

**DOING YOUR
EARLY YEARS
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

Sara Miller McCune founded SAGE Publishing in 1965 to support the dissemination of usable knowledge and educate a global community. SAGE publishes more than 1000 journals and over 800 new books each year, spanning a wide range of subject areas. Our growing selection of library products includes archives, data, case studies and video. SAGE remains majority owned by our founder and after her lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures the company's continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

4th
Edition

DOING YOUR EARLY YEARS RESEARCH PROJECT

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

GUY ROBERTS-HOLMES



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Jude Bowen
Assistant editor: Catriona McMullen
Assistant editor, digital: Chloe Statham
Production editor: Nicola Carrier
Copyeditor: Sharon Cawood
Proofreader: Thea Watson
Indexer: Cathy Heath
Marketing manager: Lorna Patkai
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

© Guy Roberts-Holmes 2018

The first edition was published in 2005 and reprinted in 2007, 2008, twice in 2009 and 2010. The second edition was published in 2011 and reprinted in 2012 and 2013. The third edition was published in 2014 and reprinted in 2015 and 2016.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017953115

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-52642-424-2
ISBN 978-1-52642-425-9 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using responsibly sourced papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

This book is dedicated to my dear brother, Paul 'Pablo'
Christopher Roberts-Holmes (02/08/64 to 05/02/01). Paul's love, warmth,
humour and passion for life are greatly missed by all who knew him.



CONTENTS

About the Author	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
Foreword	xv
Glossary	xvii
Online Resources	xxiii
1 You Can Do Research!	1
Your feelings about doing research	3
Myths about early childhood research	4
An inclusive approach to early childhood research	4
Your research project within early childhood studies	5
The professionalisation of early childhood studies	7
The importance of your reflective practice	8
Principles of high-quality early childhood research	12
The research process within early childhood studies	15
Everyday research skills	16
2 Your Research Story, Methodology and Research Questions	21
Reflecting on your personal story	23
Methodology	24
Some research stories	24
Your reflective diary	27
High levels of motivation	28
Professional motivations	29
Focusing on your area of interest	30
The overall research questions and field questions	32
Getting your research questions right: breadth and depth	33
Doing a pilot study	35
3 Writing Your Literature Review	39
Why you should do a literature review	41
Reading widely	41
Developing your own point of view	42
What you should read and include in your literature review	45
Using your college/university online databases	46
Using Google Scholar	49
How to read a really useful article	49
Synthesising the ideas	52
Write, edit, re-edit and re-re-edit!	52

4 Ethical Issues in Early Childhood Research	55
Legislation and the participatory rights of children	57
Sociology and the participatory rights of children	58
Children's participation and protection	59
A reflective impact assessment of research on children	59
Your emotional vulnerability	60
Informed consent and assent	62
Negotiating access with gatekeepers	69
'Feedback' and closure of the research	75
Ethical dilemmas are hard to resolve	76
5 Designing Your Research	79
What is research design?	81
Three research approaches	82
Examples of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches	86
Sampling within your project	89
Action research	91
Case studies	96
Surveys	97
Broad and deep research	98
Justifying your methods	99
Your research proposal	100
6 Creative Listening with Young Children	105
Developing cultures of meaningful participation	107
What is creative listening?	109
The Mosaic approach	111
Cameras and ethics	112
Children's photographs and walking tours	113
Children's drawings	118
Children's interpretations of their pictures	118
7 Observation: Looking and Listening	125
Why do observations?	127
What is observation?	128
Interpretation	128
Being open in your looking and listening	129
Knowing the context of your research setting	129
Unstructured observations	131
Structured observations	132
8 Writing and Using Questionnaires	141
Web-based surveys	144
Ethical issues and questionnaires	145

Writing your questionnaire	148
Types of question	148
Writing a Likert scale questionnaire	148
9 Interviewing Children and Adults	155
Types of interview	157
Key skills of interviewing	159
Focus groups	160
Children as researchers	165
Email and Skype interviews	169
10 Analysing Your Qualitative and Quantitative Data Findings	173
Reducing your data	175
Reducing and displaying your data	179
Analysing your data	181
11 Writing Up Your Research Project	195
Steps before submitting your research project	197
Supervision	200
Contents of your research project	201
Plagiarism	218
Final preparation and proofreading	218
Congratulations!	219
Index	221



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes is an Associate Professor in the The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0–11 years) at UCL, Institute of Education. His recent research has focused upon the role of numerical data in early years education. He has researched the introduction of the revised EYFS (DfE, 2012) and the Introduction of Reception Baseline Assessment (NUT and ATL, 2015) which won the BERA Impact Award (2016). He has recently researched Ability Labelling in the Early Years and KS1 (NEU, 2017). His latest book (with Alice Bradbury) is called *The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education Playing with Numbers* (2017).



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Pamela and her continued love, inspiration and creativity.

Thank you to the Canterbury Christ Church University Early Childhood Studies students who shared their research projects with me: Shelley Angel, Lisa Burnap, Gemma Cook, Stephanie Dennehy, Katherine Gough, Martyn Kitney, Eleanor MacDonald, and Georgina Moxon. More recently, thank you to the University College London Institute of Education, MA Early Years Education students Anthony Leete, Eleanor Rea and Michelle Palser whose dissertations are inspirational.

The author and publisher are grateful for permission to reproduce the following material in this book:

Figure 1.2 – Blaxter, L, Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010) *How to Research*, 4th Edition, Open University Press/ McGraw-Hill Education. Copyright © Blaxter, L, Hughes, C. and Tight, M 2010. Reproduced by permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Figure 5.6 from P. Clough and C. Nutbrown (2007), *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, Sage Publications: London. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 6.1 from Clark, A. (2017) *Listening to Young Children: a guide to understanding and using the Mosaic approach*, 3rd Edition, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers for National Children's Bureau. Copyright © Alison Clark 2017. Foreword copyright © Peter Moss 2017. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLS Clear.

Chapter 6, poem from Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*. From the Catalogue of the Exhibition 'The Hundred Languages of Children', © Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Inistuzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy, published by Reggio Children, 1996.

Reggio Children/Centro Internazionale Loris Malaguzzi, Via Bligny, 1/a 42124 Reggio Emilia, <http://zerosei.comune.re.it/>

English translation by Lella Gandini Ó Lella Gandini, 1983. First published in English in *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*, 1st edition, edited by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman, 1993, and *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach, Advanced Reflections*, 2nd edition, 1998, Ablex Publishing. Ó Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman, 1993, 1998. Reproduced with the permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

Chapter 6, excerpt from 'I Forgot the Sky!' Children's Stories Contained Within Their Drawings, Coates, E., *International Journal of Early Years Education* (2002: Taylor & Francis), reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>).

Figures 7.2, and 7.3 from Y. P. Lancaster and P. Kirby (2010), *Listening to Young Children (2nd Edition)*, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education. Copyright © Y. Penny Lancaster, and reproduced with the kind permission of Open International Publishing Ltd. All rights reserved.

Table 11.4 from D. Wyse & K. Cowan (2017), *The Good Writing Guide for Education Students (4th Edition)*, Sage Publications: London. Reprinted with permission.

FOREWORD

Research can often seem a lonely business. The initial thinking about the need for enquiry, the creation of resources and relationships to enable research to take place, along with sustaining its implementation, can seem overwhelming. This can be as true for the experienced researcher as it is for the novice. *Doing Your Early Years Research Project* is a perfect companion. It brings many voices, structures and examples to support and challenge the researcher.

The text can be approached as a narrative of research – taking the reader-researcher through each stage from a developmental perspective. This starts with the building blocks of research: from considerations of what it means to take on the role and identity of a researcher to the creation of questions and aims that will fuel the enquiry. Within the text, there are carefully interwoven examples from many individuals' experiences alongside structured activities to offer the reader guidance and helpful conversation at each stage. The journey continues through a consideration of ethics, methodology, the conduct of specific data collection methods and the analysis of data. Each chapter provides a combination of scaffolding for learning about ideas and practices alongside grounded illustrations of actual experiences. These provide an excellent dialogic accompaniment and create a balance of support and critical challenge for the start of research.

The book also addresses ideas and issues that run beneath its approach to the development of the individual as an excellent *researcher* and the conduct of first-rate *research*. These include articulate and lively engagement with considerations that must connect with any research with children: the position of young children in society; policy contexts; social exclusion and social justice; power relations and child rights. The reader is enabled to bring their research into contact with debates about how best to form socially inclusive relationships with children, how recent thinking in ethics is reflected in new ideas and practices about young children, and consent and discoveries about the benefits and obstacles of using new media in enquiry. Meaning making is key to much of the book's ideas about positive change and research with young children. The ways in which adults and children create transformative connections between their lives and research are held up and examined. From creative listening to observation, from developing interviews to using images and play, the reader is given access to clear thinking and international perspectives about barriers, possibilities and new insights.

The impressive achievement of this book is to offer access to essential and basic theory and practice, whilst deepening understanding and developing a sophisticated critical framework to support high quality research.

The book is relevant to the practitioner and to the early years student, whilst offering insights to the more experienced researcher. Dr Roberts-Holmes makes enquiry alive and accessible and his text will inspire the reader to see how their research can benefit young children and those who live and work with them.

*Professor Phil Jones, Department of Early Years and Primary Education,
Institute of Education, University of London*



**YOU CAN
DO RESEARCH!**



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help you to:

- understand and demystify the process of research
- express your feelings about carrying out a research project
- understand the importance of social justice in research
- appreciate the importance of reflective practice in research
- understand the principles of high-quality research
- appreciate the everyday research skills which you already possess
- understand your own and your supervisor's responsibilities for the project.

YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT DOING RESEARCH

As you start your research project, you will probably be feeling a whole range of emotions. The following sections cover a wide variety of emotions that some students stated they felt about their forthcoming early childhood research projects. These students' positive feelings were concerned with the excitement of focusing in depth on an issue which was of real interest to them and working at their own pace and helping children. The anxieties the students had included being apprehensive about their own abilities and not having sufficient time. These positive and negative feelings about research topics are extremely common. Your early apprehension will help you generate the enthusiasm to successfully complete your research project.

As you read through the students' comments below, think about the following questions:

- Which comments do you empathise with?
- Why do you think so many students feel this way?
- How do you feel at the moment about doing your research project? Talk these feelings through with your friends and your supervisor.

I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO...

- The idea of 'digging deep' into an area that really interests me is a real energy booster.
- I'm very excited about my project as it is a topic which I'm fascinated about.
- The idea of doing research gives me 'a buzz'. It's a great opportunity to learn, to evaluate, and to evolve ideas.
- I feel that this is a good opportunity to gain further insight into an area of early childhood studies which really interests ME.
- We can choose exactly what we want to look at and I can work at my own pace.
- I want to make a change for the better and help children through my research.

ANXIETIES

- I hope I can go into sufficient depth in the area in the short timespan and do the topic the justice it deserves.
- I'm worried about not being able to get enough material together and not having the time to complete the study.
- As a single mum with three children, the amount of time I will have to spend on the project concerns me. Will I have enough?
- It feels like an enormous undertaking because I'm just not sure what I will be researching!
- I'm anxious about being out of my depth!
- I am wondering whether I am confident enough to ask professionals the questions I need answering.
- I feel I need a lot of guidance and support and hope this will be available to me.
- I am a bit wary about how to approach my area, however once I start talking to lecturers and people in the setting I feel that most of these apprehensions will disappear.
- I worry about the ethical issues.
- Am I organised enough to carry out such a project?

MYTHS ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

The above range of feelings may arise because, for some, the very word 'research' can create anxiety. It is important to remember that research is simply a tool (MacNaughton et al., 2010), and as with any other tool, when you learn what it does, why it has been invented and how to use it, it becomes beneficial to you. This means that, because research is just a tool, you are in control of it, rather than it being in control of you. The negative associations that you may be having around the word 'research' are not unusual and can stem from commonly held myths and stereotypes. The following wrong and mistaken views about research do sometimes create emotional barriers which can then prevent early childhood practitioners from participating in the research process:

- Early childhood research can only be done by academic professors and experts.
- The research process is so intellectual, complex, mysterious and time-consuming that it cannot possibly be for people like me!
- Research produces hard facts which are unquestionable.
- Research proves things one way or the other.
- There is only one way to do research.
- Research is a strict scientific exercise.
- Research is boring.
- Research cannot change anything.
- There are no real benefits from doing research.

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

Below are listed some different and more inclusive viewpoints about research which many early childhood practitioners have found to be true for them:

- You already possess many ‘everyday’ research skills.
- Research can be done by everybody – this means you too!
- Research is simply a tool for you to use.
- Research is fun and hard work.
- Research asks questions about the things that really matter to us.
- Research can initiate personal and professional change and development.
- Research is about developing knowledge.
- Research is about discovery.
- Research is about change.
- Research helps us understand the complex issues in childhood.
- Research helps to further professionalise early childhood studies.
- Research is about questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, myths and ‘commonsense’ understandings.
- Research is about challenging habitual patterns of behaviour.
- Research can satisfy your fascination with an issue.
- Research can positively benefit you, your work, the children, and the setting you work in.

Which of the above statements do you agree and disagree with? To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

- Early childhood research enables us to see things about children and ourselves as practitioners in new and different ways, to challenge our habitual patterns of thinking and to possibly act in new ways.

You might be wondering what you can offer early childhood research. The good news is that early childhood is a rapidly expanding area and you can contribute to that process with your research project.

YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

Although a great deal has been written about early childhood and children, there is still a lot that remains unknown concerning young children growing up in society. Today’s complex society increasingly places responsibilities on early childhood practitioners to understand more about children. New legislation, policies and practice constantly change the ways in which practitioners must relate to and work with the children in their care. For example, within the UK the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) poses huge challenges for early years practitioners in implementing its laudable principles and aims. The EYFS has increased expectations of early childhood services and the people who work in them. There is a tremendous need to know more about the various ways in which these changing complex factors influence children and their childhoods.

Childhoods are understood as being positioned within a set of overlapping complex issues. Childhoods are not experienced within a vacuum, rather they are connected to a range of socio-logical issues such as class, ethnicity, gender and geographical location. Within society, children are holistically influenced by the type of early childhood setting they go to, their schools, their

health care and the media. All of these issues impact on different children in different ways, and in these complex ways childhoods are understood in a holistic way. This knowledge of the complexity of childhood leads us to ask many questions about children. This is where the research tool can help us to begin to answer some of those questions. So, as an early childhood practitioner, you can begin to see why you must be engaged in research; there is so much more to learn about children and their varied childhoods!

JANE'S SMARTPHONE RESEARCH

In case study 1.1, think about how Jane's reflective observations of children coming into nursery in the morning gave rise to a whole series of interesting research questions. Notice how her thinking challenged her pre-conceived ideas and how the research would lead to improved knowledge and possibly changed practice.



CASE STUDY 1.1

YOUNG CHILDREN AND TECHNOLOGY

Jane had worked in a nursery school for several years and was knowledgeable about early childhood. However, over the past year she had been struck by how many children she saw in the nursery playground playing on their parent's smartphones and she reflected on how little she knew about what they were doing. When she asked some of the children about this, they showed Jane how they had opened the YouTube application and selected their favourite videos. Some of the children were able to show Jane how they could listen to different pieces of music and also showed her videos of themselves at home! Jane was amazed at how competent, confident and flexible these children were at navigating their way around these smartphones. She reflected on the differences between the children's competence with this smartphone technology outside of school and the limited ways in which those same children were using computers in the nursery. Jane wondered why there was this difference and how it might be overcome. She also realised how little she really knew about children's technology use other than from reading negative newspaper articles about young children playing too many games! From her informal observations at school and the anecdotes she had heard, she knew that there was a lot more going on!

Jane wanted to read more about young children and technology. She was determined to 'dig deeper' and find out more about the educational value of smartphones, tablets and computers. She wanted to understand more about what children could do with technology and so she began to note down questions in her **research diary**. What, if anything, were the children learning whilst they were playing on these devices? What

learning dispositions were being developed? To what extent was internet game playing, such as Club Penguin, going on at home? How did children interact with each other on the computer? What was the teacher's role in supporting children playing on the computer? What were the ethical issues around young children playing on the internet and how might these be understood?

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

It is important to note that research is a powerful tool in developing early childhood professionalism (MacNaughton et al., 2010). So, whatever your motivations in coming to this book, whether to develop your critical skills in reading about research done by others or because you wish to carry out research for yourself, you will be helping with the ongoing professionalisation of early childhood studies.

You might want to know more about early childhood research for a variety of reasons: for example, it might be a compulsory project as part of your course assessment, or you might be a practitioner working with children in some capacity and wishing to carry out a small-scale study as part of that work with the intention of improving your practice in your institution. Such practitioner **action research** is increasingly important in developing and improving early childhood practice. This book will help you to ask research-style questions about your own current practice, the collection of evidence, its **analysis** and any possible conclusions that can be drawn. Early childhood practitioners are therefore increasingly recognised as key participants in the culture of childhood research.

By reading this book, you will inform yourself about what constitutes high-quality, valid research and this will make you a better 'consumer' of research and policy. By understanding the process of high-quality research based on ethical values and principles, you will be able to review and reflect on the research you have read more effectively and with greater confidence. By being aware of what constitutes high-quality ethical research, you will be able to critically evaluate research conducted by others. Such critical reflection on research carried out by others is central to the process of professionalism within early childhood studies.

By aspiring to be an 'evidence-based profession', early childhood practitioners move beyond merely responding to whatever the next government policy or initiative might be and adopt a more powerful and informed position. Much early childhood practice is currently led by government policy. By becoming an informed consumer of research and actually carrying out research yourself, you can generate your own knowledge and understanding. Such understanding is useful in the process of responding to policy initiatives. For example, by having read research evidence on emotional literacy in the early years and perhaps carrying out research on emotional literacy with children, you are in a better position to review government policies which address, or omit, emotional development in young children.

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Some early childhood practitioners incorrectly create a division in their own minds between an imagined ‘academic high ground’ and the ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schön, 1987). They feel that ‘thinking about practice’ (which is what reflective practice is) belongs to an ‘academic high ground’ which is not for them. These practitioners wrongly feel that they should just *do* practice and not *think about* practice. This is because they incorrectly believe that the ‘practice’ of doing early childhood research and ‘thinking about it’ are disconnected and separate. Such attitudes can act as a self-limiting barrier to one’s potential. Practitioners who engage in reflective practice can produce real-world knowledge grounded within their work. By engaging in a process of reflective practice, practitioners can create real-world knowledge born from experience and critical reflection. Reflection involves thinking about a particular aspect of your work and how to improve it. This process of reflection is personal but it may also be done with your trusted critical friends and/or colleagues.

Reflective practice is about improving practice and generating the theories by which to understand that improvement. Such real-world knowledge produced by early childhood practitioners is as good as that within the ‘established’ academic community. In order to ensure that your real-world knowledge has **validity**, you must demonstrate that it involves critical reflection and a systematic enquiry. The key message is that early years professionals can and do produce original thinking. This is because although people may well have carried out research into your topic area before, nobody has ever done your particular piece of research in your particular setting before. Schön (1987) made a distinction between ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’. Reflection *in* action is about ‘thinking on your feet’, which is what early years practitioners do all the time, of course! Reflection *on* action is a more subtle and mature retrospective thinking or ‘thinking after the event’. Early years professional reflective practice primarily involves thinking after the event about what happened and *why*. Your reflective practice research in your unique early years context may throw up original insights and thoughts about the topic area. By engaging in a systematic process of reflective practice research, your ‘voice’ will be heard in the field of early childhood.

With reflective practice, *you* take control of *your* situation: you are the script writer, the stage director and the main actor/actress. And yes, it is your play! You own the research and it is personal and meaningful to you. This is why reflective practice is so empowering. You become the insider researcher with the passion and enthusiasm to make insightful observations and improvements in your early years setting. You also become the expert doer and thinker. You can generate your theories as to what worked and why and perhaps learn from those changes that didn’t work and the reasons for this. Here, your reflective practice and research generate *sustainable* change because the practitioner is central. The practitioner creates and implements their own ideas rather than the ideas of an outside expert.

WHAT DOES REFLECTIVE PRACTICE INVOLVE?

Reflective practice is concerned with you investigating and evaluating your early years work. Reflective practice is also concerned with you taking action to improve your personal, social and

professional early years context. The main questions that early years reflective practitioners ask are based on the following:

- What am I doing?
- Why am I doing it this way?
- How can I improve on what I am doing?

These questions are at the heart of any early years reflective practice research project. From these practical projects, it is possible for early years practitioners to generate their own personal theories about what works in an early years setting and what doesn't work. Hence, reflective practice is concerned with *both* the practical aspects of doing your job better *and* generating knowledge about why you believe your practice has improved.

Table 1.1 contains some questions which highlight the differences between outsider-type questions (traditional research) and insider-type questions (action research).

Table 1.1 Outsider-type and insider-type questions

<i>Traditional research questions</i>	<i>Reflective practice research questions</i>
What is the relationship between children and the outdoor environment?	How can I improve the use of the outdoor area?
What is the connection between management style and increased motivation?	How can I improve my working relationships with my support staff?
Why do early years policy documents generally not include young children's thinking?	How can I listen more carefully to young children's ideas about what they think they should be learning?
What is the relationship between enhanced family involvement and children's learning?	How can I get families more involved in my early years setting?

In the questions in Table 1.1, you can see that you, the practitioner, are centrally involved in the research process: 'I' is used in all the reflective practice research questions because you, the practitioner, are central and you are asking questions about your professional work. You know your setting and yourself and, as a well-trained reflective practitioner, you also know the sorts of questions you need to ask to improve your practice. Reflective practice thus presents a fundamentally different approach from that of traditional research. Within reflective practice, you are much more powerfully positioned since you are in control of the process from start to finish.

STEPHEN'S REFLECTIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the following example, think about the ways in which Stephen's research was professionally reflective and empowering to him as a teacher.

Stephen was a Reception teacher and he had a deep belief in child-led learning through play. However, he was also concerned that over the past year senior colleagues had expected him to be more formally 'teaching' the children literacy, particularly phonics and maths.

Stephen felt that his play-based approach to learning was increasingly being challenged, questioned and undermined by the changes going on around him, and he wanted to know more about why these were happening. What policy amendments had enabled these changes and why? Stephen reflected on how he could own the research so that it empowered and further professionalised him. Hence, he asked the following questions: How do I make sense of and respond to increased school-readiness expectations in the early years? To what extent can I retain my **child-centred** values and philosophy? What can I do in the classroom to keep child-led learning central?

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE RESEARCH AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reflective practice is centrally concerned with your process of professional development, change and improvement. Practitioner research is an integral part of your critical professional development. As a professional, you constantly need to reflect on your work and the ways in which you enhance that work with young children. The underlying principles and values of reflective practice should be integral to everything you do in this regard.

As a professional, you will constantly need to reflect on your work. Increasingly, early years professionals need to be accountable so you will need to be able to justify what you are doing and why you are doing it. Your reflective practice project will help you understand an issue in much more depth. This understanding will then help you justify your professional actions. The following is a summary of some of the ways in which reflective practice research can help you develop your early years professionalism.

1. A deeper understanding of your values and principles

Reflection involves thinking about a particular aspect of your work and how to improve it. This process of reflection is personal and may also be done with trusted critical friends or colleagues. Informed and insightful reflection is a central aspect of personal and professional development. This will lead to an enhanced understanding of your professional values and principles.

2. Increased professionalism

By engaging in the process of reflective practice, you will develop your interests and motivation in your work, leading to further reflection and development. A positive cycle of personal and professional development can develop from your initial small-scale project.

3. Enhanced working relationships with children, parents and colleagues

Reflective practice is very often a collaborative venture and can involve close working with colleagues, children, families and communities. Reflective practice can be a sociable experience carried out with trusted colleagues or critical friends.

4. Developing your pedagogic skills and knowledge

Critical reflection can arise out of your desire to enhance your teaching skills and knowledge of how you can help children best develop emotionally, cognitively, physically and spiritually. Much practice with young children involves holistic learning. Reflective practice can be sensitive to the subtle and complex learning processes of young children.

5. Increased theoretical knowledge and engagement

One of the great benefits of engaging in reflective practice is that it is your project and you may wish to develop not only your practical knowledge but also your theoretical knowledge of the issues. Your reading of other people's ideas about early years issues, together with your experience and insight, can generate your own knowledge and understanding about what works and why. In this way, reflective practice is empowering and can give meaning to practitioners' working lives. Early years workers engaged in reflective practice develop personal 'living theories' about themselves and their work. As you share these 'living theories', you will become increasingly confident in your own thinking and theories about your practice. This increased confidence and awareness of *why* you do *what* you do is part of your professionalisation process.

6. Developed self-respect, power and self-esteem

Early years workers who engage in reflective practice projects feel more powerful. This is because action research is about you taking the lead responsibility for developing your personal and professional work. This can result in an increased sense of empowerment and enjoyment from your work. Action research can thus initiate positive cycles of personal and professional development. A worthwhile piece of action research that you personally believe in can empower and transform your working life. You will feel more powerful in your work as you come to reflect on and change it in various ways for the better.

7. Increased respect for children

Some reflective practice projects involve listening to children's perceptions and understandings. Such projects can highlight what you already know, namely that young children are strong and have immense abilities and competencies if we allow them. It is we adults who need to listen to and see children better.

8. Increased awareness of the wider contexts in which you work

Much of your work as an early years professional will be framed by various pieces of government legislation and policy guidance, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017). As you engage in your research project, your awareness will be raised of the wider policy contexts in which you, your work and your early years setting are situated. This increased awareness and knowledge may lead you to carry out further action research projects.

9. Increased confidence in your research skills

By carrying through a piece of reflective practice research, you will gain experience and knowledge of how to successfully plan and engage with a research project. This will develop your confidence in this key aspect of your professional development. You will be able to answer people who cite research and evidence with your own knowledge and understanding to justify what you are doing and why. This is a powerful and professional way to engage.

PRINCIPLES OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH

Regardless of the topic of your research project, there are some basic principles which underpin all quality early childhood research. The underpinning values and principles of high-quality research can be summarised as follows (MacNaughton et al., 2010).

Your research should be:

- critical and political
- ethical
- respectful of children's participatory rights
- purposeful
- well designed
- transparent
- honest about your assumptions.

THE CRITICAL RESEARCH STANCE

Critical researchers would argue that at the heart of their research is a desire to *transform and change people*. For the purposes of a small-scale project, this transformation is often about the researcher themselves developing their understanding through enhanced knowledge and experience by actually doing the research. Ultimately, critical research is concerned with the transformation of people, their institutions and thus society itself.

Social justice is at the heart of any critical research. The principles underpinning critical research include fairness, justice, equality and respect. Chapter 2 describes some personal research stories in which all the researchers had issues of social justice they wished to write about. Such social justice issues included race equality, patriarchy and the violent oppression of women and children, unfair gender stereotypes and a desire to listen to children's perspectives in the schooling process.

The point is to keep a critical stance throughout the research process. In order to do this, researchers must continuously ask questions about their assumptions and underlying beliefs and be aware of the power issues within their topic. Issues of racism, sexism, classism, violence and the negation of children's rights do not occur in a political vacuum. Within critical research, the interactions and structures which allow such abuses of power and inequalities will need to be understood, discussed and challenged in your written work.

Critical research involves researchers being continuously open to alternative views and perspectives. Being critical can include being sceptical of the use of certain everyday terms. For example, critical researchers challenge the thinking that goes along with the label of special educational needs, preferring instead to work with the ideology of inclusion.

LEE'S RESEARCH: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHINESE AND ENGLISH EARLY CHILDHOOD DIFFERENCES

As you read the following example, think about how Lee's experiences in England have challenged her preconceived ideas about early childhood education. What assumptions has Lee had challenged by her experiences in England? How have her reflective observations and questions further professionalised her?

Lee was a student from China and when she came to England she was very interested to see how much free play, exploring and practical activities went on in English early years settings. Lee was also very intrigued to learn that children's emotional development was a central concern in many settings, rather than cognitive learning. In China, Lee was used to much more formalised learning taking place, for example she had formally taught 2-year-olds how to read and write through memorisation. The central prominence given to child-led activities, especially play, and the focus on learning characteristics and dispositions in England challenged her thinking about early childhood education. Lee wondered why there were such differences in attitude to learning between the two countries and what she could learn from these different approaches. Specifically, she wanted to know more about the advantages and disadvantages of each system.

ETHICS ARE CENTRAL

Ethical issues must be central to any piece of early childhood research. Ethical issues should continuously permeate all aspects of the research process, from the questions or hypotheses asked, to the choice of research techniques, and how the research is presented and fed back to the respondents. All research can potentially be both beneficial and, sometimes, inadvertently harmful. Your research should aim to make a positive contribution to the broader social good within early childhood. Think about the ways in which your project may be beneficial to the children, the setting and to you. You will also have to try to predict any possible ill effects your research topic and your questions might have. It is therefore crucial at the outset of any research to think through any possible ethical difficulties, problems and concerns that may arise as a result of your research. Think of these possible difficulties in relation to the children, the setting and you. If you are doing your research as part of a college course, ethical issues might determine whether it is possible to carry out the research or not. So, think through carefully any potential ethical difficulties now to avoid disappointment later on. Chapter 4 focuses on the ethical issues needing consideration in your research.

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATORY RIGHTS

Children are important people within the research process and children have participatory rights in issues which affect them. So, within the research process, listening to children, consulting with them and respecting their views are becoming widespread in childhood research. Children actively wish to participate in the research process, for example in the planning of children's services. This process of actively engaging with children demands sensitivity from the researcher. The ethical considerations in participatory research with children are changing the ways in which research itself is understood.

PURPOSEFUL RESEARCH

Your research should have clear aims and be worthwhile. The research topic and what it sets out to do should matter to you and to others. If your research is worthwhile, it is likely to be interesting and enjoyable – essential if you are to complete your project! Purposeful, clear aims to the research are also vital in encouraging others to take part in your research.

YOUR RESEARCH SHOULD BE WELL DESIGNED

You should have carefully thought through your research approaches and techniques. Sufficient reading and knowledge will help to inform your research questions or predictive hypotheses, which should also be well thought through. The research should be well organised and achievable within a particular timescale.

YOUR RESEARCH SHOULD BE TRANSPARENT

Transparent research allows other people to follow your complete research trail. Hence, your research should be clear and honest. When other people read your research, they should clearly understand what you did and why you did it. Transparency involves letting people know why you took certain decisions within the research process, and is important for validity.



ACTIVITY 1.1

Think about the assumptions that you hold regarding your research topic.

Write down any strongly held beliefs you have about your topic.

Why do you think you hold these beliefs about your topic?

ACTIVITY 1.2



Carefully read some newspapers/magazines for a week and collect examples of research that affects children and families and early childhood. Then answer these questions about the articles:

- What do you think of this research?
- Does it tell us anything significantly new?
- Was it, in your opinion, worth researching and publishing?
- Who might benefit from the research?
- Does it fulfil the principles for high-quality research?

THE RESEARCH PROCESS WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

Research within early childhood can be approached in many different ways. Different overall approaches include perceiving research as a linear process or as a recursive spiral process.

In the linear model of early childhood research (see Figure 1.1), it is envisaged that there is a set of more or less fixed stages through which the research must pass in an orderly fashion.

The straightforward stages in Figure 1.1 provide a useful and necessary structure for your research. However, such a fixed model can prove to be rather limiting and constraining.

Stage one: *Choosing an early childhood topic*

Stage two: *Thinking about possible methods*

Stage three: *Reading about the early childhood topic*

Stage four: *Collecting the evidence*

Stage five: *Analysing the evidence*

Stage six: *Writing up*

Figure 1.1 The linear research model

The recursive research spiral is not a fixed process. It allows for the research to be more flexible and open to changes in direction. In this book you are encouraged to revisit any of the research stages in the light of your ongoing understanding, reading and evidence. In the spiral model, research becomes dynamic, fluid and open to change as you progress with your topic. For example, sometimes early childhood researchers can only select their topics after they have read some literature in the area they are interested in. Indeed, reading permeates all stages of the research process. At other times, a piece of evidence may emerge in the form of a child's drawing, or what

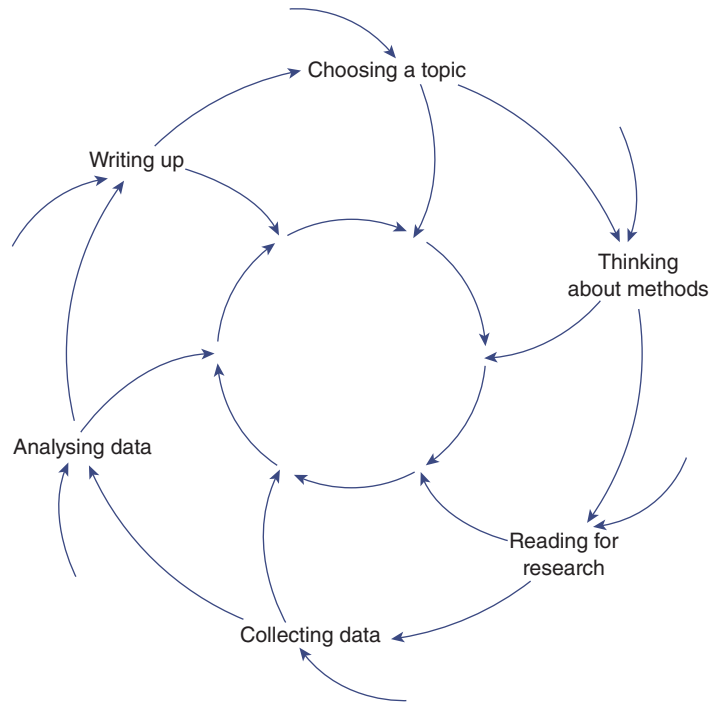


Figure 1.2 The research spiral

Source: Blaxter et al. (2010)

a child says, or a new initiative in your workforce which might lead you into reading and asking different and amended research questions. In these ways, the spiral research model is useful because it can be entered at almost any point.

EVERYDAY RESEARCH SKILLS

To get on your course or be employed within your work setting means that you are already experienced in many everyday research skills – whether you know it or not. However, you are probably unaware of how many research techniques you are already familiar with. Everyday research skills and techniques that you are experienced with will include:

- reading
- asking questions
- watching
- listening
- selecting and sorting information
- organising
- writing
- reflecting.

You will probably be very good at some of the above everyday research skills but might never have considered such an ability to be a research skill! For example, going on holiday with friends involves using many of the above everyday research skills. Finding out where to go involves selecting and reading appropriate magazines, websites and books. You may also ask friends and family for advice. You will have to reflect on the reading and your friends' advice to make a selection of where and when you go on holiday. You might decide to go to a travel agent. You will then have to ask a specific set of questions which might include destinations, costs, carriers, and travel arrangements for small children, elderly people, etc. You might have to think about appropriate clothes, language and money. You will thus accumulate a vast amount of material on destinations and travel which will need sorting through and organising. You will then have to make a selection based on your information. All of the above activities involve a huge amount of planning, organisation and effort. This book will make these implicit everyday research skills, that you already possess, explicit for you. All these natural skills and abilities that you already possess in order to book a holiday mean that you *can* successfully carry out a small research project. Table 1.2 clearly shows the connections between your everyday life skills and research skills.

Table 1.2 The connections between everyday life skills and their more formal research equivalent

<i>Everyday life skills</i>	<i>Research equivalent</i>
Reading	Reading for research; literature review; documentary analysis
Listening	Interviews
Watching	Observations
Choosing	Sampling and selection of respondents
Summarising situations, events, television shows, films, etc.	Managing your data
Organising events and situations within a given time frame	Managing your project
Writing	Writing up your project
Reflecting on life's events and situations	Researcher bias

ACTIVITY 1.3

Think of an 'everyday' situation that involves using research skills that you already possess, for example buying a new smartphone, choosing your child's childminder, organising a wedding, buying a car. List what you would have to do and the everyday research skills you would need to employ to successfully carry out the task.

SUMMARY

The principles and values underpinning high-quality early childhood research are crucial in producing critical social research that empowers practitioners, their institutions and the children in their care. This chapter has begun to demystify the process of research by making explicit the everyday research skills that you already possess. Early childhood studies is an area of rapid growth within society. As integrated and holistic children's services are developed throughout society, so early childhood practitioners' responsibilities are increased. Enhanced knowledge about children's complex and varied lives will help to meet these professional responsibilities. Your small-scale research project is an important part of this professionalisation process.

In this chapter, you will have:

- developed your confidence to 'have a go' at research
- understood the importance of your early childhood studies research project
- appreciated the significance of reflective practice in your research
- examined the principles underpinning high-quality early childhood research
- appreciated that research is a process and not a one-off right or wrong event.

RECOMMENDED READING

Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five*. Available at www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/03/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf (accessed 8 June 2017).

MacNaughton, G., Rolfe, S. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (eds) (2010) *Doing Early Childhood Research: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition. Buckingham: Open University Press. The second edition of this classic textbook is an excellent guide for both novice and experienced early childhood researchers. The first two chapters provide novice researchers with an in-depth and thorough discussion of the process of early childhood research and the principles of high-quality early childhood research.

Wilson, E. (2017) *School-based Research: A Guide for Education Students*, 3rd edition. London: Sage. This book is an extremely useful 'how-to' guide for early childhood researchers who are working in educationally based early years settings. Each chapter is clearly laid out and discusses the entire research process from start to finish.



WEB LINKS

www.learnhigher.ac.uk/research-skills – this is a fantastic, thorough and well researched website and the following sections are particularly useful; What is research?; Analyse this!!!; Collect this!!!

www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/planning-dissertation – this website carefully guides you through a reflective process of choosing a suitable early childhood research project.

www.postgrad.com/uk_research_planning – a website which contains succinct and appropriate advice on how to choose your research topic. For international students there is a particularly useful section on choosing to do research in your home country.

REFERENCES

- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (2010) *How to Research* 4e. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five*. Available at www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2017/03/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf (accessed 8 June 2017).
- MacNaughton, G., Rolfe, S. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (eds) (2010) *Doing Early Childhood Research: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

For additional online resources, please visit <https://study.sagepub.com/roberts-holmes4e>



