1. NEW DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH ON EDUCATION
RECONSTRUCTION IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD

Tom O'Donoghue and Simon Clarke

1.1 Introduction

There has been a burgeoning of research on education over the last four decades. This development has been accompanied by a profusion of publications in the form of academic books, chapters, and papers in refereed journals. In their reporting of theoretical and empirical research, there is much that is informative for both generalists and specialists working in the field of education regarding the status quo. Much less prevalent, however, are works that open up broad new areas for deliberation and for research. Those scholars who are exceptions in this regard have provided two types of work. The first of these are works that attempt to open up new research directions within education studies in relation to such matters as education access, participation, pedagogical practices, and outcomes at different education levels (as in primary, secondary and university levels), along with providing expositions on new research approaches.

Much less prominent are works that address a broad range of topics across a broad range of foci. This is understandable since most education research is undertaken from a traditional social science perspective that requires one to engage in empirical inquiry after clearly narrowing down one’s topic and one’s research questions. Yet, works that address a broad range of topics across a broad range of foci are equally valuable for generating streams
of consciousness amongst readers, stimulating thought about topical and divergent areas of research, and promoting creative ideas about how to address them.

This book was conceptualised from the latter point of view. It addresses a variety of new directions in research related to education reconstruction in challenging circumstances. While the argument for adopting such an approach is as outlined above, we are also mindful that the exercise should not become one of presenting a set of totally disconnected chapters. Thus, what is offered needs to be seen as being bounded within a broad framework on what constitutes the nature of education studies. Accordingly, the next section of this opening chapter outlines such a framework. Attention then turns to why research conceptualised in relation to it needs to be viewed in terms of the particular context within which it was undertaken. It is important that this point be emphasised at the outset since it is crucial to keep it in mind when considering the chapters offered in the rest of this book, and which are briefly mapped out at the end of this chapter.

1.2 A Framework for Considering the Nature of Education Studies

This section of the chapter provides a framework for considering the nature of education studies as a distinct field of study within universities. The account is based on a more extensive one provided already by O’Donoghue (2016, 2017). It takes as its starting point the fact that, historically, the study of education emerged within programmes for the preparation of teachers. While initially the emphasis in such programmes was on deepening one’s knowledge in one’s teaching subject areas and on engaging in teaching practice, slowly, but surely, student teachers came to be also exposed in their courses to some history of education and psychology of education. Both subjects were offered to place teaching on a professional footing, the former being aimed at locating it within a great tradition and the latter at providing a scientific basis for pedagogical approaches.

Little by little various other theoretical strands were added to courses. These included the study of the progressive education movement, child development, and the antecedents of what we now term philosophy of education and sociology of education, while throughout, a practical focus was also maintained. In this way, a third strand developed in courses of teacher preparation, namely, one aimed at producing teachers able to reflect on education at the broad societal level. While this strand became known by a variety of terms, ‘education studies’ emerged as the most common and neutral of them.

Education studies eventually became a central component of teacher preparation programmes and was generally well received by staff, students and education authorities. In some universities, particularly in the USA and in continental Europe, the field also developed as an area of study not connected with teacher preparation programmes at all. Sometimes this
T. O’Donoghue and S. Clarke

New Directions

3 • THE Monograph Series, Vol. 1
New Directions in Research

strand in the development of the field was located in schools of psychology, in schools of pedagogy, and in ‘schools of didactic’.

Over time, a confluence took place between the two strands mentioned above. Nevertheless, the associated syllabi in many countries by the late 1960s and early 1970s, consisted of such a disconnected set of academic areas that educationists were forced to devote themselves seriously to defining the nature of education studies in fairly precise terms. In Britain, the philosopher of education, Hirst (1974), made a major contribution to the debate in his distinction between ‘forms of knowledge’, ‘fields of knowledge’, and ‘practical theories’. Over history, he contended, human beings mutually constructed such specific modes of thought, or ways of knowing, as philosophy, mathematics, physical sciences, social sciences, morals, religion, literature, and fine arts. These ‘forms of knowledge’ are complex ways of understanding experience which are publicly specifiable and require justification. Each deals with different concepts, possesses a different logical structure, contains distinctive expressions which are testable against experience, utilises different techniques and skills for exploring experiences, and defines its own criteria for distinguishing true from false and good from bad. Also, each form of knowledge has developed specialist subjects, or disciplines, within it.

‘Fields of knowledge’ are interdisciplinary studies. In Hirst’s terms, they consist of selections from different forms of knowledge, and also from subject disciplines within them, which are organised around a central unifying concept. Examples are geography, women’s studies, and peace studies. ‘Practical theories’, on the other hand, are defined as being composed of relevant knowledge from the various forms of knowledge and from subject disciplines within them, which are organised around certain central practical problems in order to help one to understand these problems as fully as possible and to assist one in coming up with possible solutions for dealing with them. Medicine fits into this category since it consists of knowledge organised around a series of medical problems. Engineering, law, architecture and education can be conceptualised in a similar manner.

Around the same time as Hirst was expounding his views, Broudy et al. (1967) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the USA were designing a model for professional preparation in education which was consistent with Hirst’s views. Their starting point in this regard was a justification for the autonomous existence of professional areas of study, or what Hirst called ‘practical theories’. On this, Broudy and colleagues (1967) adopted the following position:

• For an area of study to justify an autonomous existence it must have a set of special problems that direct and focus its enquiries;

• For an area of study to be professionalized it must use and organize facts and principles taken from diverse disciplines (e.g., chemistry, physics, and psychology) around the demands of its own problems;
• If an area of study is to be professional, it has to utilize practice in order to illuminate theory and to use theory as a guide to practice.

Overall, the argument is that a profession is related to engagement in a practical enterprise; it is goal oriented. This was summarised by arguing that law, medicine, agriculture, engineering, and education, as areas of study, should have distinctive social functions in rendering service to clients. To this end, a professional field of study generates rules or practices, as well as principles or generalisations that guide practice.

From this position, a schema for education studies as a professional area of study was developed. A modified version of this can be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Problem Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Preparation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophical perspectives</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycho-social perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘leadership studies in education’, and ‘the study of how best to prepare teachers’ (as distinct from studying specifically to be a teacher).

Broudy and colleagues’ identification of the five major education areas is also extremely helpful when considered in relation to the manner in which they are organised from left to right in the schema outlined above. There is nothing haphazard about this arrangement. The implication is that in any education system, from the national level right down to the classroom level, we should initially be clear about our education policy. It is only in the light of this that we should make pronouncements about curriculum. Furthermore, it is only when we are clear about the curriculum that we should pronounce on matters of teaching and learning. Once we are clear on all of these areas we can pronounce on leadership in education. Finally, we can then go on to pronounce on teacher preparation, both pre-service and on-going.

To bring this section to conclusion, it has been argued that education studies developed in different, yet related, ways. The position subscribed to in this chapter is that the approach developed by Broudy and colleagues has the greatest utility. One aspect of it, however, that is not sufficiently stressed by many when engaging in their education research projects is the emphasis placed on the importance of taking cognisance of socio-cultural matters. In particular, many education researchers, we hold, seem to consider that the results of research generated from populations located within particular contexts can be generalised universally. The folly of subscribing to this view is now addressed.

1.3 The Importance of Paying Attention to Context When Considering Education Research

Braun et al. (2011) are some of the champions of the position that education policies are informed by various commitments, values and forms of experience, and that these should be made explicit in frameworks for policy enactment. They also hold very strongly to the importance of taking cognisance of the reality that policies are “enacted in material conditions, with varying resources” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 588). In this connection, they conceptualise four sets of contexts: the ‘situated contexts’, the ‘professional contexts’, the ‘material contexts’ and the ‘external contexts’, while recognising that disaggregating them can sometimes be an artificial exercise since, in certain instances, they are interconnected and can overlap.

To stress the importance of considering ‘situated contexts’ is to recognise that the histories of education institutions and the associated matter of their reputations, can be alive within the collective consciousness and can have an influence on key stakeholders. The notion of ‘professional contexts’ refers to somewhat less tangible context variables, including “values, teacher commitments and experiences” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 591). The notion of ‘material contexts’ refers to such matters as staffing, budget, buildings, available technology and surrounding infrastructure. Finally, the notion of ‘external contexts’ includes such matters as
local authority support, inspectors’ reports, league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities, along with the relationship that any particular education institution has with another.

There is a tradition within the discipline of ‘comparative education’ on emphasising the proposition that the possibility of any set of educational ideas and practices proposed for any context being adopted successfully is maximised when attention is paid to the nature of that context. Elsewhere we have elaborated on this proposition in detail (O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). In particular, we have highlighted the research of comparative educationists indicating how apparently well thought-out ideas on education change have floundered because they have involved inappropriate transnational education-knowledge transfer. By such transfer is meant the process which involves the exchange of theories, models and methods for academic or practical purposes among countries.

Back at the turn of the twentieth century, Sir Michael Sadler, British historian, educationist and university administrator, was at pains to stress that national education systems could only be understood by first of all understanding the national contexts in which they functioned. The most oft-quoted position of his is as follows:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties, and ‘of battles long ago’. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. (Quoted in Higginson, 1979, p. 49)

The essence of Sadler’s conclusion is that national contextual forces must be understood and that it could be futile to borrow an education practice or innovation which had evolved in one national context and transplant it into a different societal, including local, context.

Sadler’s position was very much central to the thinking of a group of later world-leading comparative educationists, including Isaac Kandel (1881-1965), Nicholas Hans (1888–1969) and Friedrich Schneider (1881–1969) (Wolhuter et al., 2007). At the most fundamental level, they stressed the vital importance of paying attention to such factors as geographical environment, the economy, culture, religion and social differentiation. Notwithstanding the influence of their work on academics, policy makers in many contexts were either oblivious to their insights, or chose to ignore them, as the process of transnational knowledge transfer continued into the twentieth century. The folly of this approach became particularly evident in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when the predominant model being adopted for such transfer between industrialised nations and developing nations was one of imitation and intervention; of
attempting to solve problems in non-Western countries by utilising Western knowledge (Kumar, 1979; O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010; Useem & Useem, 1980).

During the 1970s, heed began to be taken of the wisdom of the likes of Sadler, Kandel, Hans and Schneider as the failure of many ambitious education innovations made donors, lenders, recipients and borrowers considerably aware of the complexity and context-dependence of educational change (O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010, p. 11). Academics within the fields of curriculum studies and educational administration were particularly active in the field. Prominent among these was Hargreaves (1993, p. 149), who argued as follows on why innovations in education frequently fail quite disastrously:

....in grafting new ideas onto schools, we do it with so little knowledge about the nature of the everyday world of teachers, pupils and schools that our attempted grafts (and various forms of major and minor surgery) merely arouse the ‘anti-bodies’ of the host which undermine our attempts to play doctor to an educational patient. He went on to argue that it is ‘only when we understand the precise nature of the host body can we design our innovatory grafts with any confidence that they will prove to be acceptable’ (1993).

This was an echoing of Fullan’s (1982) argument that to introduce change that promises more success and less failure, the world of the people most closely involved in implementation must be understood. Concurrently, policy makers were advocating the adoption of flexible, iterative and incremental strategies (O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). In similar vein, Carron and Chau (1996) argued that one of the foremost reasons for suboptimal implementation of new educational projects is that planners do not consult sufficiently with those who have to implement their plans.

It might be thought that by the turn of the twentieth-first century the argument running through this section of the chapter so far had been embraced universally. This, however, is not so. On the contrary, some of the developments of the past two decades, which have involved greater centralisation of many aspects of education have led to calls for the invention and discovery of sure-fired prescriptive models in all aspects of education that would lead to easily generalizable solutions for all contexts. Those who have embraced such thinking are clearly ignorant of the still-compelling argument made by William James back in the 1890s, when, regarding the function of the study of psychology for educationists, he stated that one makes a great mistake to think that it can provide definite programmes, schemes and methods of instruction for specific classroom contexts. Rather, he went on:

Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality. The science of logic never made a man [sic.] reason rightly, the science of ethics never made a man behave rightly. The most such sciences can do is to help us catch ourselves up, check ourselves, if we start to reason or behave wrongly; and to criticise ourselves more articulately if we make mistakes. A science only lays
down lines within which the rules of the art must fall, laws which the follower of the art must not transgress; but what particular thing he shall positively do within those lines is left exclusively to his own genius . . . and so while everywhere the teaching must agree with the psychology, it may not necessarily be the only kind of teaching that would so agree; for many diverse methods of teaching may equally well agree with the psychological laws. (James, 1958, p. 15)

Eisner (1983) put forward a similar position in arguing that because of the changing uniqueness of the practical situations that make up the education domain, only a portion of professional practice can be usefully treated in the manner of a prescriptive science (O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010, p. 73). The gap between general prescriptive frameworks and successful practice is, he held, dependent more on the reflective intuition, the craft, and the art of the professional practitioner than on any particular prescriptive theory, method, or model (O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2010, p. 73).

A body of educationists who study educational leadership have, however, been somewhat exceptional in recognising the importance of attending to context if one is to maximise the possibility of successfully enacting educational policies and associated practices. As early as 1996, Gronn and Ribbins (1996) posited clearly that the approach to educational leadership in any particular circumstance needs to take that circumstance into account. Dimmock and Walker (1997), arguing in like vein, were quick in supporting this position. Bridges (2007) followed by questioning some of the assumptions of the ‘evidence-based practice’ movement. In particular, he called into question the view that generalisations derived from large population studies can lead to recommendations at the national level for implementation at the local level. He went on:

You cannot logically derive lessons from a single specific instance from such generalizations. They always have to be linked to consideration of local conditions which might well point to a different recommendation...a teacher or school may test out different teaching strategies in their own environment and find out ‘what works’ for them. The fact that this enquiry was small scale and local does not invalidate it as a reliable basis for local practice even if it might be regarded as an unreliable basis for national policy without some further work. (Bridges, 2007, p. 2)

Thus, Bridges concluded, one cannot treat local and national decisions as if they have exactly the same requirements.

This brings us back to where we started at the beginning of this chapter, and particularly to the work of Braun et al. (2011, p. 585), who argue that it is important to take context seriously. They hold that policies are intimately shaped and influenced by education-specific factors, even though in much central policy-making the associated constraints, pressures and enablers of policy enactment tend to be neglected. Instead, policy-makers “tend to assume
‘best possible’ environments for implementation: ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 585). To this, they add three further points. First, while one should always try to capture the full range of contextual factors in any situation, such a list can never be exhaustive. Consequently, and speaking specifically in relation to schools, they argue that any framework one uses to this end should be seen “as a heuristic device that is intended to stimulate interest and to ask questions about the circumstances of policy enactment in ‘real’ schools, rather than cover all possibilities” (Braun et al., p. 595). Secondly, and related to the latter point, context is “dynamic and shifting, both within and outside of schools” (Braun et al., p. 595), with possible changes taking place in staff and student profiles, including attitudes. Thirdly, while it is crucial to pay attention to Thrupp and Lupton’s (2006, p. 312) argument that “there still tends to be much more focus on schools’ differential internal organisation and practice . . . than on diverse ‘external’ contexts”, one should also never lose sight of paying attention to “the most ‘material’ of contexts – the buildings and budgets, available technologies and local infrastructures” (Braun et al. 2011, p. 595).

1.4 The Particular Focus of the Book

Both the particular approach to education research outlined in the first section of this chapter and each of the three points made by Braun et al. (2011) and noted above, informed the thinking which led to the commissioning of the remaining chapters of this book on new directions in research related to education reconstruction in challenging circumstances. We view ‘challenging circumstances’ as having a variety of types. Elsewhere (Clarke & O’Donoghue, 2013, 2016) we have illustrated what such variety can mean specifically in relation to school leadership. Clarke and Wildy (2004), for example, reported investigations into the ways leadership was understood and practised in the distinctive environment of the small, remote school, Walker (2004) provided insights from his study of the idiosyncratic characteristics of leadership in multi-ethnic schools, and Fitzgerald (2003a, 2003b, 2004) drew attention to how educational leadership might be practised differently by females, by indigenous leaders and by female indigenous leaders. Also, Shah (2005) and Sullivan (2006) opened up another avenue for research by focusing on leadership in the context of faith-based schools. Shah (2005), in fact, was concerned specifically with illustrating how learners from diverse philosophical and ethnic backgrounds conceive of, and perceive, education leadership, and also with illustrating that how they receive it is bound to interact with their learning experience and performance. In a later work (Shah, 2008) she also highlighted how the student population across much of the world is increasingly reflective of diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities. This rich diversity, she argued, could become a challenge for leaders in education, teachers and policy-makers in the absence of an understanding of the diverse sources of knowledge that people draw on for directing their beliefs and daily practices. Shah’s (2008) conclusion is that education leaders need to be aware of the need to draw on diverse ethnic knowledge sources to inform and
enrich approaches towards managing diversity. A similar position was taken by Jansen (2007) in relation to providing leadership in societies in transition, including democratising societies.

A similar range of challenging circumstances are outlined in the chapters which follow, which also illustrate how education research can be both theoretical and in the form of critique, with the latter even being in the tradition of the long-established review essay, just as much as they can be based on empirical research. Specifically regarding empirical research, we have favoured the presentation of qualitative studies undertaken within the interpretivist paradigm. In this respect, we have been influenced by the argument of Clarke and Wildy (2010) that comprehensive, professional knowledge bases embedded in the realities of workplaces found in education institutions and in the environments in which they are located should be made available in a variety of ways. It was this argument that led us to conclude that interpretive approaches to research are potentially fruitful insofar as they can help to depict the ‘lived’ experience of practitioners and describe accurately the realities of their work in given contexts.

The final concept that is central to the focus of this book and that has not been considered already is the contemporary phenomenon that has been termed ‘education restructuring’ and that has been taking place over the past 25 years in a great number of countries. At a macro-level, it has involved the central education authorities in the countries, states or provinces in question accepting prime responsibility for identifying and promulgating system aims and targets which schools and higher education level institutions are expected to draw upon in generating their own development plans. Increasingly, these authorities have been adopting student outcome approaches to restructuring curricula, so that aims and targets at school, college and centre levels can be couched in terms of student achievement. At the same time, it has also involved a shift from centralized governance to decentralized school and college-based management. The focus is on change at the whole-institution level, primarily affecting governance, management and administration. Concurrently, initiatives in restructuring at the micro-level have been aimed at ‘reforming’ teaching and learning. The concern has been to introduce a more flexible, responsive and student-oriented education by targeting changes in work organization, pedagogical practices and learning processes.

1.5 The Chapters

This opening chapter has provided a framework for considering the chapters that follow in relation both to each other and to education studies as a whole. The first six chapters are concerned with issues to do with education reconstruction in challenging circumstances particularly at the university level. Chapter Two, by Matthew Malcolm, takes as its starting point the observation that now, at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, liberal arts education is growing as quickly in East Asia as it is diminishing in the US. Adopting the approach of the extended review essay, he also notes that the nature of liberal arts
education in East Asia appears to be distinct both from classic European liberal arts, and current US models of liberal arts.

Chapter Three, by Teresa O’Doherty, continues the theme of university education, albeit in relation to the other side of the world. She highlights the fact that, contrary to developments in other jurisdictions, initial teacher education programmes in Ireland have, while seeking to revise and refresh the approaches taken to teacher preparation, consolidated the position of the foundation disciplines within them. Chapter Four, by Joseph Steinberg, outlines a particular approach to the teaching of literacy in a changing world. This is followed by Chapter Five, by Victoria Valdebenito, Tom O’Donoghue and Lesley Vidovich which details developments in Chile which reflect an international trend towards the provision of undergraduate studies within a university college system on the US model, while postgraduate studies are provided through graduate schools. The remaining chapter in this section, namely, Chapter Six, by Patrick Swanzy and Anthony Potts, considers quality assurance in higher education in developing countries, with particular reference to Ghana.

The next selection of chapters, Chapters Seven, Eight, Nine and Ten, are centred on schools in Indonesia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Serbia, respectively. The particular lens adopted by those authors who engaged in the empirical research for the chapters, namely, Dwi Est Andriani, Gilbert Karareba, Thida Kheang, Jelena Rakovic, Simon Clarke and Tom O’Donoghue is that of leadership. In each case the concern is with issues faced by school leaders in particularly challenging circumstances in the countries in question, the first three of which are developing countries, while Rwanda, Cambodia and Serbia are all post-conflict countries.

The remaining four chapters are focused on broad issues in ‘troubled’ circumstances. In Chapter Eleven, Fiona Hayward provides an overview of benefits and challenges of learning in times of conflict. In Chapter Twelve, Grant Rodwell and Nina Maadad consider a useful approach to researching Islamophobia and moral panics in schools. In Chapter Thirteen, Alex Robbins details a project in Colombia for youth peace building through the digital arts. Finally, in Chapter Fourteen, Angela Evangelinou-Yiannakis, in a review essay, considers the particular case of schooling and education in Lebanon.

It was deemed appropriate not to provide a concluding chapter as the preceding ones have been offered deliberately to address a broad range of topics across a broad range of foci in order to generate streams of consciousness amongst readers. To have tried to bring all of this together into a synthesis would have been to go against the desire to stimulate thought about topical and divergent areas of research, and promote creative ideas about how to address them.
References


