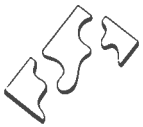

Researching Educational Practice by Loren Barritt, Ton Beekman, Hans Bleeker, and Karel Mulderij, Grand Forks, ND: University of North Dakota Press, 1985.

Reviewed by
Stephen J. Smith
University of Alberta

This slim volume will be familiar to some people, as it appeared in 1976 as a Dutch handbook for doing phenomenological research and in 1983 in an English translation. A year later a chapter of this handbook was published under the title "Analyzing Phenomenological Descriptions" in a special issue of *Phenomenology + Pedagogy* devoted to the theme of "teaching and doing phenomenology." The enduring value of this work, however, is that it raises questions that continue to challenge educational researchers: What does it mean to do educational research? What distinguishes this activity from other things educators might be doing? And how is this distinction to be understood?

Research?

The question of what it means to do educational research is woven throughout the monograph. After a short introduction comes a discussion in Chapter 1 of the now familiar criticisms leveled against behavioral and social science research conducted according to the methodological tenets of the natural sciences. This discussion moves haltingly toward a general call for a "human science" orientation to the study of educational situations, and for a phenomenological approach in particular. The bones of the phenomenological tradition are then laid bare in Chapter 2 in an attempt to provide some sort of framework for understanding the nature of this approach. At the same time, however, questions arise regarding the relation of phenomenological research, and even research per se, to education. Witness the following statement.

> Now, having discussed what phenomenology is, we want to turn to several aspects of the approach we have developed which are not strictly speaking phenomenological, but which we believe are nonetheless important. They reflect our commitments as educators interested in solving educational problems within that *vague sphere* that Langeveld talked about. (p. 31)

This statement points up a domain or "sphere" of interest to which the authors of *Researching Educational Practice* wish to orient phenomenologically, yet it suggests that phenomenological procedures fall short of educational commitment. Taking this statement a

step further, it reflects a perceived difference between the procedures of research and the principles of practice, a tension, if you will, between doing educational research and being educationally committed.

This difference is played out as one reads through the subsequent chapters of the monograph. Chapter 3, "The Heart of this Book" (p. 5), reads as a step-by-step manual for conducting phenomenological investigations. Some nice illustrations drawn largely from the authors' own work are included here. This chapter brings method to the fore. In addition, by dealing in the following chapter, Chapter 4, with criticisms of the reliability, validity, terminology, and the ahistorical nature of phenomenological research, the authors seek to identify scientifically their human science orientation. These arguments in favor of phenomenological research underline the authors' interest in being methodical. And then, just when we have been won over to the concern for method, we come up short against the question of what it means to do educational research. Chapter 5 is headed "Why Educational Research?" The question seems a little odd because we have already committed ourselves to a phenomenological approach and to the notion of application that is contained within it. Perhaps we have still to consider the nature of this commitment.

Why educational research? Because educational research signifies
200 the effort to learn from experience, not merely to accumulate experience, but to acquire as a result of thoughtful reflection a greater awareness of and sensitivity to children. Real educational research has an inherently phenomenological flavor.

> We believe that everyone who teaches, and we mean teachers in the broadest sense, including parents as well as professional teachers, should be *engaged* in research. Informally they already are. Everyone who watches, thinks about what they have seen and acts on that information is engaged in research. Research isn't separate from life; it is a special way of regarding life. It is a habit of mind which all of us have more or less and which can profitably be cultivated in everyone. (p. 69)

But to what extent does the meaning of doing educational research point toward the needs of the practitioner? There is a danger here that the really thought-provoking questions that pertain to the tensions between practice and research will be swept away. To my way of thinking, the question "Why Educational Research?" is more a question of *whatness*—of what it is that interests the investigator, and of what the investigator does to disclose the nature of this interest. The question is two-fold having to do with a commitment to educational situations on the one hand and to a mode of research that establishes the nature of commitment on the other. This question of what it means to do educational research requires a closer look at the text of *Researching Educational Practice.*

Method?

The authors have gone to great pains to avoid being accused of writing yet another text on method. Of course, method texts are not without some benefit, but "all too often methods dictate the choice of research problems" (p. 4). The task is to "use the teachings of phenomenology to free educational researchers from the constraints of method" (p. 5); to show the subordination of method to substance; in short, "of research recipes we have had enough!" (p. 5). Accordingly, the first chapter of the monograph, referring to "methodological straight-jackets," "methodological prejudices," and "methodologically-determined work" (p. 8), presents a case for accenting the primacy of educational practice. The intent is to increase discussion of "education in its broadest outlines" (p. 18) by dismissing an adherence to method that serves to keep educational events at a distance.

Ironically, this discussion of method serves as a backdrop to the presentation of the tradition of phenomenology and to the development and illustration of a particular phenomenological approach, indeed, "a step-by-step procedure that we offer as a starting point for your conduct of an analysis" (p. 40). Is a method being promoted after all? Or is the relation of method to substance more complicated than the authors would have us believe? Consider the thoughts of an earlier phenomenologist on the question of method.

> Phenomenology is a method; it could be called an attitude. The method is a way of observing, new in science; new, for instance, in psychology, not at all new in general life. On the contrary, the phenomenologist wants to observe in the way one usually observes. He has an unshakable faith in the everyday observation of objects, of the body, of the people around him and of time, because the answers to stated questions are based on the results of this sort of observation.... His science is called phenomenology. (Van den Berg, 1972, p. 77)

So why this derision of method in the present volume? Perhaps the distinction that really needs to be made is that between method and methodology, the latter referring to the thinking that gives rise to methods, the thinking that gives a particular research direction—a method—its life. Research methodology expresses not only the decision on whether to use questionnaire instruments, ethnographic strategies, or even hermeneutic conversation, but also one's standpoint vis-à-vis educational events. A methodological position is a standpoint related to the things that are of interest. It expresses the decision to stand in a particular relation to educational events.

> But is that not more an ethical imperative than a methodological prescription? The question supposes a gap between methodology and value-realization. Is that gap justified? (Beekman, 1983, p. 38)

Methodology?

Research requires more of us than simply considering educational practice by means of established methods of the so-called parent disciplines. Of course we do not need to read *Researching Educational Practice* to know that these methods keep educational events at a distance, so distant that at times we lose sight of education itself (Flitner, 1982). But we do need to read this text to alert ourselves to the admonition that springs from this oversight. We are admonished to recognize the primacy of educational phenomena within the actual conduct of research. In other words, there is a challenge to research educational practice *educationally*. Thus on the one hand, "recognizing our connections with those we study, recognizing that we share this world with them and that they are the ones with whom we must communicate, can lift a burden from all our shoulders" (p. 17); on the other hand, such recognition ought to make us mindful of the responsibility we have for the researched situation. Suppose, for instance, one chooses to research the play spaces of children (cf. Bleeker & Mulderij, 1978). Over time these children with whom one has daily contact become important not merely as research subjects, informants, interviewees, or the like, but for the sense of place they afford the researcher. It becomes increasingly difficult for the researcher to keep the children at a distance. The children invite the researcher to be part of their activities, to explore places with them, to share their playgrounds. In a way, they become a part of the researcher's life, to the extent that the research cannot be left alone. There is no final chapter. In fact, to sever one's ties to these children by way of concluding the research project would be callous and irresponsible.

It seems to me that the responsibility the researcher has for the educational situation entails an effort to maintain its meaning for the participants. Educational researchers do not look in the first instance toward making recommendations for action (cf. p. 51) on the basis of some fixed knowledge of the situation at hand; they look instead toward understanding the meaning that is held within an educational situation, the vague and elusive meaning that continually draws interest toward children and that makes any recommendation for action contingent on further inquiry. Theories of educational understanding aside (Scarbath, 1985), it is sufficient to *see* that understanding has to do with residual, undisclosed meaning, with the "irreducible meanings" of the world for children (p. 53), that in the first instance "research should be helpful by revealing the overlooked meanings in situations" (p. 80).

I would extend this reasoning even further and say that the educational researcher deals with the *silences* left behind by those readings that have attempted to demystify the meaning for children of, say, being afraid in the dark (pp. 37-51) and coming to a new school (pp. 51-54). Educational research revolves around a moment of

questioning silence in which one feels a responsibility for children that precludes the ready explanation and the hasty recommendation for action. For example, I am playing with Chris in an adventure playground. He spends much time clambering over the decks, climbing the ladders and bars, and coming down the small slides; however, he avoids the larger spiralling slide at the farther end of the playground. "I bet you can't come down that one," I say, thinking that the slide's location explains why he has left it alone so far. But my words come as a challenge—as a dare which shows in the cautious way he climbs the steps to the top. Chris calls out from the top, "You come down with me!" And having played on the other equipment with him it seems natural to do as he asks. Yet somewhat surprisingly this child still does not want to come down the slide; instead he proceeds to come down the staircase. "What's the matter?" thinking as I ask of slides twice as high from which I can't keep him away. My question is also tinged with a sense of guilt at having put him in a situation where he had to back down. So I press harder: "Why don't you want to come down the slide with *me*?" to which Chris answers, "I'll be upside down." And so I look again at the slide, noticing how the protective casing at the top makes it appear to be a tunnel in which one might conceivably turn upside down. Still, I am not satisfied. I have understood the reason Chris gave me, but the question of why he would not come down with me remains. Was I wrong to dare him? How should I have encouraged his efforts?

And then I recall another occasion in another playground. Three children of differing ages are mounting the ladder that leads up to the top of an unusually high slippery slide, one which is probably twice as high as they have seen before. These three chatter among themselves, although from a distance it is not possible to recognize the gist of their talk. Perhaps they express some concern regarding the activity, for their mother soon appears in a fairly agitated state. "Now, how do you think you're going to get down?" She moves even closer so that the children appear to hang directly over her. "I told you not to go up there." The three children stand rigid. The youngest one starts calling for his mother to come up and get him, at which she reluctantly begins to climb the ladder. As she moves closer she sees that this youngest child is quite fearful. She says in an attempt to reassure him "Just stay still—mummy's scared too." She climbs up to grasp the youngest child and then all four come back down the ladder, quite relieved it seems to be safely on the ground. "I don't want to see any of you going near that slide again," she says as the children run off to the nearby swings. And as they run off I wonder about the risk of climbing this slippery slide. Where was the danger and what was the source of the children's fear? What was the nature of this parent's concern? These are questions that broach the silence of educational understanding. These are questions that require research.

The authors of *Researching Educational Practice* speak of silence in the context of the method of interviewing, a method which requires "learning to be silent so an informant can speak" (p. 54). But here again their concern is not simply with method. They say "an interview can't be turned into a formula. It is a social encounter which will go its own way if done well" (p. 55). The interview, the view of that which lies between us and that which beckons silence, discloses the educational encounter. The interview is, in this regard, not only informative of the educational situation, it also signifies an essential aspect of it, namely the *encounter* which makes a situation educationally significant.

> To speak of the encounter does not mean that we meet "others," but it means that we meet "each other": that is, in a human and undeniably creative social reality; in a complex but never completely understood network of circumstances and problems to which human thinking and acting responsibly must be responsive. (Langeveld, 1983a, p. 6)

To encounter things that matter to children, to "experience . . . an actuality appearing opposite to the person that questions him in his innermost being and before which he must affirm himself" (Bollnow, 1972, p. 311), this is the task of educational research. To silence the ready interpretation and then, within this silence: encounter things with children in mind, this is our responsibility.

The matter of silence in educational research is not, therefore, simply the inaccessibility of the meaning of things for children, but rather the meaning of that which matters both to children and to us as observers of children. The matter of silence is, on the far side, the otherness that is evident in our inability to fully account for the child's activity, and on the near side, the concealedness of that which is the motive for our interest. As Bollnow (1974) said: "we realize we are on the right track when the subject-matter resists our interpretation, when it remains independent of our expectations and forces us to correct our original starting point again and again" (p. 11). This is what I mean by the farther side of silence. The near side attests to our complicity in the actions of the child. In other words, we identify ourselves with children when researching educational situations inasmuch as this research is only possible because of a prior complicity in such childlike activity. Hence there is a tension in our understanding educational situations, a tension of self and other which, because of a common interest, continually questions the onesidedness of my view of things.

The danger in *Researching Educational Practice* is that the notion of encounter may be treated too empathetically. Although it is necessary to try to take the child's side and see things from his or her viewpoint, it is important not to lose sight of pedagogic difference. In education we do not encounter the child but rather the things (toys, playground things, classroom things, big things, little things,

unpleasant things, etc.) in the child's world. Understanding is achieved as we come to terms with these things. So, on the one hand, the meaning of the educational situation remains only provisionally understood because our view of things always stays in part *our* view; on the other hand, the educational encounter holds out the possibility of meeting the other's gaze in a common experience that questions our situatedness. A questioning silence is the very logic of this educational research.

This leads me to consider the authors' discussion of the place of memory in educational research. They say, with what seems once again a concern for method,

> We think that recollections of past experience are a legitimate, and sometimes the only source of information about important events. We believe that these recollections should be used with the acknowledgment that they are not exactly the same as the original experience. They are not unrelated to it. If the researcher places recollections in the context of the informants' present situation both can be better understood. (p. 66)

Another way of speaking of the place of memory is to suggest that educational research remembers the child. Through remembered experience we encounter the things in a child's world, not only to better understand the child's view of such things, but also to deepen our own view of things. The authors make reference at this point to the game of Hide and Seek, an analysis of which they have published elsewhere (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1983). If we look at this analysis we come to appreciate the importance of memory to their phenomenological approach. For instance, after observing some very young children play a version of Hide and Seek they ask, "Is there anyone who does not recognize this experience? Who has not either played this game or watched it being played?" (p. 143). And then later on they suggest that, "It might be useful for readers who wish to check our comments and analysis to take a moment to write about their own recollections. . . . This should greatly enrich the reader's insights" (p. 145). In fact, of the five descriptions of Hide and Seek that are offered to us, two are written as adult recollections. So may we ask: Is memory simply a research procedure that "enriches insight"? How could a researcher describe a simple game so vividly and with such sensitivity without it being an appeal to memory? It seems to me that memory is not just "a part of the meaning of that experience" but constitutive of the educational meaning of Hide and Seek. This reference to memory alludes to the dimension of self-reflection that underlies educational research, to self-reflection as a "standing-with-oneself, a self-identification with oneself, a process not of introspection but of self-becoming in the action itself" (Bollnow, 1974, p. 17). In fact, what sets the researcher apart from parents, teachers, and other practitioners is the degree of self-reflection that characterizes the former's interest. This self-

reflection that is at work as memory in the framing of an interest would also seem to be the motive for being committed to the task of educational research.

What can now be said regarding the methodology of educational research? My reading of *Researching Educational Practice* suggests that it entails considering one's responsibility to the educational situation, becoming attentive to the logic of silence within educational inquiry, and orienting oneself in a self-reflective way toward the activity of children.

A Research Tradition?

This monograph is not without its flaws. The denunciation of positivistic social research, and in particular the sort of research that falls under the American Education Research Association (AERA) banner, seems curiously dated in view of more recent methodological discussions (cf. Smith and Heshusius, 1986). So, too, the discussion of language as a "tool" or "instrument . . . for understanding and communicating" (p. 27) has been surpassed by more insightful analyses (e.g., Bollnow, 1980; Gadamer, 1982; and of course the writers of the post-structuralist and deconstructionist movements). Chapter 2, where an account is given of what phenomenology is, also seems rather sketchy, with the result that the reader remains oblivious of the waves, cross-currents, and eddies that constitute this sea of phenomenological literature. There is the distinct danger that in positing "central concepts . . . that can be useful in the conduct of descriptive research" (p. 23) one loses sight of the requirement for personal commitment, for scholarship, for charting one's own course.

Each of these flaws would be of no real consequence were it not for the fact that they indicate a certain confusion as to the place of the authors' phenomenological approach to educational research. They leave me wondering why, in their desire to clear a space for themselves, they have not acknowledged more fully the site of their own research endeavors. Quite frankly I am surprised that the point of departure for understanding what it means to do educational research is a criticism of positivistic research. This is all the more surprising when one considers that the Utrecht School sits squarely within what has been called the *Geistesswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* tradition—a tradition of scholarship in which the principles of a phenomenological approach to educational research have already been enunciated (see van Manen, 1979). While I do not wish to pigeonhole the authors of *Researching Educational Practice* (and I am well aware that not all four are Dutch), I do find it strange that the legacy of the Utrecht School is not given greater prominence in the monograph. Though a debt is expressed to Langeveld and to "the tradition of evocative, speculative phenomenology which has for the time being passed into disuse but which, we

believe, is nevertheless of importance for understanding the world of the child" (p. 78), still I expect more from the authors in terms of a "dialogue with the tradition of which that research is part" (p. 81).

Certainly the approach developed by Langeveld, Van den Berg, Buytendijk, Beets, and others less well known to the English-speaking world, is difficult to comprehend let alone emulate. Think, for instance, of the deceptive simplicity of Langeveld's analysis of "The Secret Place in the Life of the Child" (Langeveld, 1983b; 1983c). Who could hope to write a piece such as this? But is the inaccessibility of Langeveld's "method" overcome by "experimenting with a systematic set of procedures for leading educators and students of pedagogy into the artful practice of phenomenological situation-analysis" (van Manen, 1979, p. 57)? On this point I am unsure; however, I wonder if in the attempt to outline the procedures of a more learnable phenomenological approach the fundamental question of what it means to do educational research is not somehow obscured. For my part I would prefer to see a greater deference to a tradition of educational research in which the questions of methodology were uppermost. I would prefer to see the authors of *Researching Educational Practice* not only raise the question of what it means to do educational research, but to address the methodological principles that were exemplified in the works of the earlier Utrecht scholars. In my opinion this project would make *Researching Educational Practice* truly thought-provoking.

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