

# Reflecting on research in practice: developing innovative support structures for students undertaking small-scale research projects in work settings

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Acknowledgments AUT - CEPD  
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## Rationale

There has been a long-standing research interest in the field of childhood studies (James and James, 2012). By striving to be an evidence-based profession, childhood practitioners move beyond simply responding to government policies and initiatives to a more informed position (Robert-Holmes, 2011). Providing practitioners receive adequate support, small-scale research can be a useful tool for helping them to broaden their knowledge, develop increased professional competency and successfully innovate (Tisdall *et al.*, 2009).

Endeavouring to equip practitioners with the skills required for the workforce, many social science courses within Higher Education require students to engage in work-based learning (HEA, 2013) and have incorporated a final year research related assessment task (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). Whilst the benefits of work-based learning, in terms of developing students' employability skills are often recognised, the benefits of small-scale research projects in developing transferrable skills for the workplace are less often acknowledged and, coverage of research methods are sometimes left implicit (HEA, 2013).

## Objectives / Context (1)

- ❖ To capture the critical voice and reflections of level 6 researchers before, during and after their research journeys.
- ❖ To evaluate the effectiveness of a spiral curriculum related to promoting research skills
- ❖ To develop innovative support structures for students undertaking small-scale research projects in work-based settings.

The investigation focused on a group of final year undergraduates working towards two related degree programmes - the BA (Hons) Education and Childhood Studies and the BA (Hons) Family and Childhood Studies. Aware of the central role of research in promoting policy and practice in the child, family and education workforce, the programme team has adopted a spiral curriculum to introduce research skills at all levels of study. At level 4 basic research skills are built into an 'Academic Skills' module. At level 5 the module 'Research Methods' provides learners with an opportunity to experiment with the design, utilisation and evaluation of primary research tools, enabling them to make informed choices for the preparation of a research proposal which underpins a work-based investigation at level 6.

## Context (2)

The level 6 'Practice-Based Evaluation' module, implemented in 2010, replaces the traditional dissertation. The Practice-Based Evaluation module remains based on primary and secondary research, establishing links between theory and work-based practice, though the medium of a journal article and conference poster.

The investigations are predominantly based in the naturalistic qualitative paradigm (e.g. interpretive-inductive models). The team continually look for creative ways to disseminate the findings of learners' research projects to a wide and relevant audience, including sharing the findings with participating work settings. Student journal articles are submitted electronically to programme leaders, who collate and make these accessible to learners on the childhood studies programmes. Some learners continue to work alongside their supervisor after they have graduated in an attempt to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Having observed two groups of learners experience the practice-based evaluation module, this action research project will enable the programme team to reflect on any 'problem spaces' (Miller and Cable, 2008), at which they can direct commitment to, development and change.

## Methods

The principle method of data collection was a questionnaire, distributed to 70 childhood studies students before they embarked on their placement. The open-ended questions, designed to capture the critical voices and reflections of learners, were based around three stages of the research: before, during and after data collection. Learners were not prompted during data collection.

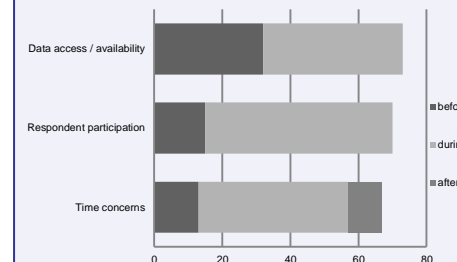
Upon returning to university, learners submitted their questionnaire (n=55) and formed into discussion groups to further reflect upon and share their research experiences (including successes, barriers to progress and the implementation of research skills). The discussion groups consisted of five or six students and lasted approximately an hour, facilitated by two members of the research team who circulated, observed and prompted learners. Learners recorded their discussion points on to flip-chart paper.

**Results below: Sources and references refer to Nvivo. Sources are individual respondents references are total frequency of identified theme.**

**'At first you are always going to have concerns.' Respondent E45**

## Themes/References

### Key themes



Higher Education Academy (2013), Teaching research methods: Developing a pedagogical culture in the social sciences. Liverpool: HEA Social Sciences Annual Conference (23 - 24 May 2013)

James, A. and James, A. (2012), Key Concepts in Childhood Studies. Second Edition. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Miller, L. and Cable, C. (2008), Professionalism in the Early Years. London: Hodder Education.

Robert-Holmes, G. (2011), Doing Your Early Years Research Project. Second Edition. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Thomas, D. (2006), 'A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data' American Journal of Education, Vol. 27, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 237-246

Tisdall, E.K., Davies, J.M. and Gallagher, M. (2009), Researching with Children and Young People: Research Design, Methods and Analysis. London: Sage Publications Ltd

## Analysis / Results - Before

Data was textually analysed using Thomas' (2006) general inductive approach. The first stage involved reading and re-reading individual questionnaires for implied meanings which were considered to be related to the objectives of the study. ⇨

### Themes from 'before' responses

#### Data access - negative (Sources 29, References 32)

- Not finding out what I needed. Not knowing what to look for or write down. Respondent E34
- What I should observe and record. Would my data collection tools gain enough data? Respondent E43

#### Participation concerns – negative (Sources 14, References 15)

- At first you are always going to have concerns about the setting and if staff are going to be happy about taking part in the research. Respondent E45
- Teachers not willing to participate. Respondent E51

#### Personal confidence – negative (Sources 12, References 12)

- Not knowing what to look for or write down. Respondent E34
- This assessment was different than other placement tasks. It made me feel nervous about carrying out the research. Respondent E55
- I found it daunting before placement to think about what I needed to do during placement. I knew I would be comfortable in the setting but realised how important the research was. Respondent F9
- Worried about the academic level involved and lack of contact with the university. Respondent F16

#### Time concerns (Sources 13, References 13)

- Time management - to undertake research, placement, work, family and revise for an exam. Focus group discussion
- Unsure I was going to get enough time to gather the information needed as settings usually give you a job to do and you get into a routine. Respondent E19
- Getting enough of the right information in the time available. Respondent E32

## Analysis / Results - During

⇨ The second stage involved collating individual responses under each open-ended question, numerical coding participants. The third stage involved highlighting and coding words or segments of statements that appeared to 'fit together' (i.e. they involved similar ideas, thoughts and feelings), leading to emerging themes. ⇨

### Themes from 'during' responses

#### Data access - negative (Sources 16, References 21)

- Despite in-depth discussion with my article supervisor, the class teacher was nervous and uncertain about my role and responsibilities throughout. Respondent E43

#### Data access - positive (Sources 19, References 20)

- I was fortunate to spend time with a health visitor who was able to answer my questions. She helped me to get my interview schedule out to other health visitors. Respondent F7

#### Participation concerns – negative (Sources 13, References 18)

- I didn't think I would get many questionnaires back. Some teachers didn't seem interested. Respondent E54
- I only managed two interviews with teachers as they were so busy. Respondent E50

#### Participation concerns – positive (Sources 33, References 37)

- Staff were very helpful and interested in the research I carried out. Teachers were keen to be asked questions and provided me with lots of useful information. Respondent E29

#### Time concerns (Sources 23, References 44)

- Staff not having time/finding time to be interviewed (felt like a pest bothering busy teachers). Focus group discussion
- Not having enough time within the daily routine to write things down/How to take quick notes. Focus group discussion
- I was unsure whether staff were willing to provide me with any information or time to undertake interviews. Respondent E21

## Analysis / Results - After

⇨ The third stage utilised what Thomas refers to as 'independent parallel coding'. Two members of the research team worked independently to determine initial codes, then came together to present, debate and on occasion merge/fine-tune their identified categories where overlap was identified.

### Themes from 'after' responses

#### Data extent concerns – negative (Sources 15, References 17)

- That the information I have is not in enough detail or relevant for my project. Respondent E37

#### Write up concerns (Sources 32, References 32)

- Collating and presenting data in journal style. Respondent E21
- Worried about how to make sense of the data collected. Respondent E35
- Ensuring I pick out the most relevant aspects. Respondent E23

#### Research project usefulness – generally (Sources 33, References 33)

- Research is needed to ensure that strategies and initiatives are really working to improve the life of the child and to bring about change if needed. Respondent E24
- It helps establish areas for development; helps practice evolve with changes in practice, policy and thinking. Respondent E41

#### Research project usefulness – personally (Sources 48, References 70)

- Reinforced an interest in my chosen subject and the want to pursue a career relating to the subject. Focus group discussion
- Developed my professionalism in a work environment. Focus group discussion
- Experience. The importance of different agencies, working in a professional manner, communicating with different people and agencies. Respondent F3
- I have not only gained knowledge through books, but through practice. Respondent F5
- It has given me more confidence not only to research but also as a practitioner. It has helped me to develop my professional work ethic. Respondent E55