

Book reviews

Allan, J. & Slee, R. (2008). *Doing inclusive education research*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Doing inclusive education research is the first volume in a series entitled *Studies in inclusive education* edited by Roger Slee. The book aims to provide the reader with an introduction to the controversial field of inclusive education research and aspires to address what Allan and Slee see as a lack of transparency in inclusive education research. The book adopts an innovative approach by detailing the authors' analysis and interpretations of interviews conducted with twelve 'well known' and 'respected' researchers in inclusive education research. Through this work they reveal the positions of prominent researchers by asking them to specify their foundations of knowledge and their assumptions about their chosen research topic.

The authors believe that conceptualising the book this way offers an alternative to the 'glossie' textbooks and the 'one size fits all' manuals on how to do research. Written for those entering the field as students or as novice researchers, the authors, working within a sociological framework, present the full spectrum of viewpoints in inclusive education research from special educationists through to critical researchers. Disability activists and reformists are positioned on this spectrum.

The participant researchers are questioned about a particular research project that they have been involved with. Of particular interest is how they negotiated their research process including how and why research decisions were made. The participants and their projects present different foundations of thought in inclusive education. The contrasting and sometimes opposing views suggest the tensions, struggles and confrontations that a novice researcher may encounter and needs to negotiate when entering this domain. The book's aim, while outlining these controversies, is to challenge new and experienced researchers with an appreciation of the "dilemmas and uncertainties" (p.7) in all research, particularly focusing on the dilemma of the "pretence of certainty" (p.7). The authors suggest that an understanding of this dilemma is imperative for research, because certainty can eliminate the possibility of alternatives and reflexivity, that offer foundations for change.

The introduction outlines recent and multiple tensions between special educationists and postmodernists, and between proponents of the social model of disability and those who have seen it as an imperfect concept. The authors have conceived their project in this book in an attempt to explore these counterpoints and to look beyond the words by reconceptualizing the produced texts and superficial meanings these researchers' projects present. Chapter two describes the book's project and the importance of "unpacking our own bags" (p.11) as researchers.

The research participants and their studies are also introduced here and the theoretical framing of the authors' project revealed: poststructuralism. The poststructuralist framework proposed for the analysis aims to attend to both the underlying and

produced discourses of the research projects. Foucault's analysis of the interrelationship between 'power' and 'knowledge', 'practices of the self' and 'transgression', as well as Derrida's concept of 'undecidability' are well used by the authors to analyse and interpret their data.

Chapters three to seven describe the author's findings, analysis and interpretations. Of interest here is the social, economic and political history of the inclusive movement with a focus on discourses that have produced the many faces of inclusive education research. Chapter five's emphasis on ideology proves interesting, with some researchers engaging in ideological warfare, others dismissing ideology as neutral and unimportant to their research, and others seeing their work as inevitably ideological because of its involvement with inequity and injustice. By examining the role ideology plays in each research projects, the authors consider the ways in which ideologies shape "ambiguities and contradictions" (p.65).

Allan & Slee interrogate the many choices and decisions made by researchers during the research process, to highlight how decisions can sometimes lead to a closure which they suggest could undermine the possibility of alternatives. The final chapter of the book offers the new or experienced researcher with some propositions for entering inclusive education research with the authors being very clear that they had no intention of creating a 'how to do research' manual.

For the novice researcher entering the field of inclusive education, the book truly lives up to its intention to be an 'intellectual tin opener' (p.14). While reading copious amounts of research from the positivist paradigm through to poststructuralist ways of thinking, one can become overwhelmed by the enormous variety of viewpoints. And yet Allan & Slee dig even deeper to go beyond the words, to uncover and contrast theoretical frameworks, processes, politics and personalities of inclusive education research.

I found that this book has given light to what I felt was a foggy landscape. By describing the tensions and struggles in the field, and also importantly taking these tensions further by offering an alternative approach to research in the future. In particular, understanding the imperative of being clear about one's theoretical perspective before beginning a study, as well as being open to alternatives as the project progresses, was made clear through the text.

The passion for and commitment to this area of research filters through in the pages of the book and is equally shared by all researchers. The authors admit that although they may disagree with the perspectives of some of the researchers, they admire the intensity of their engagement with their work and are careful to state that they have tried to avoid judgements on the effectiveness of the various projects. They have stated that their aim was to open up research processes to scrutiny (p.25). However, in such an emotionally charged debate, it seems unlikely that all who will read this book will be able to fully grasp the book's intentions and consequently will disagree with the authors' findings and my appraisal.

For those who are commencing research in this field, *Doing inclusive education research* is an essential text. For the experienced researcher, in opening up their research processes to the scrutiny of a poststructuralist perspective, the book offers an opportunity to widen their gaze and unsettle their certainties (p.102). This book introduces an alternative approach to doing inclusive research by steering “students and new researchers away from the kind of certainty that creates closure” (p.96) and towards research that provides for a greater transparency.

Karen Watson

University of Newcastle

Karen.Watson@newcastle.edu.au

Cantwell, R. H., & Scevak, J. J. (Eds.). (2010). *An academic life: A handbook for new academics*. Camberwell: ACER Press.

In the edited book titled *An academic life: A handbook for new academics*, the formation of a professional identity as an academic is fashioned by a subtle interweaving of a range of key academic threads - threads of teaching and learning, of research and research training, of administration and community service and of the social-cultural workplace. Each thread is taken as a section in the book, introducing novice academics into the realm of academic odyssey. The book does not seek to conceptualise abstract or far-fetched theories, but it seeks to provide a practical step-by-step guide to a productive exploration into an academic career. The straightforward language, well-informed ideas, and logically presented organisation make the book readily accessible to a great many readers in facilitating their improved understanding of entering into a new academic life. If you are still in the puzzling phase of wondering what it means to be a good teacher, a new researcher, an efficient administrator or a great colleague, then this is an indispensable book for you to turn to. As a Chinese lecturer with little teaching and researching experience, I find it especially valuable and applicable to the Chinese academic life where the ongoing reform of curriculum and professional development poses great challenges to Chinese academics.

Reflections by Danielle Skropeta and Kelly Freebody in the first section on early professional experiences trigger readers to wonder how to set about productive professional practices. This is further explored in the next four sections, which probe the corresponding thread of academic life. Chapter four by Cantwell, Scevak and Parkes in section two, puts forward ‘Backward Design’ (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006) as a theoretical framework for aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment to the learning needs of students. Thus, being a good teacher requires more than mastering knowledge of subject matter as is commonly assumed, it also necessitates ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (p. 23). However, pedagogy is associated with a broad field of theorising and research that offers plentiful of approaches to conceptualise ways of teaching and learning. Thus, it goes beyond the mere appreciation of the nature of learning, and in conjunction with teaching method, incorporates the cognitive, meta-

cognitive and affective aspects of learning as is pointed out in chapter five *The nature of academic learning*.

Chapter seven, *Lectures*, also utilises the information processing theory of learning. It argues that the lecture as an information conveying process functions most effectively when it is meaningfully organised, facilitating integrated representation in students' cognitive mechanism by employing signaling, both visual and audio, suggests effective learning strategies, and instigates reflective practice. Considering the exam-oriented and teacher-authoritative teaching style pervasive in China which demands huge amount of memorisation and recitation, this section is particularly thought provoking to Chinese scholars in seeking student-centered practices in response to the ongoing quality-oriented curriculum reforms' demands.

What makes this book particularly appealing to me is that it not only integrates different threads of academic life, but different dimensions of each thread, such as the diverse dimensions of teaching in the area of teaching and learning. For example, teaching in different settings - laboratory, online and multicultural classroom - is explored in separate chapters in this section. I am particularly drawn by chapter twelve *Teaching within diversity*, since it is directly related to my teaching experience of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds in China. Though China is a multi-ethnic country, efforts to implement a multi-cultural curriculum reform leave much to be desired (Jin, 2008). Take my example of a Chinese teacher who is passionate about delivering the 'right' approach for fostering culturally diverse environments for my Mongolian students. For me, the 'culturally responsive' and 'socially inclusive' (p. 106) practices offered by Burrige and Walker, together with their case study, provide me with practical and valuable insights into solving this difficult task.

As a Chinese scholar with few experiences of publishing in China, reading section three about the thread of research particularly resonates with me. Academics in general share a common professional expectation of actively seeking research agendas, opportunities, support, potential funding, and of developing 'project management' (p. 115) skills to increase success in publishing their work. Publication, a dominant feature of the academic landscape, is discussed further in chapter fourteen *Writing for publication*. Green and Bowden suggest a tension between selecting target audiences for research publication and career advancement planning while publishing. They argue that sometimes the two do not align seamlessly. However, one can publish to a targeted audience too and the ranking or citation of journals matters less in that case. Authorship decision, reviewed in the same chapter, relates to such issues as the degree of contribution and agreement within a research team, while taking into account ethical and intellectual property considerations. So far in my experience as a beginning researcher, the head of project decides about the matter of authorship. Having read this chapter I know that there are other considerations in relation to authorship, such as the amount of contribution one has made to the project. Above the question of the level of effort, this chapter provides me with feasible guidelines on how to make my work visible and recognisable.

The last two threads in the final two sections deal with interpersonal dimensions of academic life, such as academic administration, community service, and academic workplace. These threads demonstrate the multi-layered and dynamic nature of this life. Knowing about the complexity of this workplace is especially useful for Chinese scholars in learning to balance different threads of their academic career and to adjust to the changing situations brought about by current curriculum reforms while negotiating their academic identities.

Overall, though published in Australia, I found the book an equally valuable and applicable asset for Chinese novice academics in sharpening professional edges, as well as for experienced researchers to gain a platform for their reflections. I would not hesitate to suggest this book for those scholars seeking a long-term, successful and rewarding academic life. Moreover, to make this book more accessible for everyone working in universities in China, I would recommend the book to be translated into Chinese.

Yongxia Zhang

University of Newcastle

Yongxia.zhang@uon.edu.au

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