

**Book review**

**Research methods for social justice and  
equity in education**

Liz Atkins and Vicky Duckworth (2020)

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What is socially just research? Is it research that is participative and enables greater power to those being researched? Is it only about researching marginalised communities? Liz Atkins and Vicky Duckworth have produced a valuable book that addresses these questions and explores the principles of social justice and how researchers can use more ethical methods. If I was a new research student looking for a good book on critical theory and socially just research methods, I might start here. Better still, the book will appeal to teacher educators who want to help students research their practice. One exciting aspect of the book is that it is unashamedly written from the point of view of researchers in post-compulsory education.

In support, and rather unusually, the book offers plenty of examples of research projects that set out to address inequalities, it is knee-deep in citations of use to the new researcher. There's a good glossary, a broad bibliography and every chapter suggests further reading.

This publication is very timely. Most education systems are unfair because they are embedded in societies already weighted in favour of those with the most power. Because this unfairness has evolved historically, it is more pernicious and harder for everyone to see, and even harder to challenge. 'It is not possible to work in this sector,' suggest the authors in the introduction, 'without recognising the lack of equity in how education is structured and enacted and wanting to address this' (p3). Here I am reminded of the delightful book, 'Caliban's Dance: FE after the tempest' which suggests that a re-imagined further education (TAFE) might give students the capacities to engage critically, 'identify inequality and injustice, consider alternatives, and become actively involved in the positive transformation of society' (p177).

The book is divided into three broad sections. In the first there is an exploration and description of the theoretical concepts over four chapters. New terms are explained carefully and there are helpful glossaries, reading lists and a well-argued overview of what social justice might mean. The authors are careful to explain their positioning and see socially just research as one of the drivers to a '...more equitable, critical and democratic education system' (p11). The first section covers theoretical conceptions of social justice and equity; research methods in context; socially just research as ethical in itself; and provides valuable consideration of the well-worn conundrum of the education researcher as 'insider'. The assumption here is that action research and researching one's own practice is likely to be commoner among readers than paid-for research – and that the reader will be a reflexive researcher. It is a good broad introduction to the field. The first section argues that we cannot see research as socially just unless its aims and methods are seen to be 'doing social justice'- in other words to take into account the community and the common good more broadly. This is an appealing stance: it supports the argument that socially just research and social activism are closely related, that care for others and reciprocity are central to action research and practitioner research. In addition, critical pedagogy based on Paulo Freire's work is given a central place in this book - which is helpful to see. The authors take this further by reminding us

that participation in promoting social justice also assumes that the researcher will work with individuals and communities in helping them to shape social policy as part of the broader research purpose.

The second section allows the reader to explore other voices and contexts for research and includes a consideration of power and voice; emancipatory approaches to researching literacy work with adults; and broader global issues. By 'literacy' I don't mean the narrow instrumental teaching of English and its measurement through tests, and neither do the authors. Instead, Atkins and Duckworth write of literacy research in terms of emancipation and students as partners in the process - just as Paulo Freire argued in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this section too, there is proper consideration about making the research ethical in the broadest sense and throughout the process (i.e. not just sorted by an ethics application before you begin!). I found the authors' argument clear and full of useful exemplars. The pithy contributions of other researchers in their own words helps change the narrative voice, and provides examples of research projects and methods to illustrate socially just approaches to research.

The last third of the book offers a discussion of collaborative and participatory methods for researching in a socially just way, a useful consideration of ethnographic approaches, and concludes with a chapter on methodological creativity. The exemplars are once again interesting and thought-provoking.

Of course, no textbook on research is perfect. There are three small concerns for me. First, I found the short section on the history and philosophy of justice puzzling - rushing from Aristotle across belief systems and philosophy with little pause for breath. Better by far for the reader to look at Michael Sandel's excellent primer, 'Justice - what's the right thing to do?' which is both accessible and written for the layperson with great clarity by a philosopher. Second, I found the case examples infuriatingly hard to read because they are in finer type and printed in grey type on grey shaded pages. The publishers need to think again about the accessibility of their design styles. Third, the final chapter, 'Conclusions' is powerful but perhaps too concise. It raises excellent and powerful points but does not quite do justice to the breadth and depth of the previous ten chapters and all the 'case examples'.

There is an inbuilt bias to this useful book, of course, which the authors are very open about - their perspective is unashamedly related to research in post compulsory education and lifelong learning. Both

started out in nursing, then moved into further education colleges (TAFE). Both cut their teeth in literacy work with adults, like some of the best adult educators in the world. This ‘adult education’ background to my mind adds greatly to the value of the book. Nevertheless, there are examples here of research projects in all phases of education and in many different countries.

If, like me, you can sometimes hear yourself talking about critical theory like some throwback to the 1960s, or you are looking for ways to enrich discussions with students on critical theory and why it is such a significant research paradigm, this book will help you, and will inspire researchers to think more carefully about the research approaches and methods they use. More importantly, I think it gives researchers and research students the confidence and the argument to set their research within a social justice framework. Right now, when a global pandemic has shown governments how the gaps between rich and poor are widening, how inequalities in health and education reduce opportunities, and why listening to one another is more critical than ever – we need more social justice research.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Daley, M., Orr, K. & Petrie, J. (eds) (2020). *Caliban’s Dance – FE after the Tempest*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press

<sup>2</sup> Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books

<sup>3</sup> Sandel, M. J. (2010). *Justice – What’s the right thing to do?* London: Penguin Books

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