

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Finding Your Way in Qualitative Research.**

Elizabeth Henning with Wilhelm van Rensburg and Brigitte Smit (2004). Van Schaik, Pretoria, pp 179; ISBN 0 627 02545 5

In the past decade Elizabeth Henning and her colleagues brought considerable visibility and organization to qualitative research and researchers in South African education. Her co-authored book, *Finding Your Way in Qualitative Research*, is a logical outcome of years of dedication to this species of inquiry called “qualitative research”. It is worth recalling that not too long ago educational research in South Africa, following the trends of its European and North American neighbours, dismissed any research that surfaced outside of the established experimental or statistical approaches to the study of teaching, learning or curriculum. Yet today, as elsewhere, some of the most exciting studies of human endeavour in education emerge from the tradition of qualitative inquiry. It should be mentioned, though, that this emerging tradition is again under threat, this time through a new species of inquiry called “evidence based research”—an attempt, in my view, to re-establish the epistemological and political certainties that once sat so comfortably under the umbrella of all kinds of positivist or empiricist approaches to knowing. While evidence-based research works relatively well in the medical or pharmaceutical sciences, its re-entry into the humanities and education is bound to create renewed turmoil.

Returning to the book: this is a useful guide to new researchers concerned with educational research in general and qualitative studies in particular. In more than 170-pages the authors outline the rationale for doing qualitative research, the various frameworks for inquiry (positivist, interpretivist and critical), the range of qualitative methods and methodologies (case studies, ethnography, discourse analysis etc), qualitative data collection, analysis and interpretation, and conclude with a handy set of appendices such as transcriptions emerging from conversation analysis. The book self-consciously claims not to be a “how to” manual but a guide to “methodological reasoning” through an approach that is “primarily inductive” - by which they mean the design examples emerge at the end of the monograph - and that leads to “informed choice”. One of the strengths of this book is in fact the very lucid and progressive use of examples from everyday life that shape the rich discussion of how intellectual choices are made in the course of doing qualitative research. One of the most promising young qualitative researchers in the country writes a much-neglected chapter on computer-aided qualitative data analysis.

Despite its many qualities, I found the book very difficult to read. It carries the “thickness” of text that makes it very difficult to excavate the main point from the mud of detail. The writing style is awkward, with complex sentence structures that blur what should otherwise be much easier to communicate. The insistence on writing in the third person is puzzling, since this works against one of the main contributions of qualitative inquiry—that is, the release from the formal and formulaic demands of writing that had long characterized (and undermined) quantitative research. The reference throughout to the first author as “I” is then doubly confusing, and raises yet another concern about the roles of the two co-authors. And while the authors are clear that they do not intend to say “all” on the subject, there is the danger that saying too little on very complex topics (like grounded theory) means saying nothing at all.

Finally, this is a book worth having on the shelf alongside the qualitative manuals and the classic qualitative texts in education—not only because of its local content and context, but because it draws on a wealth of experience in the training and support of postgraduate students.

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