Book review

LeCompte, M. D., Millroy, W. L. and Preissle, J. (Eds.) (1992). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press. **(**881 pages).

Reviewed by Peter Musaeus, PhD Student Aarhus University

Handbooks are voluminous and give the reader high expectations. They are authoritative and not just any "approach to" or "sketch towards" something. The stereotypical view of the handbook states that such a book represents legitimised knowledge, clearly stated and all ready to be looked up. This notion of knowledge is problematic not only for epistemological but also for political reasons since knowledge becomes desituated and the defining of what counts as legitimised, "mainstream" happens at the cost of the voices of the oppressed. However, handbooks are justified to the extent that they give an overview of a field of inquiry by defining or describing its problems and the procedures developed to deal with these problems.

Thus I recall starting reading this book with both expectation and scepticism: Could it take me to a summit overlooking the landscape of education intersected by roads of qualitative methods? I was attracted to this book since it is unique in one sense: While there are a few other handbooks in either education or qualitative research none are, to my knowledge, devoted to both. Therefore this handbook fills a gap for researchers in education curious about qualitative research. As Harry Wolcott asks in one of the opening chapters: "Are you in the market or not?" This question stresses the point that hardly anyone without a research problem will use this handbook. This being said there are three questions that I will ask from this book:

1) Does it cover significant developments in qualitative methodology applied to education? Is it well balanced in terms of the various techniques and perspectives presented?

In order to judge its selection of material I will briefly refer to the titles of the three sections of this book:

I.   "The current boundaries and the future directions of ethnographic research"
II.   "Issues in the execution of ethnography and qualitative research"
III.   "Applications of qualitative and ethnographic research"

As the section titles indicate (and a reading of the chapters tend to support) there is a strong ethnographic leaning in this handbook. It is quite problematic that a handbook, which is likely to become the canon for year to come, is written mainly from the perspective of a single perspective.

A well-written chapter by Harry Wolcott, who is by the way an anthropologist, in part ameliorates this bias. In it he argues that ethnographic methods should not be claimed the property of solely anthropologists - or sociologists for that matter. His argument centres on what he calls "posturing".

To posture carries the negative connotation of acting in an affected way, however it can also mean to position oneself strategically. In other words his chapter is about avoiding posturing and seeking it, i.e. not to carry out qualitative research, which is artificial in scope, but instead aim for poignant research.

Wolcott has a neat way of cutting everything down to the bare necessities. For instance he cuts the number of data gathering techniques down to three (experiencing, enquiring, and examining). This is a lot less than the estimate of 1,048,576 (sic!), which Wolcott cites Schwab to have posited. In general Wolcott seems to conjure to the maxim that the secret in qualitative research is to get rid of as much data as possible as soon as possible. However, at the same time Wolcott seems to be unclear about certain conceptual distinctions. For instance he distinguishes between theory driven-, concept driven-, reform driven-, and procedure driven research. I fail to see the justification for this distinction. From a critical point of view it does not make sense to posit such strands of inquiry, as separate - unless we want to point out that there is a crisis in contemporary social science. Another place, where Wolcott makes an artificial conceptual distinction is when it comes to the way anthropology and psychology use theory. His thesis is that psychology is "up front", meaning that theory comes first and anthropology is "laid back". This is not a well-founded remark, and it is, not surprisingly, contradicted in a later chapter (by Carspecken and Apple) on critical anthropology. Here it is argued that all qualitative research is "theory-driven," and the question then becomes not how does it rid itself of theory, but which theory drives it? Thus formulating a methodology without theory is naïve since it is itself a theory.

And the theoretical inclination in this book is towards ethnography thus leaving out perspectives from history, management, and psychology - to name a few.

2) To what extent does this handbook deal with important theoretical traditions?

This handbook is at its best, when it comes to introducing different theoretical stances. I cannot do justice to the richness of all chapters but e.g. point to Erickson, who traces the development of context analysis to conversation analysis and communicative action. Also Evelyn Jacobs has written an interesting chapter on the potential of activity theory in qualitative research relating such studies to cognition in context studies. Another interesting example is the chapter Leslie Roman defends a feminist materialist ethnography. She argues against a vulgar dialectical materialism in which class determines everything and gender also becomes deterministic. Social reality is more contradictory and rich than that, but she adheres to a reading of Marxism, which places the culture as reliant upon the material base from which also ideology stems. Finally Peter Woods reviews symbolic interactionism and its significant influence on qualitative research among sociologist today. He points to the fact that this tradition, also known as the Chicago School (Mead, Blumer and to some extent also Goffman), arose from urban sociological studies. These scientists shared a view on what Peter Woods calls "getting their hands dirty", i.e. of developing theory out of the empirical data. This is exactly the same commitment, which spurred Anselm Strauss, another second-generation member of the Chicago school, to develop grounded theory together with Glaser. Thus grounded theory pops up in the book, but (unfortunately given its popularity) without being given any more coverage. I must add, out of context but I simply found it entertaining that Peter Woods also

discusses several interesting dilemmas in the role of the researcher: Going native versus being objective, the I (creativity of the researcher) and the me (the evaluation, the scientific community, the canon).

3) Can this handbook be used as a means of consultation, when faced with practical questions relating to actually doing qualitative research?

An important reason for consulting a handbook is to find information about something more or less specific (e.g. to answer a general question such as what is discourse analysis or more specifically what speaks for or against a given research design, etc.). In other words the main stages of conducting qualitative research must be covered in this handbook: Identifying a research problem, planning, interviewing, analysing, writing it up and publishing. I do not find that this book contains discussion on all these matters. I must grant that there are examples of e.g. interpretations of a text from the point of view of discourse analysis (by James Gee, Sarah Michaels and Mary O'Connor). Furthermore George and Louise Spindler address the problems of volume of data, instrumentation, quantification, time to use at the site and general criteria for good ethnography. Their criteria for good ethnography of education can perhaps be summoned up in a belief that observations are contextualised and should be generated in situ by any means (as long as it is ethically justified). But there is not much material in the book on the later stages of actually writing it up and publishing. Thus this book is not "a soul mate" to consult in times of pressing doubts, or the trying to overcome practical questions, such as how focus groups work or what are the pitfalls of groups interviews, can good journalism be good qualitative research etc?

Garry Anderson has in a review in 1994 of this book noted that it devotes great interest to critical theory. Therefore he found it highly surprising and unfortunate that almost all authors but one (Peter Woods in the UK) are at North American Universities and that the Latin Emancipatory movement (Freire etc.) are not represented. In other words a handbook with a critical outlook, which is oblivious to non-American alternatives, suffers from shortcomings. Even if (German for instance) critical theory never found its way into this book's definition of ethnography, then where are the African and Asian voices, which ought to have been given space?

Now I will not need to criticise this book, posing as a handbook of qualitative research in education, for not covering everything within its title. Such a task would simply be too great. But it ought to have dealt explicitly and critically with what it left out. Thus, as mentioned already, the ethnographic bias is a problem. And to reiterate: Focus group interviews, visual anthropology, and even action research – all relevant areas – are more or less completely left out. Also there might be too little connection between the chapters and pointing out in the world: Where is the criticising, juxtaposing of various traditions and pointing to unresolved problems or new territories in qualitative research in education? But the various shortcomings of this book as a handbook are also its strengths. If we for a moment forget that it aspires to be a general handbook, it is actually an interesting book on one line of doing qualitative research. Thus the focus on participant observation away from just plain interviews makes sense. However, what is another severe bias stems from the book's various examples of education. Thus the actual settings mentioned in the book mostly concern children's schooling (in primary school). Where are the examples of other educational

institutions such as trade schools, folk high schools etc.? In conclusion, Voltaire is dead and the role and time of the great encyclopaedias has since been questioned, yet we need handbooks, if for no other reason, to find out what the limitations are of the canonical view, which is a contradiction in terms, since ethnography deals with points of views not the canon.

Literature

Anderson, Gary L. (1994) The Cultural Politics of Qualitative Research in Education: Confirming and Contesting the Canon. *Educational Theory*. Volume 44, Number 2: 225. Available from: http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/Educational-Theory/Contents/1994_2.asp