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Editors

# International Handbook of Interpretation in Educational Research

 Springer

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# Preface: How the Handbook Came into Being

It all started on December 1, 2009, with an e-mail from Yoka Janssen (Springer), who invited me (Paul Smeyers) to edit an international handbook on methods in philosophy of education. Though appealing, I immediately had reservations concerning the particular topic. Following Wittgenstein and many other philosophers, I was not sure whether there was such a thing as a method in that area. But even the plural, “methods,” which Wittgenstein does use, has in my opinion the wrong connotations. My skepticism was not refuted by the publication in the same year of a special issue (*Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2009, ed. by Claudia Ruitenberg) with the provocative title “What do philosophers of education do? (And how do they do it?).” I held and still hold the belief that it is difficult to speak of a method in the sense that we normally attach to that word when talking about educational research. But there was something we could do in this area I thought. Some 10 years earlier, I co-edited a collection with Bas Levering (*Opvoeding en onderwijs leren zien* [Teaching to see education and child rearing]) addressing various qualitative methods used in educational research. Typically in that book authors would not only describe their theoretical stance and the method they used for their investigation (e.g., a case of action research) but also, and to a large extent, deal with an example of their particular research, showing what they actually did. For many years, I made use of this collection in my own teaching in the context of a course on qualitative research methods in the M.A. educational sciences degree at KU Leuven. This proved to fulfill its intended purpose of providing: an initiation into research which exemplifies what it is exactly that a researcher bears in mind, the possible pitfalls, the problems, the tensions, and much more that needs to be taken into account when engaging in trying to make sense of a particular educational context. I took this idea with me when I discussed Springer’s question with Yoka Janssen, and Springer was excited about it, not in the least because I told them that that particular collection was highly successful, as was shown by the thousands of copies that Boom sold (not only in Belgium but in The Netherlands as well) since it was published in 1998.

It was overwhelmingly clear that it would be impossible for me to take on the editorship just on my own. It so happened that in January 2010 David Bridges and

I were together in Addis Ababa preparing for the forthcoming biennial conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, and so I talked to him about the project. Going through what we thought could be part of an international handbook, it furthermore became clear that it would not be a bad idea to look for a team of general editors, say four, to combine our expertise and to be able to cope with such a demanding task. I approached Morwenna Griffiths who gladly accepted, mentioning among other things that she would like to work with us, because of the kinds of discussion that she thought we would surely have. In the discussion I subsequently had with Springer in February 2010, various ideas were exchanged; Nick Burbules, who was delighted to be part of this, was added as a general editor and we were strongly encouraged by Springer to put a formal proposal together for the handbook. Thus the four of us met in June 2010 and decided that the focus of the handbook would be on interpretation in educational research methods and that extensive use would be made in all chapters of examples of educational research, and reflections on the role of interpretation in that research, whatever the methods. We were also very much occupied with realizing a truly international collection. Moreover, we would explicitly try to balance the gender of the authors. The lengthy proposal was sent out to six reviewers by Springer, and slightly amended based on the comments that were received. It reached its final shape in September of that year. Now we could really start.

As we were fully aware of the high level of specific methodological expertise that was required, we decided to look for contributing or section editors who could help us in identifying authors for the various approaches of educational research. Though our initial plan was to finalise everything within 3 years or so, we experienced several delays. It was not easy to find experts in a particular genre or approach who could also deal with the eight substantive fields of educational research we had in mind (e.g., learning, or teaching and teacher education; see the introduction for a detailed discussion of genre and field). The plan was indeed to put a collection (an 8 by 8 matrix) together that could be read either with a focus on a particular genre or methodological approach (such as narrative or history) or by reference to a particular substantive field (such as curriculum and hidden curriculum or educational organizations and leadership). Moreover, for some genres the editors encountered quite frustrating challenges, and thus it took us 5 years to finalise everything. After hundreds and hundreds of e-mail exchanges, we finally got there. The resulting handbook, with the collaboration of more than 100 authors from 27 countries worldwide, is around 760,000 words.

We are grateful to our section editors for their substantial work in guiding the authors to what the focus of this collection is. Without their suggestions and comments it would not have been possible to produce an international collection that in each genre presents excellent work reflecting the various kinds of educational research. And we are indebted to the authors who took on the task not only to present their work, but to discuss extensively at the beginning and at the end of their chapters; where and how interpretation plays an important role, to show the reader how they proceeded when setting up the research, collecting their data, interpreting these, justifying their conclusions, and offering a meta-level reflection. Due to

delays that we were confronted with at various stages, some of the authors had to wait a long time before they could see the publication of their work. Some genres were already finished after 2 years; others things were more difficult and more time was required. We learned to be patient, and appreciated that it was frustrating not only for us, but more importantly for our section editors and many of the authors. However at last we were able to produce something like what we had wanted to produce. For us, the general editors, it was not only an intellectually very stimulating experience, but moreover and at a more personal level a very engaging, demanding, and rewarding endeavor. Though we worked efficiently, we needed each other's encouragement and we always looked forward to the many meetings we organized and the face-to-face discussions which we enjoyed both academically as well as socially. Without each other's support it would never have been possible to bring this to a good end.

Finally, we thank Yoka Janssen, Annemarie Keur, and all the other staff from Springer. It was a pleasure to work with them. And we thank the universities of Ghent and Leuven, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) for their support in this task that was much more demanding than we ever expected. We are confident that this book will assist junior researchers (at master's and Ph.D. level) and our colleagues who are teaching methodology courses to highlight the utmost importance of interpretation at all levels and stages of educational research. We are also confident that it will stimulate and challenge more experienced researchers, as it has challenged and stimulated the four of us, to think again about the processes and purposes of educational research more generally.

Ghent, Belgium  
May 2014

Paul Smeyers  
and on behalf of  
David Bridges  
Morwenna Griffiths  
Nicholas C. Burbules





# General Introduction

**Morwenna Griffiths, David Bridges, Nicholas C. Burbules,  
and Paul Smeyers**

This book helps researchers to understand better the role of interpretation in educational research—and we hope to understand better the variety of ways that interpretation enters into the research process. It focuses on the specifics of interpretation in the actual doing of educational research, but it is not a how-to book.<sup>1</sup> *The International Handbook*

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this collection could give occasion to some confusion for the reader. According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Pearsall 1998) a “handbook” is “a book giving information such as facts on a particular subject or instructions for operating a machine.” It is derived from the Old English *handboc* translated from the Latin *manualis*. There is another term in English that is derived from this Latin word, i.e., “manual,” which refers to “a book of instructions, especially for operating a machine or learning a subject” (ibid.). Similar references are found in Dutch, where “handboek” refers to a publication which gives the state of the art in a discipline or sub-discipline, or in the German “*Handbuch*” which refers to an organized compilation of fragments of human knowledge which can be used as a reference book.

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*of Interpretation in Educational Research* does not offer specific instruction about how to proceed when engaging in educational research, but rather offers the possibility of what Lave and Wenger called “legitimate peripheral participation” in witnessing a variety of forms of research covering a broad range of issues and settings. Educational research pursues different kinds of theoretical interests and uses a diversity of modes of explanation. The Handbook reflects this variety through its international array of authors, settings, questions, and methods, emphasizing that the field of education includes some very diverse objects of inquiry and that researchers in different parts of the world give priority to different aspects of educational policy and practice as well as to different ways of investigating them. It is in the focus on *interpretation* that we try to bring these different approaches into conversation with each other.

Focusing on interpretation necessarily draws one into philosophy. Yet what we offer is not a philosophical discussion of interpretation as such, though there is some of that, both in the introductory chapters in the part we labeled “The Theoretical Landscape” as well as in some of the chapters further on in the book. No single answer to the question of the role interpretation plays in educational research is offered here. Instead the approach of the collection should be seen more in a Wittgensteinian spirit of, “assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (Wittgenstein 1953, pp. I, # 127). Or as he himself writes about the *Philosophical Investigations*,

The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which we made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. (ibid., p. vii)

He says that his thoughts were soon crippled

... if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. (ibid., p. vii)

What we wanted the authors to focus on is how interpretation is conceived in the actual doing of it, in practice, when they are doing their work: we invited them to *show* what interpretation means in the very act of doing research. For us, then, what is offered are “reminders” that range “over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction.” This distinct mode of argument and presentation is one suited, we believe, to a more open-ended examination of a theme, and not a prescription of the “right” or “best” way of doing things. It is through observing and comparing the different ways that the authors deal with interpretation that an understanding of its nature and role in the research process emerges—but then it is also a consequence that different readers will discover this in different ways.

We want to say something in this introduction about how the Handbook can be used, but this requires first detailing how it has been set up, clarifying the various steps that were taken in order to achieve what we have in mind. This Handbook focuses on the often-neglected dimension of interpretation in educational research. It argues that all educational research is in some sense “interpretive,” and that understanding this issue belies some usual dualisms of thought and practice, such as the sharp dichotomy between “qualitative” and “quantitative” research. On our

view, interpretation extends from the very framing of the research task, through the sources which constitute the data, the process of their recording, representation, and analysis, to the way in which the research is finally or provisionally presented to others. The thesis of the Handbook is that interpretation cuts across all forms of research, philosophically, organizationally, and methodologically. Thus, for example, not only qualitative researchers, or philosophers, historians, and cultural theorists, but also quantitative researchers rely on interpretation and cannot avoid it.

By covering a comprehensive range of research approaches and methodologies, the Handbook gives educational researchers, including novices and early career researchers, a set of signposts to the complex landscape of educational research, indicating something of what particular genres of approach can offer for the investigation of a number of enduring issues, or “fields” as we call them (see below). A glance at the contents list will show something of this range, and also of the many settings in which the research took place, from Swedish school classrooms to the street children of Indonesia, from artisan stonemasons in Italy to videogame design in North America, from teacher education in the UK to citizenship testing in Colombia. Each chapter provides a full description and explanation of why specific research choices were made in particular circumstances, together with reflections on the benefits or shortcomings of these choices—combined in each case with consideration of the role of interpretation in the research process.

The Handbook selects examples of a large number of methods traditionally classified as “qualitative,” “interpretive” or “quantitative,” across the broad area of the study of education. Along one dimension of organization, we commissioned research studies across eight “fields”:

- Learning
- Teaching and teacher education
- Curriculum and hidden curriculum
- Evaluation and assessment
- Educational organizations and leadership
- Equity, justice, and diversity
- Policy
- Non-formal education and informal education

Along a second dimension of organization, we divided the book into eight sections marked as much by the variety of approaches within them as by the differences between the sections. We describe these clusters of methods as *genres* or *approaches*:

- Narrative approaches
- Analysis of language and significations
- Ethnography *of* education: sociological and anthropological approaches
- Ethnography *in* educational research: applying ethnographic methods in educational inquiry
- Historical approaches

- Philosophical approaches
- Quantitative approaches
- Cultural-transgressive approaches

Within each genre, we tried to provide at least one example addressing each of the fields.

It will thus be possible to use the Handbook to explore either a field of educational inquiry and an overview of genres used in that field, or to use particular genres to examine different fields of enquiry within the theory and practice of education. The following table (genre number followed by chapter number in that genre) gives a starting point for doing that.

Genre	Learning	Teaching teacher education	Curriculum hidden curriculum	Evaluation assessment	Organization leadership	Equity justice diversity	Policy	Non-formal informal
Narrative	1.5	1.6	1.3	1.4	1.1	1.8	1.7	1.2
Language significations	2.6	2.8	2.2	2.4	2.7	2.3	2.1	2.5
Ethnography of education	3.1	3.3	3.5	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.4	3.2
Ethnography in educational research	4.2	4.7	4.1	4.8	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.4
Historical	5.3	5.2	5.5	5.4	5.1	5.6	5.7	5.8
Philosophical	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.4	6.5	6.6	6.7	6.8
Quantitative	7.1	7.7	7.2	7.3	7.4	7.5	7.6	7.8
Cultural-transgressive	8.1 8.3	8.7	8.8	8.4	8.5	8.2	8.6	8.9

By including a research report in each chapter, the Handbook offers not just an outline of particular methods but a concrete example of the way these have been applied in research practice. Throughout, authors are also self-conscious about the role of interpretation in the selection and execution of particular genres of research, and thus on the “why” questions underlying the “how” questions of actually doing the research.

There are many good handbooks on methods in educational research within either a quantitative or qualitative stance, and there are many good books dealing with meta-theoretical issues. However, hardly any of them focus particularly on interpretation and its centrality in the process of research and research writing. We think it is remarkable how little attention the process of interpretation itself receives either in the index or text of most of these books, even books that claim to be dealing with “qualitative and interpretive” research. In usual practice, we have found, “interpretive” just becomes a synonym for “qualitative,” or with specific qualitative methods without being explained or defined very clearly. Finally, although a significant number of educational research studies include both quantitative and qualitative methods, few books include both, except to contrast them. We want to emphasize their continuities as well as their differences, which also gives this book a distinctive niche.

Many handbooks also give a lot of space to history, i.e., how methods have been used in the past. Others focus predominantly on philosophical meta-theories, especially ontology and epistemology. Typically they do not include examples of actual research which has been carried out in diverse educational contexts. If one wants to know more about that, one is obliged to turn to books which address the use of a method in a particular educational area—but this goes with the disadvantage that the researcher has to go through several books in order to learn enough to make an informed decision about what is appropriate for her particular research. It goes without saying that this also confronts university lecturers who teach Methodology courses with the difficult task of selecting published material that is apt for their purposes.

Finally, there is another dimension that is largely lacking in the material that is available and which is important for the study of education, i.e., the international. Education is typically one of those areas that is given shape within particular societal contexts. An “international handbook” on educational research, therefore, should give examples from across the globe, thus exemplifying the different “opportunities and constraints” that educational research has to confront in different societies. And this became a third organizational strand, trying to the greatest extent possible to represent research from a variety of national and cultural settings. Having done so, it then became a principled choice to reflect this diversity of site and context wherever possible in the titles of the chapters. What is offered here is the work of more than 100 scholars from all continents. Around 60 % of them are female, around 30 % are from the UK, again around 30 % are from the rest of Europe, slightly over 20 % are from the USA or Canada, slightly less than 20 % are from other parts of the world. In the Afterword, we discuss some of the issues raised by this endeavor to represent the “international” in this Handbook.

The themes that are addressed by the authors and the way they have set up their research exemplifies the enormous variety of what is offered nowadays in the study of the education. Thus—and the following should only be seen as a list of examples organized in the order of the various genres—Michael Watts deals with Life History Research in Higher Education; Kate Pahl with literacy practices through ethnography; Francesca Gobbo offers a methodological ethnological autobiography; whereas György Mészáros presents an autoethnography, a critical interpretation of the subject (the “Gay Eye” of a researcher and a student in a Hungarian school); the history of secondary education is interpreted by Gary McCulloch; philosophical approaches to justice, democracy, and education are dealt with by Janet Orchard; Elias Hemelsoet addresses the quantification of irregular migrants but also deals with “knowing how to go on” and what this implies for the kind of research one engages in; whereas Olena Fimyar foregrounds the place for autoethnography in the study of education policy in Kazakhstan. Within each of the eight genres, these essays provide clear examples of the very different ways that interpretation enters the research process.

In order to identify and recruit this large and diverse range of authors, the four editors invited colleagues, authorities in their respective areas, to take the lead as section editors in identifying authors who could contribute to the particular approaches

they represented. Their international perspectives and networks of colleagues were indispensable to giving this collection the diversity and scope that it achieved. Of course, to avoid overlapping, and to ensure that as much ground as possible was covered, the general editors were also involved in identifying contributors.<sup>2</sup>

As described, we began this project with a fairly discrete  $8 \times 8$  matrix in mind. Not surprisingly, as the contributions came in, these strict boundaries and sharp category distinctions proved not sustainable. Research in all these genres or approaches is characterized by what might be termed crossover research, creating a rich array of hybrids. Individual chapters often address more than one educational field, and their positioning in a discrete genre, though not entirely arbitrary, was nevertheless not as straightforward as we expected. In some respects, their positioning was a challenge to our model of classification as much as a confirmation of it. This was overwhelmingly clear for genres 3 and 4 (ethnography), but also surfaced in other genres.

The contributing or section editors asked authors to provide a chapter that *shows* that a problem in an educational area has successfully been addressed through research—in other words that this research made a difference. This could mean among other things that solutions are presented, that future similar problems can be anticipated, that a present context or situation has been viewed critically and not as “natural” or “inevitable,” or that future research, perhaps from a different conceptual schema, is necessary to yield a fuller understanding of the issue. All of the research presented here is, we believe, of exemplary quality in terms of the use of a particular method (or methods)—but sometimes too in showing the limits of certain methods, or the need to experiment with less conventional approaches. The chapters are written in a way that they could each be read on their own, but as we have tried to show, the 65 chapters can just as well be clustered in ways that suit a reader interested in a particular setting or context (e.g., research about Roma/travelers/migrants, or about teaching and learning using IT and e-learning), or by regional authorship, or by specific method (e.g., the use of interviews, visual data, or autoethnography).

The Handbook starts off with four introductory chapters intended to give an overview of the theoretical landscape. In “Varieties of interpretation in educational research: How we frame the project” the four editors offer their own framework for thinking about interpretation in educational research. This essay lays out the overall rationale of the Handbook project and addresses the reasons why the supposed dualism between quantitative and qualitative research has to be reframed as related dimensions of inquiry as opposed to a dichotomy. It offers a careful examination of the varied meanings and functions of “interpretation” in inquiry. It develops the idea that it is important to *show* how research in the educational field is conducted, and not just to identify meta-reasons for choosing particular methods.

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<sup>2</sup> This worked well for most of the genres. In one case (quantitative), for various reasons a different route had to be followed.

This framing chapter fulfilled another crucial role: an earlier version was sent to all contributors to use as the overall point of reference for developing their own contributions. While individual accounts certainly differ or even disagree with certain aspects of the framing argument, it helped to provide greater coherence to the Handbook as a whole. This framing chapter is followed by three in-depth discussions of interpretation focusing on epistemological issues (Kerdeman), ethical issues (LeCompte), and the purposes of educational research as a change agent (Peters).

In the main part of the Handbook, 65 chapters<sup>3</sup> are offered organized within the mentioned eight genres and addressing eight educational fields. Each chapter of the book provides a reflective account of a particular research project carried out by the author. Though, as outlined above, this is not a “How to . . .” guide, it does include, however, sufficient description of how the researcher actually carried out his or her work for new researchers to see what was involved in the actual doing of it. Each chapter describes the topic that is addressed and makes the research transparent (i.e., what is going on in a particular research approach, and why.) Each chapter consists of a description of the problem that is addressed, the focus of the research, identifies sources, data (raw material), and answers questions such as: “What did you do as investigator and author?” “How did you get the data?” “What processes did you follow (and why did you select these)?” “What theoretical frameworks did you use?” “How did you interpret your results?” and “How and why did you decide to present your results in the way you did?” Each chapter makes explicit the reasons for choosing an approach (and not another), whether for theoretical, political, philosophical, or autobiographical considerations, and/or because of contextual constraints. Each chapter pays attention to how the researcher justifies an approach, why he or she thinks this was the best approach; and what the limitations, constraints, strengths and weaknesses, and impact of that approach might be. Chapters also identify other important publications related to the “method” or the use of it in the educational field.

At the forefront of this reflective account is the role of interpretation and what it meant in the context of each kind of study that was done, and at various stages of the research process. Each chapter thus addresses how one sets about teasing out an interpretation of the data, thus making transparent what an educational researcher actually does when he or she successfully addresses a problem.

The table cross-linking educational fields and research genres clarifies how particular educational issues can be dealt with using different methods, as well as how particular methods can be applied across different fields of educational research. All examples highlight *educational* research and not just any area where a particular method is applied. Together they foreground the application of educational research across a range of different international settings. Moreover, they contain a range of educational contexts drawn from different age-levels and from compulsory, post-compulsory, and informal education contexts. Thus the

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<sup>3</sup> True to the spirit of its title, the cultural-transgressive section ended up with an extra chapter.

Handbook adopts itself a “case study” approach; it gives examples, but deeply reflects upon and analyses those.

Finally, in the “Afterword” the editors reflect on the material that is offered in this Handbook, and what we learned from putting it together. Details about the authors, editors, and finally an author and subject index assist the reader to contextualize the research that is dealt with and to locate specific cross-cutting issues. As we have noted, readers will see patterns of organization that might parallel, or might diverge from, our own. To facilitate these alternative systems of organization, and to allow some customization of the text for teaching purposes, the publisher of this volume will allow users to design and order organized subsets of the essays published here, to be used in different configurations for different courses, whether classes in specific research methods, or more analytical courses designed to orient novice researchers to the epistemological and normative issues implicit in their methodological choices.

Of course, we also expect that these reflective insights from real examples will be beneficial to experienced researchers as well, by showing a broad range of research possibilities and approaches that each have something to teach us.

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