

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.

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