

1 The Reality of Research: An Introduction

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Research is an exciting activity. It provides a wonderful opportunity to explore ideas and theories, discover new things, confirm facts and identify further questions in need of answers. However, there is another side to research which is often not discussed. It can be very stressful, lonely and frustrating. Things may not go according to plan. You may have to make changes part way through a piece of research for reasons beyond your control. Some parts of the research may take much longer than you anticipated at the outset. And so on.

There are many books on how to do research which explore topics such as asking research questions, designing a study, selecting a method, collecting data, analysing data, etc. In this edited book we have not attempted to cover these sorts of topics. Rather, we have brought together 13 pieces of research which have either been published as reproduced here or adapted slightly, edited from longer publications or specially commissioned. The focus of each paper is either children or young people and together they represent a range of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies within Education, Health, Social Welfare, Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology. However, published papers, such as the 13 included in this book, seldom reflect the process of research. In such papers researchers generally refrain from commenting on the origins of the research questions, the difficulties experienced or the things that went wrong. Published papers are generally a polished account of research.

Our aim in putting this book together was to get at the side of research which is rarely evident from the final publication. In order to achieve this we asked the first author of each paper to write a commentary on the various stages of carrying out the research, from the origins of the ideas for the research to writing up. These commentaries follow each paper. They provide a rich addition to the reported research, illuminating the reality of doing research. The approach of providing a paper *and* a commentary on the process makes this book distinctively different from other books on doing research. We have deliberately put the commentaries after the papers so that you first encounter the polished account and then hear about the process.

When we embarked on this book with the idea of asking researchers to write a commentary on the process of carrying out their research we had

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several concerns. One was whether or not researchers would be prepared to engage with this sort of self-reflection. Another was whether we would get 13 commentaries which said much the same things albeit in slightly different ways. We did not know most of the researchers at the outset so we had no way of judging if our concerns were justified. We had chosen the research 'stories', as they became known, because we felt that together they covered the disciplines and methodologies we wanted to illustrate. We hadn't selected the stories because we felt the researchers would have the ability to reflect on their research and would bring distinct perspectives. Our concerns were soon dispelled when the commentaries began to come in. Everyone was able to engage with this process. Some commented on how much they had enjoyed writing about doing their research, almost as though no one had ever asked them about it. Others commented on how easy it was to do. Likewise, although we asked most of them to comment on similar things such as access, ethics, choosing a methodology and so on, the commentaries were very different from one another. Nevertheless, one thing did surprise us. And this was how much additional insight into the research process these commentaries brought.

We hope that you will find the papers and commentaries helpful for your research, whatever stage you are at. This volume was put together in conjunction with a companion volume, *Doing Research with Children and Young People* (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson, 2004). The contributors to that book discuss a number of critical issues which arise in the planning, carrying out and dissemination stages of research. Many of the issues and questions they discuss are also evident in the commentaries and papers in the present volume. In the remainder of this chapter we have provided an overview of the 13 research 'stories' in terms of how they fit various categories into which research can be grouped. Depending on your interests this may help you select particular 'stories' on which to focus. There is no need for you to read the stories in sequence.

When we began to consider potential research stories our selection criteria included that the content should be engaging, the approach taken should be representative of different disciplines, the research should involve children and young people of varying ages, should have been carried out in different countries and should utilise a range of different research tools.

We certainly hope that the content of the research of all the papers is engaging, although we expect some to be more engaging than others. They are certainly very varied in the topics studied, as the following snapshots hopefully demonstrate. Liz Coates examined how children's drawings can be supplemented and enriched by what they say to themselves and to others as they draw, while Wataru Takei observed the hand gestures of two deaf infants in the period before they began using Japanese Sign Language. Jon Sutton and his colleagues addressed the question of whether children who bully have an especially sophisticated understanding of what others are thinking and feeling. Jane Aldgate and Marie Bradley studied children's

views of short-term accommodation away from their families, whereas Samantha Punch focused on the lives of children in a rural community in Bolivia. Will Pickett and his colleagues looked at the behaviours which increase young people's likelihood of injury, and Alison Clark explored young children's views of their school nursery. Marina Monteith examined the transition to adulthood for disabled young people, and Daphne Evans and Paul Norman reported an intervention study aimed at improving attitudes to road safety. Lynda Ince carried out a study of young black people leaving care, and Naz Rassool examined race and gender issues among immigrant pupils. Barrie Thorne studied gender relations in school and Dev Griesel and colleagues evaluated the effect of involving South African children in improving their environment.

In terms of our other criteria, there are research stories from Education (Coates; Clark), Psychology (Takei; Sutton et al.; Griesel et al.), Social Care (Aldgate & Bradley; Ince), Anthropology (Punch), Sociology (Rassool; Thorne), and Health and Social Welfare (Pickett et al.; Monteith; Evans & Norman). The studies involve children and young people across a wide age range from the first year (Takei), three to seven years (Coates; Clark), seven to ten years (Sutton et al.; Thorne), 10 to 21 years (Pickett et al.; Monteith; Evans & Norman; Ince; Rassool; Griesel et al.) and two of the papers span several age groups (Aldgate & Bradley; Punch). In addition, within the research stories are studies of disabled children and young people (Takei; Monteith), young black people (Ince; Rassool; Griesel et al.) and gender differences (Thorne).

A majority of the papers are from the UK, although papers are included from Japan (Takei), Bolivia (Punch), South Africa (Griesel et al.), and America (Thorne), while one paper includes young people from 12 different countries including Canada, Estonia, Lithuania and Sweden (Pickett et al.). The studies also vary enormously in the number of children or young people involved. At one extreme is Takei's observations of two infants and at the other is Pickett et al.'s report of findings from almost 50,000 young people. The remaining papers involved between 10 (Ince) and 242 (Evans & Norman) children and young people.

A wide range of research tools are used. Several rely on naturalistic observations and of these four researchers simply kept notes of their observations (Coates; Punch; Clark; Thorne) whereas one made video recordings of everyday situations which were later coded (Takei). Questionnaires were used by Sutton et al., Pickett et al., Evans and Norman, and Griesel et al. Sutton et al. and Punch used specially designed tasks, and Sutton et al. and Griesel et al. administered standardised psychometric tests. Clark used a range of methods, including the children taking photographs, and escorting the researcher around the nursery. Clark also interviewed the children, and interviewing was employed in a number of the other studies (Aldgate & Bradley; Punch; Monteith; Ince; Rassool) and Griesel et al. used discussion groups. Rassool asked the young people to construct a personal life history and Ince examined casework files to support her research.

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We were also clear from the outset that we wanted research stories which illustrated both qualitative and quantitative research and this is reflected in the 13 we have selected. Thus, six are qualitative (Coates; Punch; Clark; Ince; Rassool; Thorne), two draw on both qualitative and quantitative data (Aldgate & Bradley; Griesel et al.), and five present quantitative data (Takei; Sutton et al.; Pickett et al.; Monteith; Evans & Norman). Within the papers presenting quantitative data, three give descriptive statistics such as means and percentages but do not carry out any statistical analyses (Takei; Aldgate & Bradley; Monteith), whereas the other papers make use of a range of statistical procedures including χ^2 (Sutton et al.), analysis of variance (Sutton et al.; Evans & Norman; Griesel et al.), analysis of covariance (Sutton et al.), Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests (Evans & Norman), correlation, including partial correlation (Sutton et al.; Pickett et al.), and logistic regression (Pickett et al.).

There are also other interesting contrasts which are evident in our final selection. For example, three of the studies are longitudinal, involving observations over a period of time (Takei; Punch; Thorne) and two involve observing and assessing children and young people before and after an intervention (Aldgate & Bradley; Evans & Norman). The remaining stories are representative of cross-sectional research, involving observation or assessment of children and young people at one moment in time.

Three of the studies took an experimental approach (Sutton et al.; Evans & Norman; Griesel et al.). Sutton et al. grouped children on the basis of their involvement in bullying and then compared the groups in terms of their understanding of other people's thoughts and feelings. Evans and Norman compared the attitudes towards road safety of two groups, one of whom had watched a drama on road safety, while the other group had not. Likewise, Griesel et al. compared groups of young people who differed in terms of whether they had been involved in a programme to improve their community.

The studies also represent different stages of research. For example, Coates and Ince describe their studies as pilot studies, whereas the study by Pickett et al. is part of an ongoing multinational epidemiological health study which is repeated every three or four years involving tens of thousands of young people. Some of the other papers are part of ongoing research programmes, as indicated in the authors' commentaries, whereas others are one-off studies examining a particular question.

The above account of the 13 research stories within this book demonstrates the variety of information which is available. We hope that the final selection has largely met our original criteria and more besides, although we would be the first to acknowledge that we have achieved some criteria to a greater extent than others. However, in each case the commentaries provided by the authors further elucidate the process of doing research with children and young people. We hope you find them as illuminating as we have.