" (p.25). Interestingly Basit discusses grounded theory under analytical techniques, and so seems to consider this (in terms of her 4 level system) as a method rather than a methodology or approach.

The mapping between Basit's four levels is not as clear as a reader might wish for. The main problem seems to be confusion in how Basit uses the terms 'quantitative' and 'qualitative'. Basit makes two different distinctions here. She tells her readers that qualitative "methodology is based on the premise that the social world is very different from the natural world and what we see is not necessarily the truth" (p.16), whereas the researcher "regards the social world as hard and objective and similar to the natural world" (p. 15) in quantitative research. This is a common way of

thinking about this distinction, and links clearly to her positivist and interpretative paradigms. However, Basit *also* tells readers that *any* research not involving statistics and quantification is qualitative research. Now clearly, there are two distinctions here that are both commonly used in the discourses of research methods – but they are not equivalent, and indeed are not consistent. Using the same labels to make two very different distinctions is unhelpful. Suggestions that “a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies is increasingly being favored by educational researches” (p.17), or that case study research “can be conducted using both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies” (p.21) are very different claims, depending which of these distinctions is brought to mind by the reader.

Elsewhere, the reader is told that “experimental research is based on the hypothesis-deductive model” (p.31), and yet experimental research can be either confirmatory, “when it uses a fixed design and supports or rejects a null hypothesis”, or exploratory “when it discovers the effects of specific variables” (p.30). This contrasts with the more common understanding that exploratory research generates hypotheses that can *later* be tested by experimental or survey methods (Biddle & Anderson, 1986). Basit tells her readers that “hypotheses are formulated for quantitative studies, during the course of which they are proven [sic] or unproven” (p.46): so here quantitative studies are not only identified with the positivist paradigm, but a rather naive form of positivism. Basit also takes a rather idiosyncratic view of quantitative data: telling her readers “nominal and ordinal data are regarded as nonparametric...” whereas “interval and ratio data are regarded as parameter data...” (p.165). So data are categorised as parametric (or not) according to the type of scale used, without reference to the distribution of the population sampled. This is, at the very least, likely to mislead those new to statistics.

Overall, this is a book that is well motivated, but substantially flawed, and sadly does not approach being the ‘definitive’ introductory resource that the author claims. Readers might learn a good deal from this text, but could well also become very confused by the treatment of some rather fundamental ideas.

Bibliography

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