

Book Review

Review of Liz Atkins and Verity Duckworth, *Research Methods for Social Justice and Equity in Education*, Bloomsbury Research Methods for Education (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). 336pp., 5 bw illus. \$32.95. ISBN 9781350015463.

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Atkins and Duckworth begin their new book with a question: how can we be sure that research addresses social justice, when the notion of social justice itself is so contested, debated, and potentially contradictory? Accordingly, the authors set themselves a difficult challenge, outlining two aims: attempting to balance, on the one hand, a discussion of theories of justice, and on the other, a focus on methodology, to reveal how questions of social justice problematize educational research. The work that emerges is divided into three sections, beginning with theoretical interventions on questions of social justice, equity, and ethics. Then, the book discusses case studies, mainly drawn from UK further education (the authors' own field), and invites researchers to reflect on the social justice issues raised in their work. Finally, there is a focus on practical research methods, 'to challenge inequality and work towards social justice and equity' (15). The book ranges over a great deal of ground, and presents a nuanced, provocative, and

useful compendium of research methods and case studies which is widely applicable to educational researchers, and indeed to all researchers seeking an equitable and just approach to fieldwork. As a postcolonial scholar, rather than a FE researcher, I shall focus my review on the core methodological discussion instead of the content of the studies.

Central to the book's thesis is a focus on reflexivity and positionality: 'unless a practitioner can critically engage in examining their own practice, they cannot position themselves as able to critically examine others' claim to knowledge' (102). Tensions resonate throughout the chapters: operations of privilege and voice, implicit value-judgments and claims to knowledge, insiders and outsiders, practitioners and researchers – all of these are embodied in the person of the social justice researcher. The analysis of case studies in the middle chapters, which invite the researchers involved to discuss these tensions, reveals a number of important insights.

The projects examined feature a wide range of methods and mixed methods approaches, including: group interviews, participant observation, workshops, the mixed use of text and images, quantitative analysis, participatory action research, critical discourse analysis, biography, and knowledge exchange. Taken together, they present a convincing and incisive picture of what socially-conscious research can and cannot do. For example, a study by Atkins of the aspirations of 'othered... vocational... low-level' further education learners, raises complex questions of participant involvement in data analysis: while 'collaboration and inclusion were intended and attempted at each stage... she could only claim partial success', due to the difficulties of engaging with participants of differing life experience and educational level (139). Despite these downsides, the participants evinced 'a far greater involvement' in the project than they would have otherwise, and it succeeded in its aim of revealing issues of learner agency, othering, and social capital deficit in these learners' experiences (139-140).

A chapter comparing five research projects from a diversity of international contexts (Armenia, Barbados, Ireland, Pakistan, and South Africa; the majority of the book's other cases are from Britain, with some from Western Europe and North America) explores the tension between structural inequalities and researcher agency: 'collaboration in itself does not address issues of social justice, human value or power relations, despite consideration of these issues being of fundamental importance: does a study pay lip service to the notions of dialogue, equality and collaboration or does it try to find a means to negotiate the issues arising from the research with the participants in the context of an equal relationship?' (198). The authors, citing bell hooks, conclude that, while researchers' ability to advocate for social justice is partial, and perhaps

compromised, socially just research can ‘facilitate’ the liberation of voices and the move from object to subject (199-200).

The approach taken by this book is not without its drawbacks, however. The theoretical discussion is oddly unbalanced: a section on postcolonial thought makes no mention of Spivak, for instance; a discussion of historical epistemologies of justice gives us Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, but not Locke or Kant, which would have added a useful counterpoint to later discussions of studies rejecting positivist approaches (230). The Quran stands as the sole representative of non-western ideas of justice; the inclusion of other perspectives, Mencius for example, would have been beneficial (21). The question is raised in the reader as to whether an entire section on theory was necessary, when the book’s major contributions are to be found in its discussions of case studies and methods.

The only other criticism which might be levelled at this book is that it is strongly UK-focused, and this potentially narrows its scope somewhat. This is not to deny that an in-depth study of UK further education is useful and worthwhile, but considering the framing of this book as both a discussion of theories of social justice and a guide to research methods, a greater diversity of case studies would have strengthened its conclusions. There is one chapter on decolonization and global education, but it seems rather disconnected from the rest of the book. In this chapter, issues of indigenous silences, and difficult questions surrounding researchers’ implicit or explicit attempts at ‘reclaiming’ them are raised (171), and a postcolonial perspective is brought to bear in discussions of cultural relevance between contexts (192), the authors noting that ‘socially just research is highly contextualized, [and] demands a situated approach’ (196). However, discussions of coloniality are absent from other chapters.

The final chapters focus on selected methods in depth, and the questions they raise for socially just research: participative and collaborative methods; the sensitive question of ‘insider research’; and ethnography. A call for ‘methodological creativity’ is made, or the combination and adaptation of different research methods to create a methodology uniquely suited to addressing a particular research question (254-5). Again, a number of important insights present themselves here. The authors note that ‘researchers all too often restrict themselves to those most commonly used [methods] (e.g. interviews and questionnaires) even where these are not actually fit for purpose’, and call for a more nuanced approach to methodology (274).

One core theme running through the book is ‘impact’, that much-maligned phrase beloved of managerial academia. Atkins and Duckworth recognize at various

points that social justice approaches imply that ‘the usual forms of dissemination such as conference presentations and journal articles are insufficient’ (250). It may be for this reason that the methodology discussions focus primarily on policy research. Another recurring theme in the book is the tension between the role of the researcher as scientist and as activist (9, 114), and once again policy-focused research in particular is proposed as an avenue to reconcile this tension, in a way that purely academic research cannot (167, 279). The suggestion seems to be that only policy-based research can truly have a social purpose, a bold claim which begs further examination. A more in-depth discussion of the complexities of researcher positionality, and the power relations between senior researcher, junior researcher, and ‘subject’ (which are raised but not extensively pursued) may be necessary to address these issues. There is significant scope for further work here, particularly from a postcolonial perspective.

In the conclusion, the authors lay down a challenge to researchers, suggesting that ‘the very structures of academia may be incongruent with social justice approaches’, that it is ‘too easy to ignore the plight of children, young people and adults... who have differentiated, “divided and divisive” access to education’, and exhorting researchers to ‘challenge the status quo’, to ““walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk”” (278). As welcome as these sentiments are, they strike the reader as perhaps slightly platitudinous in light of the authors’ prescription for these ills, of ‘practitioner fora, blogs, practitioner journals and conferences, personal and professional networks’ and the other trappings of academe (279). Considering the nuanced discussions of the structural issues underlying access to education (4, 143, 150, 170), and the deep analysis into questions of structural violence, power, and equity revealed through the case studies, the conclusion seems to overemphasize the agency of individual researchers in resolving these issues.

This is, however, a relatively minor objection to a book which stands as an important and welcome intervention in favour of socially just and equitable research, and provides numerous examples of how these approaches work in practice. Overall, this book represents a useful contribution to the field, and its reflexive approach to its case studies is very insightful. Research students and early-career academics will find much of value here. A good selection of further reading is also provided at the end of each chapter. While its theoretical framework, UK focus, and concentration on policy research limits its scope, these criticisms are more than made up for by the depth of insight into the methods that are presented.