

# Research and the Early Years Practitioner-Researcher

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In this paper I seek to explore the tension that exists when teaching students on a work-based degree within Higher Education, particularly within the realms of research. It reflects upon my own learning journey as I have come to question presumptions that I previously held about teaching research, which were based upon my own post-graduate educational experience.

Two significant occurrences have caused me to reconsider my views on this point; firstly the re-framing of research and its purpose when writing a new Foundation Degree in early years and, secondly, the confusion and disheartenment that was displayed by many students during our research methods module (which prepares students for their own Independent Study) in 2010. In reflecting upon the aims and reasoning behind early years students carrying out research, I had to ask why it was that the subject was fundamentally being taught with the same approach that is taken to research at doctorate level; an approach which disempowers and intimidates our level 5 students. I also came to ask whether one size can possibly fit all when it comes to research, or whether we ought to be taking a drastically different approach to research when attempting to up-skill fledgling professionals within the realms of early years education and care.

I am still struggling to find a definitive answer to my questions, as the implications are diverse and complex: feedback will be welcomed. What I do believe is that our current approach to educational research is inappropriate for our undergraduate students as it does not build upon their previous experience, understanding and ability (Biggs, 2007). It does not make research real and personal to the student's professional development and employability, instead it treats it as a 'tag on', very much like the independent study itself. Although we take it as a given that all of our teaching will build upon previous knowledge, relate to knowledge acquired in different modules and focus upon content that is significant to the student (Marton *et al.*, 1984), and indeed, such is the case within all other areas of our early years teaching, I do not believe this to be the case in our approach to research methods, which has historically been presented as some type of mysterious 'rite of passage' for students. Research has been elevated as something distinct and for the chosen few and we need to reclaim it as a skill which is central to early years practice.

As a result of the shroud of importance placed around research, it has become a teaching area that we avoid discussing because many tutors feel insecure in their knowledge of it. Comments made by students would suggest that there are as many different views about the purpose and content of the Independent Study as there are tutors supervising them through it. And I realise that this does not apply to my department alone. It is imperative that early years teams clarify what, exactly, they mean by 'research' and reach a shared agreement about what their expectations of research projects are, if we are to offer valuable learning experiences to our students.

### **The research 'mystery' (with its very own language)**

A key issue within this conundrum is that we present the research concept as something detached from the rest of the students' learning, replete with its very own language. In reality research is something that the students have been using, in both their practice and their studies, throughout their early years experience. We continue to present research as the 'golden fleece' of the early years degree and I do wonder whether this is almost to aggrandise our own research achievements, when in reality it is a practical skill that should be threaded throughout modules. This practical approach is contrary to the complex and scientific impression that many of our students have of research. Many students view research as a set of rules that they need to learn and follow in a very superficial way. Einstein (undated, no page) refers to science as a whole as *'nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking'* and also adds that the reason that it is referred to as 'research' is because we don't really know what we are doing.

We often fail to make clear to students that with research you are venturing into the unknown; as McNiff (2011b) has stressed, we are not travelling toward a set end point, but stepping off a cliff and seeing what happens. And this is what should make it exciting to students, because each and every piece of research is unique, there are no right or wrong answers. Moustakas (1994: 65) comments that 'No scientific discovery is ever complete' and adds that 'The beauty of knowledge and discovery is that it keeps us forever awake, alive, and connected with what is and with what matters in life.' So why do we so often dampen this passion and prise student into a rigid and formulaic approach?

A year ago my second year (level 5) early years students were introduced to the intricacies of quantitative research. During their first year of study they had drafted a questionnaire which aimed to gain the views of parents within their setting. During this subsequent qualitative research methods session they were made aware that this was not actually a

questionnaire at all, because it did not adequately follow 'research parameters'. It reminded me of Biggs' (2003) physics teacher who totally dismissed the knowledge that the students had previously toiled to acquire, because they were now going to learn how things *really* were. The second year early years students were told *forget what you thought you knew about research, because this is **real** research*. The verbal and written feedback that I gained from the students indicated that many were disheartened, and I would go so far as to say that in some cases students were actually offended, by the dismissal of their work. It was at this time that I began to question why we, as an experienced and knowledgeable group of educators, had allowed ourselves to be drawn into archaic systems that were so inappropriate for our students.

By 'toeing the line' of academic tradition we have a tendency to aggrandise research and elevate it to something that is elite and all but unobtainable. And by doing this we negate the value of the research that all of our students and practitioners take part in day-to-day and the knowledge and experience that they already hold about it. We are presenting research as a mystery to be gradually discovered, when, in reality, it is an instinctive component of a practitioner's daily interaction with their children. The only difference with the piece of enquiry that students produce for their Independent Study is that its purpose is to be 'made public' (Stenhouse, 1980: 1). Therefore it is important that the student is able to relate their discoveries to an audience. We have traditionally accepted that the 'audience' for the study is the academic tutor, and more-so, one particular academic tutor, but should we not be considering the most appropriate ways in which the student-practitioner could be sharing their research findings with their colleagues instead?

### **Making research useful**

If we embrace the concept, as I'm sure that we all do, that as tutors our 'job is to make sure the experience is as useful as possible' (Beatty, 2003: 144) then many of us need to rethink our approach to practitioner research. Is the aim of an Independent Study for students to 'tick an academic box' and achieve their honours, or is it for them to take away a skill that will improve their practice and their employability? Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) stress how important it is to have very clear expectations of our students if any form of assessment is to be successful, yet I believe that due to a wide variance in conceptions of the 'research project' our students are receiving mixed messages on this front. Barnett (2000) discusses how 'insecurity' is good for students as it is akin to reflection, sifting to unearth the complexities of a shifting environment; and much as I agree that we should encourage scholars who will question the apparently obvious, I would argue that our approach to

research develops the wrong type of 'insecurity' in our students; they feel insecure about their own capabilities and the expectations of the Independent Study itself. In a degree that seeks to empower and professionalise throughout it seems out of sync that the final task thrust upon them is to attempt to conquer and work within an obscure, and in some cases debilitating language.

The question of the type of language that we should be using when we introduce students to research is a difficult one, because there are two often conflicting communities to which these students belong. In order for their work to be recognised and respected *academically*, students need to be able to adopt and show an understanding of the language of research which is found in research texts, including methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks and paradigms. In order for their research to be meaningful within settings and to be shared with colleagues in a manifestly clear way, (which Foucault (1983) refers to as *parrhesia*) our students will need to be able to explain their research to early years colleagues, many of whom have an education that is limited to their school experience. So which should be their focus? And is it possible to combine the two?

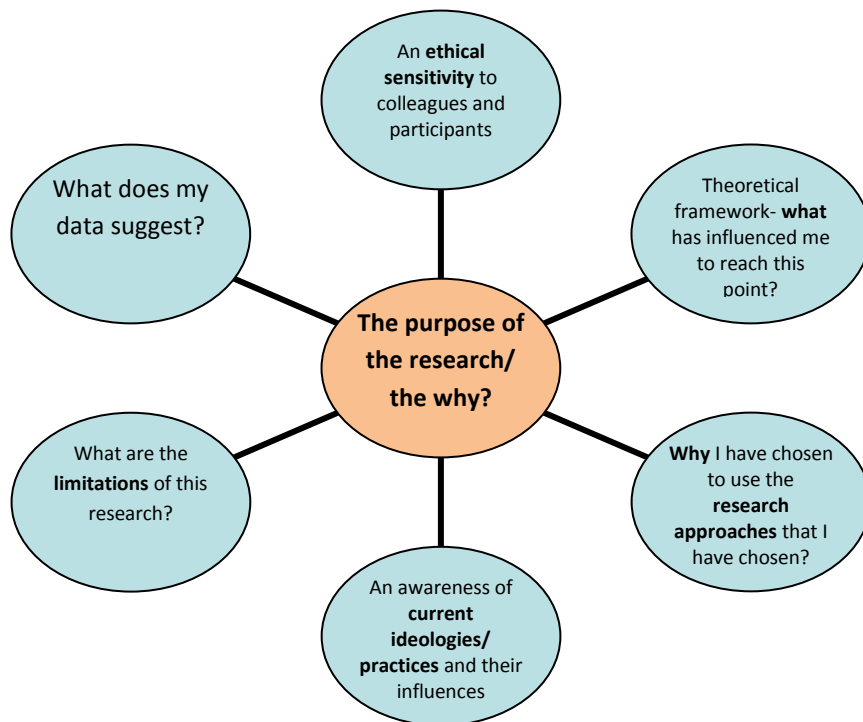
As tutors it is difficult to balance between the practicality of work-based skills and academic standards within this problematic area. Beaty (2003: 146) comments that, we need to modernise our approach, as our role as tutors is not 'simply to train the next generation of academics' but 'to tie learning from experience inextricably to academic study'. We should always start with the students' experience and research should start with *purpose*. Before asking what methodological approach they will use, it is vital that we ask the student the purpose of their research enquiry, how will it benefit them as practitioners? McNiff (2011a) suggests that we should always ask '*why*' in order to unpack those concepts which we hold dear. *Why* is this an important area to them? What do they hope to gain from it? How will it enrich their career (and employability)? McNiff also adds that where we have traditionally held rather a 'spectator' view of research, it needs to be acknowledged our students are members of the community that they are investigating, and as such they play a part within their own research.

Janesick (1994: 215) uses 'methodolatry', the combination of methodology and idolatry to describe some academic's 'slavish attachment and devotion to method' which overshadows 'the actual substance of the story being told'. Within my own department views are currently developing around this area, but I strongly believe that we should not buy into such sophistry. I believe that our discussions should be based around what the student wants to

explore and which are the best and most appropriate methods with which to do that (with limited resources and within a limited timeframe). So what approach should early years research take? My first suggestion is that we remove methodalry and replace it with *purpose*, or the *why?* The reason that many of the research projects that I have come across are no more than a paper exercise is that they have lacked purpose. They have rigidly followed the methodology, methods, data analysis, conclusions structure; and have had reams of references to worthy literature, but they have smacked of self-aggrandisement rather than reflective development. They show understanding of literature, not of themselves. Ironically it is these studies that would most adequately meet the requirements of 'academia'.

My suggestion is that we put these requirements to one side for a moment and instead we focus upon purpose. By focusing on this students will develop a more real understanding of the relationship of research to their own professional development, and the part that methodologies and paradigms have to play within that. My focus upon purpose is very similar to McNiff's (2011a) *why?* Why do I want to explore this area? Why is it important to me? What do I hope to achieve through this exploration? How will it help me to grow and develop as a practitioner? As these questions become central to the research the student can no longer explore this as a spectator, they become pivotal to discussion. Their project becomes, as Rinaldi (2001: 150) describes, a way of 'narrating' their own 'learning process.' Rinaldi's discussion on recording instances in settings, where documents aim to 'bring into existence... the 'emotionally moving' sense of the search for the meaning of life' is equally applicable to student's studies. Whatever the focus area of the investigation, the ultimate aim of the study should be for the student to enrich their own understanding and their own practice. This stance is similar to that promoted by Whitehead (1989; 2008) and McNiff (2009; 2010) throughout their literature.

In discussion with colleagues I have attempted to develop what I see as the 'vital ingredients' of a piece of early years research, these are the areas that I would expect to see evidenced within the student's 'writing' (and I use this term in the widest sense, acknowledging that there are many different forms of representation).



**Figure 1**

What will immediately notice about this diagram, is that it still contains all of the recognised features of a piece of academic research, as I am not of the impression that any of them can be disposed of. Instead I believe that each of the aspects of research should be firmly linked to the purpose of the study. The student should ask themselves *why* ethicality so important to their study, *why* their own perceptions are central, *why* they have chosen to focus on *this* data, and *this* particular way of collecting it. Having a genuine and personal underpinning for the research will give a clarity and significance to the more complex aspects of research that many studies lack. The institutional problem with such an approach is that it lacks easily recognisable structure and, let's be honest, makes marking more difficult. How do you give grades to sixty studies if you are not following a set template? How does someone who is not familiar with the pedagogical aims of the department 'slot into' marking requirements? Would the figure represented above provide a sufficient basis from which to develop a marking criteria? It is such procedural questions and restrictions that make us struggle to move thinking forward within our institutions.

## **Ethicality and the Student Researcher**

You will notice in Figure 1 that I have included 'ethical sensitivity' and I feel that this should be unpicked a little further. Unfortunately for some individuals when they take on the persona of 'researcher' it can make them slightly megalomaniacal. I remember my own delusions when I embarked on my Ph.D. (having had no previous experience of research) that I would swan into the setting and collect ground-breaking data. I was Silverman's (2000: 198) 'philosopher-queen':

Under the remit of divine orthodoxy, the social scientist is transformed into philosopher-king (or queen) who can always see through people's claims and know better than they do.

Needless to say I was soon brought back down to reality with a bump, but this rather unpleasant trait can often be found within students' work. It is, therefore, the student's approach to their research that I would like to discuss here and not the practicalities of permission letters and gaining signatures. I knew that I felt uncomfortable when reading some students work, but could not quite articulate why, until I heard Julian Stern (2010) discussing 'vicious' and 'virtuous' research. The studies which had caused me discomfort were what Stern would describe as 'vicious' research. In the work of students this is often, as Stern (2010: 7) explains, 'a simple and naïve form of sincerity' whereby the student believes that they should, quite simply, be honest and relay what they have seen. Unfortunately this can often be untempered by the respect, humility, kindness and modesty that Pring (2004) suggests are all important qualities of research. Stern's (2010) paper made me realise that what I was actually looking for in the student's studies, was a virtuous approach to the research. Costley *et al.* (2010: 43) refer to this as a 'caring' approach to research. They clarify:

...caring is more than a superficial clarification of one's actions by means of a voluntary consent form; it is the reframing of the research project as a mutual activity which has personal consequences ...

The concepts of power, trust and vulnerability that Costley *et al.* also discuss, and which apply to all individuals involved, even indirectly, in a research project, are concepts that the more traditional guidance on research projects overlook. Roberts-Holmes (2011), for example, focuses on the emotional vulnerability of children, and even the researcher, whereas other adults involved are looked upon as no more than 'gatekeepers', or

obstructions to getting the research completed. It is no surprise, then, that so many students believe that they are researching on, as opposed to with. We need to help our students to understand that by being in the 'privileged and powerful position' of carrying out research within a setting they have a 'moral obligation' to carry out that duty with care (Costley *et al.* 2010: 44). Stern (2011) advocated that we should keep the virtues of openness to criticism, modesty and humility to the fore within our research and it is our responsibility as tutors to help students to understand that 'Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen...' (Palmer, 1998: 108).

Because early years is a field in which decisions have historically been 'done to' rather than 'made with', it is necessary that we empower our early years practitioners to become capable researchers who have something to say about how things should be. This will not happen through a superficial understanding of terminology. Goodfellow and Hedges (2007: 187) comment that a 'critical way in which Early Childhood practitioners can be considered as professionals is for them to systematically engage in enquiry into their own practices'. But it is important that in order to do this we do not feel pressure to prostrate ourselves before current research regimes, but that we should be more confident in developing our own approach. The more that we can up-skill our students to confidently engage in rigorous research that works, the more confidence they will have to speak out about it. The *Reggio Emilia* approach to exploration suggests that research:

...leaves-or rather, demands to come out of-the scientific laboratories, thus ceasing to be a privilege of the few (in universities and other designated places) to become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life (Rinaldi, 2005: 148).

I believe that such an approach needs to become central to our early years degrees.

***What is your view? Do you agree with Carla? Did you find this paper useful and interesting?***

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