

*Book Review*

## **Research Methods in Education (6th Edition)**

by Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison

*656 pp, Routledge, London, UK, 2007; ISBN 0-415-36878-2 (paperback), £24.99*

As scientists, we are used to applying the “scientific method” in our research activities. If we then undertake research grounded in a different discipline – such as education – we need support, since we will probably not be familiar with the research approaches used in that discipline. *Research Methods in Education* has for many years been regarded as an authoritative work on education research, and the latest (6th) edition supports researchers with a scientific background in two ways – not only is it an accessible and interesting textbook, but it is also an excellent reference manual.

This book is divided into five sections and 26 chapters. The first part discusses what is meant by research in an educational context, and examines how education research relates to research in other disciplines. In particular, the scientific method is analysed, and contrasted with approaches more appropriate to the social sciences. This section is perhaps a philosophical essay, but it highlights the reasons why understanding how to do research in education is actually an interesting question, and the discussion of the scientific method is particularly helpful for readers who are trained as scientists.

Humans form the focus of most education research, and there is therefore an ethical dimension to most research activities in the field. Part 2 commences with a chapter which explains what ethics is and why it is important for us to be keenly aware of the ethical dimensions of any research in this field. The remaining chapters in this part of the book explore the other tasks which must be completed before actual research commences, and include substantial discussion of the tricky subjects of reliability and validity (this is important for readers who are unfamiliar with non-scientific methods which may initially appear “soft”). An interesting addition since the previous edition is a chapter on “sensitive” research, in which the research process may pose a threat to the researcher and/or the subjects of the research exercise – such as investigations relating to unlawful activities, or research which is politically sensitive.

The third part of the book covers all the research methodologies which are likely to be used in education, such as case studies, experiments, quasi-experiments, ethnographic research, and action research. These are all illustrated with examples, and practical guidance is given as to the type of research activity each may be suitable for, together with a discussion of the pros and cons of each methodological approach.

Most educational research requires data collection and analysis, and the collection activity forms the focus of part 4 of the book. Questionnaires and interviews are two strategies which come to mind, but others include accounts (often used by ethnographers), observations, and tests. Each of these is covered comprehensively, and the reader is provided with “dos” and “don’ts” which – if followed – should ensure that a data collection exercise runs smoothly.

The final part of the book – new to the 6th edition – is coverage of data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative. Processing and interpretation of different types of data sets is supported by worked examples, and the discussion refers, where appropriate, to software (such as SPSS

and NVivo) which can be used to assist in data analysis. I found the material on basic statistical analysis particularly helpful, since (unlike many other books) the examples are carefully chosen to relate closely to research activities in this area.

There is a substantial bibliography (33 pages), and the index is comprehensive. On-line resources are provided at the publisher's web site, consisting of PowerPoint slides, some further reading, and copies of the "boxed" material in the book. I felt this on-line presence was not very helpful, since the amount of extra material is small and for the most part only provides information that is already covered in the book.

Research Methods in Education contains much theoretical material, but this is supported by many practical examples and down-to-earth guidance. It is very clearly written, and demystifies the theory aspects of education research. The 200 pages of supplementary material is particularly practically focused, and is a substantial improvement on the previous edition of the book – if you already have a copy of the 5th edition, I would suggest you consider upgrading.

If you plan to undertake serious educational research in your discipline, Research Methods in Education is an invaluable addition to your bookshelf.

Reviewed by Mike Joy

Department of Computer Science  
University of Warwick  
Coventry  
CV4 7AL