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BOOK REVIEW

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Smyth, J., Down, B., McInerney, P. & Hattam, R. (2014). *Doing critical educational research: A conversation with the research of John Smyth*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Australian professor John Smyth's illustrious and prolific career in critical educational research is celebrated in this timely book, which is a part of international publisher Peter Lang's series on Teaching Contemporary Scholars. This tribute to the work of John Smyth is beautifully rendered by three of Australia's leading academics, whose own work in socially-just schooling complements and strengthens the analysis contained within each chapter.

Doing critical educational research is aptly titled as each chapter offers the Reader insights into 'doing' educational research in ways that honour active listening and authentic representations of educators at the chalk-face; that urge researchers to be activists and advocates of critical pedagogy; and challenge all of us to commit to the ideals of Freirian praxis. The signposting in chapter one reminds us of the intellectual craftsmanship that academic research should always entail, while offering advice on how to engage with a text that successfully manages to be both deeply theoretical and engaging at the same time.

Chapter two focuses on teachers work and laments the docility and apolitical blandness that encapsulates much of teaching today. It asks what has happened to teachers work and why as a society did we allow this to happen? The chapter then explores these questions with a piercing synthesis of decades of seminal work from experts such as sociologist C. W. Mills, and international critical theorists including Michael Apple, Joe Kincheloe, Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux. John Smyth's work then again takes centre stage with a re-examination of his contributions to critical reflective practice that describes, informs, confronts and reconstructs teachers work so it can become fair, ethical and empowering.

In chapter three, the authors imagine a future where students 'speak back' to power so that their dreams and ambitions are the key drivers in educational reform. Researchers who fight against a culture of schooling that normalises 'the way things are done' often find themselves kept out by education gatekeepers. Smyth's stellar reputation as a researcher of authenticity has allowed him access to young people in schools and his resultant research on how to treat students as active co-producers of knowledge is an inspiration and a challenge to all of us who comes up against methodological and political roadblocks in our desire to conduct rigorous and cutting-edge critical education research.

Community engagement is the title of chapter four and within its pages we are reminded through Smyth's works that rethinking how schools can be reformed can only occur if community engagement is genuine and unique to the place where each school is located. My favourite chapter is the fifth in the book as it looks at the big picture issues of educational policy and leadership. In contrast to the scarily articulated growth of neoliberal managerialism which has led to a kind of 'zombie leadership' in schools, the authors argue for a socially critical view of leadership where student relationships and holistic learning re-emerge as the essential foci of principals' advocacy and daily practice.

The final chapter synthesises the main themes of the research of John Smyth and his colleagues. While there is no doubt that *Doing critical educational research* is written as a ‘call to action’ there is a thread of despair that seeps into each chapter of the book. Perhaps this is my own anguish coming through as a forty something educator who yearns for, but has never actually experienced, the left-leaning society and educational sector that Smyth, Down, McInerney and Hattam envision: a society “founded on a commitment to creating a more humane, democratic and socially just school.” (p. xv)