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Book Review

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Engaging science policy: From the side of the messy

Lather, P. 2010

New York: Peter Lang Publishing

118 pp., [SFR 23.00 / €* 15.80 / €** 16.30 / € 14.80 / £ 13.30 / US\$ 22.95], (softcover)

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This book discusses the relationships between education policy and education research. The book contributes to important questions for those with a stake in education research; what is the role of policy in shaping research, what kinds of research are valued, and what effects do these policy and research agendas have on education? These questions are not new to the field of education research, but as Lather demonstrates, still relevant. Through five chapters and a postface, Lather advocates a qualitative approach to education policy and research informed by feminism and a commitment to social justice.

In chapter one Lathers recounts how she came to focus on the relationships between policy and research in the field of education. In particular, her interest lies in the policy move towards a science of education research. She argues that relationships between education policy and research are complex, contested and confusing. As a result, she suggests a break away from quantitative vs. qualitative debates in favour of exploring how 'qualitative work

with a critical edge might improve the quality of practice' (p. 10). This statement is hard to disagree with. However, Lather goes further. She argues that re-thinking what a science of education research might look like is crucial. Rather than focusing only on standardisation, accountability and quantitative studies, she insists that education policy and research must remain alert to shifting social contexts, to be explicit about privileges, authority and uncertainty. Drawing on her background in feminist research, Lather suggests that carried out from this perspective qualitative research has much to offer education.

In chapter one, Lather demonstrates how certain policies, like the No Child Left Behind Act from the US in 2001, re-established a 'science' of education research, and challenges what this shift means for qualitative research. The second chapter establishes the broader context within which education policies created a model of scientific research in the twenty-first century. Lather explores the education policy setting in greater detail, in both the US and the UK. She concludes the chapter by offering an alternative science for education research, one rooted in Foucauldian, feminist and post-colonial perspectives.

In chapter three, Lather argues that the promotion of a scientific approach to education research was part of a move to standardise education through legislation and accountability. She compares the US situation to that in Australia and the UK. She concludes that researchers ought to question whether government advocated scientific methods for education research are capable of handling the complexities involved. She also highlights a key tension within the premise of scientific education research. On the one hand, the idea that educational practices ought to be based on empirical studies and their findings forms the cornerstone of the scientific approach to education research. On the other hand, research shows that teachers rarely change their practices as a result of such studies. This contradiction points to an underlying problem with the assumptions made by certain education policies and the research methods they advocate. Lather uses chapter four to address the ways in which qualitative research could answer demands for socially useful education research. Using Foucault's idea of scientificity, Lather argues for a socially responsible research agenda that defies narrow policy definitions. She refutes positivistic tendencies found in education policy — to relate research to policy only in terms of accountability and regulation — and argues instead that a broader and more complex understanding of what counts as science would better serve education researchers and policy makers alike.

In the final chapter Lather concludes that a critical approach to education policy and the research such policies advocate ought to question the narrow confines of state led agendas. She argues that through their attempts to treat all communities, cultures and knowledges in the same, standardised manner, education policies and their associated research programmes can damage more than they protect. Building on radical approaches to democratic theory and feminist policy analysis, Lather suggests socially just education research and policy ought to address real practices rather than 'best' practices (p. 78). She argues this more difficult path can 'lead toward a reflexive, embodied engagement with otherness, foreground conflict and complication, and attend to the practical logics of reception and the workings of power and difference' (p. 86). She concludes that qualitative research in education is well positioned to resist the homogenising forces of policies committed to ensuring best practice, and in doing so can work towards a more complex view of socially just education.

While this conclusion is well argued, the book closes with an open letter from Lather to Bill Gates. This distracts from the conclusion of the final chapter. In the letter Lather both congratulates Gates for his support of education research and chides him for the direction in which that research is going (for example, standardised measurements of good teachers). She suggests instead that Gates include the learners, the teachers, parents and a diversity of research methods in his attempts to support school reform in the US. The letter at the end of the book echoes statements made elsewhere and pulls focus from the conclusions made in the final chapter. Although Lather obviously felt strongly that such a letter ought to be written, it may have served readers better by being sent directly to Gates.

Readers should be aware of two further issues. Firstly, although the book itself is brief, it is not always an easy read. Sentences are sometimes hard to follow. Take this example from a paragraph in the introductory chapter about socially engaged research; 'Confronted with the empirically elusive as not not philosophy, we can work carefully towards a displacement of a philosophy of presence in order to think mobility' (p. 15). Read with the context of the surrounding paragraphs it is unclear what mobility refers to and what not-philosophy could be. Secondly, the advocacy of qualitative research, while understandable given Lather's background, is never explained. Although the assertions Lather makes regarding the ability of qualitative research to contribute to a socially just and relevant body of research on education are well argued, she sidesteps any discussion of why quantitative research is more or less worthy of such attention than other research methods.

She argues early on that she does not want to play a role in continuing a qualitative vs. quantitative debate about research methods, but focuses exclusively on the qualitative. The case for the value of qualitative research in education has been made more clearly elsewhere (for example, Howe, 2004). While others have suggested that education research is a broad enough field to accommodate a variety of research methods, and have gone as far as suggesting that the range of research tools is actually beneficial (Eisenhart, 2005). Certainly I struggle to think of the quantitative researcher who would argue that their work was not capable of playing a role in the agenda Lather sets out for qualitative education research. Without a discussion of why she focuses on qualitative research, Lather's argument misses a vital component.

Overall this short book makes an interesting argument; that education research ought not be governed by a narrow focus given what we know about how diverse and complex educational practices are. It explores the policy terrain in the US, charts the shift towards a science of education research, outlines the problematic implications of this shift and draws informative comparisons with the UK and Australia. The influence of education policies on research and practice is undoubtedly of interest to education researchers who reflect upon the role of their work in society and trends within the field. For those concerned with educational policy, managerialism and trends within the research-policy nexus, this book would provide some useful insights, in particular Lather's review of the policy setting. The book will also be useful for those interested in discussions of research methods more broadly.

References

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