

Book Reviews

A beginner's guide to doing your education research

Mike Lambert
London: Sage, 2010
ISBN 978-0-85702-981-2

Perhaps seeming to enter an already overcrowded marketplace, here we have another 'how to' guide for students doing their educational project. However, while the temptation might be to gloss over a book like this (competition being stiff) and stick with your favourite one, I would urge you to give this text the consideration it is due. To my mind, it more than justifies its place in this well-established marketplace – in fact, it is fast becoming my favourite.

Over its 13 chapters and multiple useful appendices this book presents very clearly articulated and extremely useful advice and guidance to learners. Interestingly, 'how to write it up' is delayed until chapter 12 of 13, which is an indication of the genuine emphasis given to thorough preparation, reading and question-setting and the methodology that this requires. All this is contextualised by a philosophy that firmly denotes education as a 'research profession', establishing the need for teachers, education students and education leaders to engage with research and to generate research outcomes.

As with any book of this description, we would not wish our learners to use it as a 'one-stop shop' but to use it in conjunction with other sources and texts. Lambert does a skilful job of providing 'just enough' and then 'a little bit more' in this text, before the reader proceeds to explore the very useful 'further readings' provided. The text is rich with definition, example, reflective questions and mini tasks/activities, all of which provide a thorough and interesting grounding for the 'beginner', as the book's title portends.

Chapter 9, 'Validity, reliability and ethical approval', is very strong and one of the best I've read on this topic in this sort of book. I urge colleagues to explore this chapter, in particular, for recommended reading for learners. Lambert makes easy work of dense and

complex materials and ideas while at the same time not reducing such ideas to a mere simplistic shadow of their true self, as is sometimes the danger when teaching beginners research methods.

The book positions itself as a 'basic guide' that provides 'step-by-step advice'. It certainly delivers on this, but it does more. Helped by an easy and accessible writing tone and style, it raises many key questions and opens up debates about research methodology and research logistics and practices. This is essential recommended reading for learners if you are interested in this field and teach it yourself, and will be of great interest, I am sure, to readers of *Research in Teacher Education*.

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School leadership for public value: understanding valuable outcomes for children, families and communities

Denis Mongon and Charles Leadbeater
London: Institute of Education, 2012
ISBN 978-0-85473-919-6

It is refreshing when you receive a book to review and it does what it says on the tin. The publication of this book comes at an opportune moment in terms of the current policy discourse as to the direction and focus of the English education system. It is based on a study conducted for the National College. While the study takes cognisance of the need for schools to adhere to the data, attainment and league table imperatives that drive education systems in developed countries, notably England, it goes further, in highlighting the need for schools and their leaders to actively engage with their communities not just as a tick-box exercise

but to deal with key issues such as the attainment levels and low aspirations of those members of their communities who come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds. Credit for this goes to the authors, both of whom have a deep understanding of the English education system from a practitioner and policy perspective.

This slim tome of just seven chapters has significant academic depth but is written and presented in such a way that practitioners and students will be instantly engaged with it. Using the concept of public value as the driving force for the book gives it direction and focus. It focuses on ten case-study schools that are examined in depth in terms of their commitment to and engagement with their local communities. It does so in three distinct ways: first, by taking the reader on a historical policy and legislative journey through the English education system that contextualises the key issues and themes of the book; secondly, by creating and adapting a number of conceptual models to explain public value and engagement with communities; and thirdly, by using examples of how the case-study schools carry this out in practice. In one sense, this is a clarion call by the authors for less rhetoric and more action in terms of meaningful community engagement by schools.

The authors define public value in terms of ecological, political, economic, social and cultural values. This allows the reader to follow how and why the case-study schools and their leaders engage with their communities for educational and policy purposes: significantly, in terms of all stakeholders being regarded as learners and, more importantly, to foster greater social cohesion, improve community relations and deal with issues such as crime, mental health and well-being. What clearly emerges from this study is the passion of the school leaders to go beyond what could be termed their policy remit and immerse themselves and their schools in many aspects of local community life. This is one of the strengths of the book, as the authors argue that under successive governments, irrespective of political hue, education in England has been continually nationalised and centralised.

As has been noted, the authors introduce the reader to a number of concepts and models that schools and their leaders can utilise to help them get to grips with the notion of their work having public value in terms of engagement with their communities. They argue that to achieve this requires innovation. To this end,

the book is underpinned by the use of one model, the *Public Innovation Triangle*, that deals with the concepts of the Authorising Environment, which the authors argue must support the case for innovation and taking risks; New Capacity, as most innovation involves the creation of new capacity, be it technological or process-driven; and Measures of Value that highlight the limitations of current approaches and the value created by new approaches. Each of these concepts is dealt with in a separate chapter and linked to vignettes of how schools have dealt with each of these concepts, and narratives of the school leaders. These narratives are very powerful as the reader gets a keen sense of the commitment and passion these school leaders show in support of their students and the communities their schools are a part of. This is brought into sharp focus by a mind map drawn by one of the school leaders involved in the study. Not only does it show the complexity of their role and the myriad relationships that have to be in place for them to carry out their statutory responsibilities, but also how to fully commit to and engage with the local community. I would suggest that this is one activity many readers of this book will undertake in order to get a sense of where they are and what they need to be doing from a community engagement perspective.

The study is drawn together by a concise concluding chapter that brings together the main themes of the book. The authors warn that schools engaged in public value innovation will not experience a smooth ride and that failure will be part of the learning process. However, the overriding message is that if schools are serious about engaging meaningfully with their local communities then such engagement must be driven by the public value derived in terms of improving educational attainment and aspiration and creating more opportunities for economic mobility and greater social cohesion for the most disadvantaged within these communities.

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Phonics essentials: practical, professional problem-solving for primary teachers

Gill Budgell

London: Rising Stars, 2012

ISBN 978-0-85769-411-9

The book is aimed at any teacher 'who wants a better understanding of phonics, non specialist teachers and NQTs [Newly Qualified Teachers]'. I consider myself to be in the first category, as I am a Key Stage 2 (KS2) teacher/SEN co-ordinator who didn't feel confident teaching phonics, as I have never had to put my skills into practice. Ofsted now places more emphasis on the teaching of phonics, which has put pressure on teachers like myself to brush up their skills, so I would imagine this book would be a popular choice among KS2 teachers. The book provides a good background on the difference between synthetic and analytic phonics, which, as I recently discovered during staff training, is a mystery to many KS2 teachers. It gives a brief but informative definition of the terminology used with phonics (blending and segmenting) and provides working examples of these skills being used in reading and spelling. The book breaks down these skills into two separate chapters and deals with them individually, which I found useful, as I wanted to concentrate on phonics for spelling. It discusses each of the different phases of the Department for Education's (DFE) Letters and Sounds programme, with very useful tables in each section displaying the phonemes taught therein and examples of words to be used and also the alternative spellings for each phoneme. It then devotes a chapter each to the assessments available and the resources to support both teaching reading and spelling.

A great strength of the book is that it is so easy to read. Terminology is clearly explained, tables are provided and the contents page is very inclusive. It is a book that can be dipped into by teachers who want to brush up or it could be read very quickly by an NQT who has little experience of teaching phonics. Phonics teaching is a massive subject and the authors have managed to condense the important parts into fewer than 120 pages.

The weakness of the book is that phonics in KS2 is very different to that in KS1 and I feel that this should have been covered in more detail. A chapter is devoted to phonics and older learners, but I feel as a KS2 teacher that I needed more information and more useful tips to keep the children engaged. KS1 teachers tend to

be the experts in phonics teaching, as they usually teach phonics daily either to small groups or during whole class sessions. Therefore, I would imagine that KS2 teachers are more likely to purchase this book, as these are the teachers that finding themselves having to learn new skills. With this in mind, I feel that the author could have devoted more time to KS2 teachers. There are lots of resources on the market that are aimed at KS1 children and teachers, so that children that need interventions with phonics in KS2 have to use resources that are not suited to their age and maturity. It is these children that teachers find are disengaged in phonics sessions and need stimulating lesson ideas and techniques that appeal to the older child.

Despite the weakness mentioned above, I would still recommend this read to any teacher who wants a better understanding of phonics. After reading the book I felt confident to deliver staff training, to change the way phonics sessions were delivered in my school and also to teach phonics sessions to children with special educational needs.

Janine Mudd is this month's guest reviewer. Janine is currently the SEN Co-ordinator at The White Bridge Junior School, Loughton in Essex.
