

Doing critical educational research: a conversation with the research of John Smyth. By John Smyth, Barry Down, Peter McLnerney and Robert Hattam, R. New York and Oxford, Peter Lang. 2014. £25 (pbk), £92 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-4331-2317-7 pb (pbk), 1-4331-2318-4 hb (hbk).

There are many 'how to do research' manuals on the market, some of which are quite good, especially if you want to know the difference between, say, a systematic sample and a stratified random sample, or how to get the best out of SPSS. This book isn't one of those. As its subtitle, *A conversation with the research of John Smyth*, suggests, *Doing Critical Educational Research* offers a critical engagement with the work of one of the leading educational researchers of our time, John Smyth. Co-authored by Smyth and some of his closest collaborators, it is the seventh volume in Peter Lang's Teaching Contemporary Scholars series. Edited by Shirley Steinberg, the series showcases the work of leading critical thinkers including Henry Giroux, Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren, so John Smyth is in good company here – and quite rightly. He is one of the most prolific, combative and powerful critical researchers of recent times and this book will provide readers with a fascinating insight into Smyth's *modus operandi* - for he is, in equal part, critical ethnographer, policy analyst, theorist and activist.

The book consists of six chapters. The first of these draws on C.W Mills (1971), to introduce Smyth's 'intellectual craftsmanship' and provides the reader with some of the key ideas which underpin his work. Immediately, it is clear that John Smyth does not attempt to be neutral or detached in his approach to educational research. Political activism and a commitment to praxis have, for over forty years, been central to Smyth's work and this book leaves us in no doubt that he is sceptical about some of the technicist concerns which preoccupy certain researchers (p. 27). Chapter One also introduces us to some of leading critical thinkers that influenced Smyth's work. These include Giroux, Habermas and Freire but it is clear that the aforementioned C.W. Mills has been particularly influential for Smyth. This can be seen both in the way Mills' concept of the sociological imagination is used as an intellectual touchstone and how, throughout the book, Smyth's work repeatedly – and powerfully - reminds us that 'private problems' are usually manifestations of broader 'public issues'. Whether dealing with the underachievement of disadvantaged young people, the degradation of teachers' work, or the plight of so-called failing schools, the research of John Smyth shows us that such matters are not simply local or isolated concerns but how are they are invariably related to deep-rooted and systemic social and economic inequalities.

The central chapters of the book focus on four inter-related strands of John Smyth's research: *Teachers' Work*; *Students' Lives*; *Community Engagement*; and *Educational Policy and Leadership*. Each chapter draws both on Smyth's work and that of other leading critical scholars, and begins with a series of critical reflections written by John Smyth. These are drawn from findings from some of the many research projects with which he has been involved and summarise some of the key themes of Smyth's work in each of the four areas highlighted above. The second part of each chapter is entitled 'Progressing the Conversation' and is written by Barry Down, Peter McLnerney and Robert Hattam. Each of these sections extends the arguments made by Smyth and highlights the ways in which the next generation of critical scholars can take the agenda forward. This leads us to an important point about the readership of this book. Whilst policymakers will be challenged by the work of John Smyth and many of the ideas contained within *Doing Critical Educational Research* will undoubtedly chime with teachers and other practitioners interested in education and social justice, experienced academics should point nascent researchers, perhaps

especially doctoral students, towards this book. Few texts will provide them with the degree of critical insight or stimulation as this.

Chapter 2, *Teachers' Work*, shows how neo-liberal policy agendas have increasingly corroded professional practice in schools and, drawing on Habermas (1976) and others, Smyth explains how teachers have become increasingly blamed for a range of social and economic ills. For John Smyth, the disciplining forces of managerialism, marketisation and instrumentalism distort the social practices and creative processes of teaching and learning, and the relationship between teachers and students with particularly pernicious consequences for those who are most socially and economically disadvantaged. These are points which will resonate with the concerns of many educationalists, but where Smyth's work differs from that of many other critical scholars is that it also shows how more progressive forms of professional practice can be used to develop viable alternatives to some of the oppressive discourses which increasingly corrupt teachers' work. Using research to challenge conservative policy and practice is a consistent theme throughout the book and here Down, McInerney and Hattam draw on Smyth's research to argue the case for teachers as intellectuals rather than technicians. Smyth's model of critical reflective practice is used to argue for a 'pedagogy of the question' - a set of ideas which challenge dominant discourses of power and authority - to be developed in schools.

The next chapter, *Students' Lives*, deals particularly with the ways in which Smyth and his colleagues have used critical ethnography to explore the lives of young people on the margins of education and employment. Two themes are central to the chapter. First, following Mills (1971), it shows how the experiences of disadvantaged young people can be best understood sociologically rather than as being the manifestation of individual pathologies or deficiencies. Second, it vividly illustrates what Smyth and his colleagues mean by 'doing' critical research: for them, it is not only about exposing and highlighting injustice; it is also about constructing empirical and conceptual narratives of hope (p. 68). The fourth chapter, *Community Engagement*, reminds us that schools are not bounded institutions, which can be simply 'fixed' by policymakers, technocrats or so-called experts. Schools, as Smyth says, are part of a complex social, economic and political matrix, and educational opportunities, especially for the most disadvantaged, can only be improved as part of a broader programme of social and economic reform. An important principle which underpins the work of John Smyth is that research should be accessible to students, parents, practitioners and the community more widely, and, although this is a strong theme throughout, Chapter 4 perhaps best demonstrates how critical research can be mobilised to create *Radical Possibilities* (Anyon 2005). Here Smyth and colleagues draw on Freireian conceptions of community development to argue that authentic forms of critical dialogue, participation and leadership are necessary to challenge the ways in which not only certain schools but whole communities have been marginalised and disenfranchised by the predatory forces of neo-liberal capitalism.

The final theme covered in the book is educational policy and leadership. Mirroring previous sections, Chapter 5 begins by explaining how Smyth's research in this area has consistently challenged and critiqued neo-liberal discourses of educational leadership, particularly the championing of competition and targets, and the priority given to matters of finance and audit at the expense of teaching, learning and the curriculum. The chapter goes on to present an alternative model of educational policy and democratic leadership. This is laid out in some detail, drawing on original research data, and poses a series of questions and themes around which educational leaders can strive to build collegial professionalism and socially inclusive practice. Educational leadership is, as Smyth et al remind us, a highly-politicised activity and here they argue for an engagement with education as a critical social practice. This, it is argued, needs to be rooted in

'thick' democratic processes which emphasise social justice, mobilise community engagement, and challenge the doctrines of market-led managerialism.

The final chapter draws together the main themes contained within the book and finishes with a short subsection entitled *What Next?* This provides a series of key questions relating to the four main strands of Smyth's work and invites academics, teachers, school leaders and community activists to question injustice, exploitation and inequality in education and society more broadly. This is an important point because, for Smyth, educational injustice cannot be decoupled from broader social and economic forces, and an exposure and analysis of these relations is at the heart of his research. Towards the end of the book the authors turn to the words of the Christian theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo who tells us that:

"Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."
(cited in St Vincent de Paul, 2013, p. 3)

This is apt because *Doing Critical Educational Research* is not so much a research handbook as an exercise in what Jim Thomas (1993) once described as 'intellectual rebellion'.

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