# Book Reviews

## Doing your education research project (2nd edn)

There exists a wealth of 'how to' literature aimed at supporting educational researchers. Books on this subject range from step-by-step tutorials to sagacious theoretical discussions of specific research approaches. The field is also punctuated by a number of seminal texts and definitive tomes, many of which tend to dominate the bibliographies of education research reports. So, where does Doing your education research project stand in this already saturated market? And what has it to offer such that it deserves revision and re-release?

Here we have a text aimed at guiding the education researcher, at whatever stage of their career, through the perils and pitfalls of carrying out a project. The authors present their advice through comprehensive discussions of themes and ideas. They include reflective prompts, practical tips and well-selected lists of recommended further reading. And, as if to reinforce the systematic nature of research activity, the book's chapters have been usefully compiled into three main sections about planning, carrying out and writing up research:

1.      Think Before You Do – Planning

2.      Gathering Your Evidence

3.      Making Sense of the Outcomes.

The opening chapter, 'The place of research within the classroom and school', introduces and locates the text confidently and authoritatively. Given the current political drive towards evidence-informed teaching (pp. 6–7), Burton et al neatly justify the development of research skills among the teaching workforce. They argue that since teachers, and teacher leaders, must continually strive to improve practice they need 'a more enduring and robust capability for change' (p. 15) through the professional development of research skills.

The book appears to have considered every aspect of research activity, to some degree. And herein lie its limitations: it is practically impossible to present a balanced discussion of all competing themes in just 250 pages. As a result, some readers might feel short-changed by the chapter on quantitative data analysis, when it is compared with the book's comprehensive treatment of qualitative data handling and presentation. Also, some complex, crucial theoretical devices and concepts are given but a brief mention, which might baffle the uninitiated and demand exploration of time-consuming sidelines. This will undoubtedly benefit the more eager component of the book's readership, by prompting wider reading about historical and theoretical foundations of modern research paradigms. However, those with little or no research experience would need some guidance in order to fully access the themes and ideas in the text.

This is why Doing your education research project will make a superb resource as part of a module of academic study, supported by a tutor's input. Overall, the book is written with expert authority;

the authors expound the complex and chaotic landscape of education research with rigour and verve. But they have also struck the right balance between providing guidance and acknowledging that researchers must think for themselves about their own singular route to success. The result is a book that will ably encourage and support research students' independent reading and research.

To conclude, this thoroughly revised and thoughtfully restructured second edition improves upon what was already a strong text. It is a very good example of an authoritative guide to research, drawing on a wealth of literature and experience to create a single comprehensive text for the education research student. Used well, it should ensure that research activity is thorough and well considered. If you are searching for a single core research text, covering the complexities of methodology but with practical advice about conducting educational research, then look no further – this is the book for you.

**Reviewed by Daniel Ayres**

University of East London

## Research design: creating robust approaches for the social sciences

Stephen Gorard
London: Sage, 2013
ISBN 978-1-446-24902-4

Gorard, Professor of Education and Well-being at the University of Durham, provides an uncompromising critique of research in the social sciences and makes a very strong case for increasing the robustness of research design. While this is clearly a book designed for researchers it will also be useful for those who are consumers of research, arming them with the tools and the vocabulary with which to interrogate research findings.

There are a number of calls to increase the level of teacher engagement with research. For example: Teaching Schools have a responsibility within their contracts for research and development; Newly Qualified Teachers are asked, through the annual NQT survey, how well their training prepared them to access, assess, understand and apply educational research; and the Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (2014) recommends 'a central portal of synthesised executive summaries providing practical advice on research findings about effective teaching' (p. 54).

Gorard is clear that research design is a Cinderella discipline which is often disregarded because of an assumption that design is part of a positivist paradigm with which many will have no truck. Gorard states that this is a misguided position with 'no kinds of data and no particular philosophical predicates, [being] entailed by common existing design structure such as longitudinal, case study, randomised controlled trial or action research' (p. 6). Similar misunderstandings are evident in the redundant arguments that abound around the qualitative/quantitative divide; arguments which form large sections of research methods courses and associated texts. Gorard contends that there is a need to forefront design and think about the data collection method once the design is in place.

Throughout the book he provides many examples of studies where the design stage has been neglected and demonstrates clearly how this diminishes the warrant of the claims that those particular studies should be able to make. Some of the studies that he chooses to illustrate his points have been used as the basis for interventions in various fields which have 'been well-intended and rolled out into practice… Yet when they have been rigorously evaluated, they have been found to be ineffective or even harmful' (p. 5). By considering such examples Gorard makes a persuasive case for developing an ethical concern, not only for research participants, but also 'the perspective of people who do not take part in the research, but who may fund it, or be affected by the results' (p. 188). He contends that this view means that it is unethical to carry out poorly designed research as it leads to unwarranted conclusions which inform actions in the real world. One wonders how much of the practical advice derived from research that forms

the executive summaries recommended by Carter would pass robust design analysis.

The book consists of 14 chapters divided into five sections. Each chapter is preceded by a helpful summary and also has suggestions for further reading. In addition there are a number of exercises at the end of each chapter which challenge the reader to consider the content of each chapter through real-life examples. Each exercise is supported by notes which pick up the main points – these could be used for self-reflection or as the basis for discussion if the book was being used in a class situation.

This is an important book which aims to improve social science research. In addressing this aim it challenges us to develop a much more rigorous approach to the way in which we carry out our own research and how we engage with the research of others. Gorard is to be congratulated for tackling this issue head-on and managing to do it through a very readable and enjoyable book.

**Reviewed by Neil Herrington**

University of East London

## Getting into primary teaching

David Owen and Cathy Burnett (eds.)
Northwich: Critical Publishing, 2014
ISBN 978-1-909-68225-2

I have to finish with this book. Although, as reviewer, I am entitled to hold on to it (for it could be a teacher's constant, loyal and reflective companion), I think that would be selfish. I need to pass it on. I have a colleague, a talented teaching assistant, who is currently applying for a position on a PGCE course, and she needs to take a look at this book.

Owen and Burnett have compiled a guide, which sets out to provide a comprehensive account of getting into primary school teaching. In his introduction (p. 1), Owen asserts that this book will support the reader through the application process, help the reader to develop knowledge skills and understanding, and experience the school life, which will result in the reader becoming a successful teacher. Wow – it promises an awful lot! Hobson, the series editor, reminds the reader that the decision to embark on a career in teaching 'must not be taken lightly' (p. ix). Becoming a teacher is no easy journey, and the teachers of the future need all the support that they can get. This book is designed to guide and nurture the reader through this process.

Each chapter is a contribution from one of a range of experts in their various educational fields. The editors have organised this book in such a way that the chapters are linked by common useful features: reflective tasks, pupil/teacher/student voice, research focus, jargon busters, taking it further (additional guidance on finding out more about the particular topic) and a progress checklist. It is pleasingly and cohesively organised and presented with an abundance of illustrative tables, diagrams and samples of children's work. The reader is tempted to dip in and out of the pages, hooked in by thought-provoking case studies, such as student teacher Daniel's comments about classroom inclusivity with regard to a child with Down's syndrome (p. 163), or reflective tasks such as 'What sort of maths teacher do you want to be?' (p. 95).

Key to becoming a good teacher is to be able to critically reflect on one's own practice. What particularly impressed me about this book was the way in which the reflective tasks that feature in each chapter lead the reader on a path towards being able to critically reflect upon their experiences and, ultimately, their teaching. Reflection is not an easy skill to learn, but this book nurtures this skill prior to formal training.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on developing subject knowledge in English and mathematics respectively. The approach to both subjects is refreshing and relevant to today's real-life experiences for teachers and children. We are encouraged to think about the use of screen-based

texts such as websites, social networking sites and online games, to engage with popular media such as podcasts to create innovative presentations, (pp. 64–6), and to think about why confidence and attitude are so important in mathematics (p. 91). These chapters will not tell you all you need to know about the core subjects – that is to be found in other, specific publications. They are to equip you to view a curriculum critically, and to question and evaluate your approach to teaching these subjects with the necessary knowledge and skills.

One small difficulty that I have with this book is that it could overwhelm the potential trainee teacher with tasks and expectations, which, perceivably, should ideally be completed before formal training has even begun. This is not the case. To combat this, rather than read the book from beginning to end, I would recommend that the reader peruse the conclusion first. This succinctly summarises each chapter, and signposts when suggested tasks might be best completed. It then becomes evident that this book is designed to guide you through the entire process of becoming a teacher from the initial decision-making to employment and beyond.

In my opinion, the editors most certainly deliver on their promises set out in their introduction. This book feels like a kind, loyal and learned friend – there to advise you on the basics, encouraging you to reflect, and scaffolding your teaching and learning experience. I particularly enjoyed the thought-provoking pupil/teacher/student voice case studies, which keep the book grounded in concrete real-life situations, and the research foci introduce the reader to research material which not only informs, but prepares the reader for the academic rigours of a teacher training programme.

**Reviewed by Cathy Hurley**

(ex-UEL Primary PGCE)
Class teacher