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METHODS FOR
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PLACE-BASED METHODS FOR RESEARCHING SCHOOLS

**PAT THOMSON AND
CHRISTINE HALL**

B L O O M S B U R Y

'Pat Thomson and Christine Hall's imaginative, informed and innovative methodology textbook is a must for anyone, from novice to expert, studying any aspect of schools.'

LIZ TODD, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE, UK

'Pat Thomson and Christine Hall use the literature on space, time and place in combination with that on place-based research projects to provide a map for the field... Their map covers the field of place-based research, offering a clear framework and the necessary know-how. Accessible, interesting and rigorous, their work inspires an interest in schools as places, and in place-based methods for researching, understanding and representing them.'

HILARY JANKS, EMERITUS PROFESSOR, WITS UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AFRICA

'This book inspires me to do school research, and to do it well. It takes seriously the many entangled factors – people, places, structures, ideas, experiences, feelings – that make a school, demonstrating the "specificity, particularity and complexity to the near-universal experience of being in school" and showing us what we might do with this as researchers...After this book, it will be difficult to think of school research that does not engage deeply with the place of a school.'

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Schools are complex institutions. Understanding a school, its neighbourhood and its students requires a researcher with a complex repertoire of verbal, statistical and visual research strategies. *Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools* shows how multiple methods can be used together, rather than dealing with decontextualised methods, one by one. Taking a novel theoretical approach to the school as a 'place', the book offers grounded illustrations of schools from case study and ethnographic research conducted in Australia and the UK. A practical guide, this book explores the on-the-ground questions researchers are likely to face in the order they are likely to face them. The chapters not only look at data generation approaches, but also address analysis of the data and writing about the school, topics that are often ignored. Methods explored include those drawn from urban planning and geography to research neighbourhoods, visual surveys, mapping, classroom observation, ethnographic observation, interviews, focus groups, sociograms and linguistic corpora. Including tips from the authors, case studies, a glossary and annotated further reading list, this book is essential reading for students and scholars approaching their research project.

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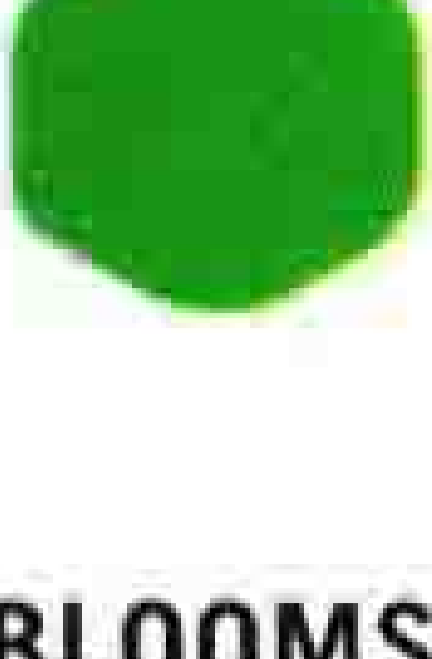
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Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools


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CHRISTINE HALL**

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Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools

BLOOMSBURY RESEARCH METHODS FOR EDUCATION SERIES

Edited by
Melanie Nind, University of Southampton, UK

The *Bloomsbury Research Methods for Education* series provides overviews of the range of sometimes interconnected and diverse methodological possibilities for researching aspects of education such as education contexts, sectors, problems or phenomena. Each volume discusses prevailing, less obvious and more innovative methods and approaches for the particular area of educational research.

More targeted than general methods textbooks, these authoritative yet accessible books are invaluable resources for students and researchers planning their research design and wanting to explore methodological possibilities to make well-informed decisions regarding their choice of methods.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The idea of the *Bloomsbury Research Methods for Education* series is to provide books that are useful to researchers wanting to think about research methods in the context of their research area, research problem or research aims. While researchers may use any methods textbook for ideas and inspiration, the onus falls on them to apply something from social science research methods to education in particular, or from education to a particular dimension of education (pedagogy, schools, the digital dimension, practitioner learning, to name some examples). This application of ideas is not beyond us and has led to some great research and also to methodological development. In this series, though, the books are more targeted, making them a good place to start for the student, researcher or person wanting to craft a research proposal. Each book brings together in one place the range of sometimes interconnected and often diverse methodological possibilities for researching one aspect or sector of education, one research problem or phenomenon. Thus, readers will quickly find a discussion of the methods they associate with that bit of education research they are interested in, but in addition they will find less obvious and more innovative methods and approaches. A quick look at the opening glossary will give you an idea of the methods you will find included within each book. You can expect a discussion of those methods that is critical, authoritative *and* situated. In each text the authors use powerful examples of the methods in use in the arena with which you are concerned.

There are other features that make this series distinctive. In each of the books the authors draw on their own research and on the research of others making alternative methodological choices. In

this way they address the affordances of the methods in terms of real studies; they illustrate the potential with real data. The authors also discuss the rationale behind the choice of methods and behind how researchers put them together in research designs. As readers, you will get behind the scenes of published research and into the kind of methodological decision-making that you are grappling with. In each of the books you will find yourself moving between methods, theory and data; you will find theoretical concepts to think with and with which you might be able to enhance your methods. You will find that the authors develop arguments about methods rather than just describing them.

In *Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools*, Pat Thomson and Christine Hall bring a particular methodological outlook to the challenge of researching schools. You will find fresh ways of positioning school-based research alongside plenty of solid good advice and detailed illustrations. Pat and Christine write in an open, accessible and straightforward style, which complements their highly engaging content. They seem to build a relationship with you, the reader, just as they advocate you build a relationship with the school(s) you are studying. Their approach almost disguises the academic weight of the ideas they discuss, as they ever so deftly ease you into complex territory. In common with other books in the series, these authors make powerful use of examples of studies from around the world in your sphere of interest. In this book in particular, these studies will become almost like old friends as you are helped to appreciate their qualities.

This book (nor any in the series) cannot be the only book you need to read to formulate, justify and implement your research methods. Other books will cover a greater range or methods and, others still, more operational detail. The aim of this series, though, is to provide books that take you to the heart of the methods thinking you will want and need to do. They are books by authors who are equally passionate about their substantive topic and about research methods and they are books that will be invaluable for inspiring deep and informed methods thinking.

Melanie Nind
Series Editor

GLOSSARY OF RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACHES

This glossary comprises only those methods and approaches covered in this book. These words/terms will appear in bold on their first occasion of use in the text.

Action research: A systematic approach, often used by practitioners to understand and improve their own practice through a focus on their own practical actions and their own reflections on data about the effects of those actions. Action research involves cycles of planning, implementing, recording and analysing a change in practice.

Assets mapping: A way of assessing the economic, cultural and social composition of a neighbourhood by systematically driving or walking around.

Case study: In-depth, intensive analysis of the single (or multiple) case within its naturalistic context, valuing its particularity, complexity and relationships with the context. This approach uses multiple methods and perspectives to look at the case holistically.

Critical incident analysis: A method to focus the researcher on a critical incident or turning point, exploring people's behaviour and experience before, during and after the incident to analyse its meaning for those involved. Incidents are usually explored via interview and are significant or revelatory in relation to what interrupts or enables everyday practices.

Dérive: A walk designed to explore a terrain, which simultaneously disrupts familiarity and emphasizes the psychogeographical, not simply the material.

Discourse analysis: A term given to various approaches to the analysis of texts (which can be spoken, verbal or written) but which communicate something of what is taken for granted in the social

situation. Discourse analysts, for example, examine texts for what they say about what is doable, sayable and thinkable in a classroom situation.

Documentary analysis: More often used by social science researchers as a supplementary rather than main method, this involves analysis of documents (pre-existing artefacts or written texts) for what they can tell us about the phenomenon under study.

Drawing: A visual method used particularly with children and young people to offer an alternative or supplement to verbal or written accounts. Participants may be asked to draw a picture to depict the phenomenon, e.g. classroom, lesson, learning support teacher. Drawings can be analysed alone or alongside recorded conversations to offer another perspective on what is under study.

Ethnographic case study: A type of case study using an ethnographic approach. This usually involves a shorter, less intensive degree of immersion in the context by the researcher than in an ethnography. The focus is on the case – the individual, event or phenomenon – rather than on the culture of the group.

Ethnography: A research approach aimed at understanding an insider perspective on a particular community, practice or setting by focusing on the meaning of social action from the point of view of the participants. Methods of progressively focused observation and interview are used by the researcher who is immersed in the situation, generating complex, detailed data to enable deep descriptions and theorization of the cultural context.

Field notes: Often thought of as simply jotting in a notebook, the term covers the range of ways in which researchers record their observations and experiences in the research site.

Focus group: A group interview method in which participants are invited to explore a given topic in group discussion. Participants respond to each other, to activities or stimuli rather than just to the researcher's questions. The researcher aims to facilitate discussion as much as direct it.

Historical/archival analysis: A systematic approach to the analysis of primary sources such as meeting minutes, first-person writings, newspapers and other media, registers and roll books. Historical analysis is often based in libraries but is now equally undertaken online, using digitized records.

Inclusive research: An umbrella term for research approaches that respond to the call for democratization of the research process. This includes, for example, participatory, emancipatory and partnership research. The emphasis is on ensuring the relevance of the research to the people concerned, so that it is important and beneficial to them,

so that they are involved in the process and decision-making, and so that their views and experiences are treated with respect.

Insider research: The term used to describe those who research in their own workplace. Familiarity is both a strength and limitation. The antonym, outsider research, has the corollary asset/weakness of distance and lack of knowledge.

Interview: The method of asking participants to respond to questions, usually by reflecting on their experiences or views. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured and conducted with individuals or groups.

Longitudinal research: Research conducted over an extended period of time, in which time is a unit of analysis. Examples include cohort studies, in which individuals experiencing the same event are observed at repeated intervals to examine changes; panel studies, involving a cross-section of a population surveyed at multiple points in time; and qualitative longitudinal research, involving returning to interviewees on multiple occasions over time.

Mapping: A visual method in which participants individually or in groups map out (write or draw) their experiences, often including a space/time dimension. The researcher may record and explore the production of these maps alongside the maps produced.

Mosaic approach: A combination of participatory and visual methods designed to bring together data generated by young children and adults, making sense of their everyday experiences. The resulting mosaic is co-constructed by the participants and the researcher.

Multi-modal analysis: An approach that takes into account multiple modes of communication (gesture, gaze, movement, speech, drawing, etc.) without taking for granted that any is the most important. The researcher reads different texts and embodied actions for what they say about the phenomenon under study.

Narrative research: The researcher focuses on the ways in which research participants 'story' their lives and work practices. The researcher might look for plot and character as well as critical events. Narrative researchers often look for ways in which narratives 'work' in an organization, how they assist in identity formation, or how narratives conform to archetypal structures.

Observation: A method for recording what can be seen in the research site. Observation can be naturalistic, conducted by participant or non-participant observers. It can also be systematic and structured, using time or event sampling and pre-prepared schedules.

Participatory/partnership research: A research process that involves those being researched or implicated in the research in the decision-making and conduct of the research.

- Photo ethnography:** The use of digital or mobile technology to visually record ethnographic data and experiences.
- Practice-based inquiry:** A research strategy for practitioners (individually or collectively) to systematically and rigorously study their own practice. Related to action research, this is a way to support the development of knowledge contextualized within specific contexts of practice, emphasizing the role of collaboration and reflection in the inquiry and learning process.
- Semiotic analysis:** An approach which focuses on meaning-making processes through reading cultural and social signs, usually using either discourse or narrative analysis.
- Sensory research:** A method which focuses on lived experience, recording data gained through multiple senses.
- Shadowing:** An approach in which the researcher follows the participant around to get a sense of their experience by 'walking in their shoes'. Shadowing can occur for various length of time depending on the purpose.
- Spatial research methods:** Methods employing physical, social, temporal, experiential and/or virtual aspects of space to understand the experiences of participants in a research site.
- Survey:** An approach used to discover broad, general or comparative information on a selected topic by surveying a (frequently large) number of participants. This may involve no personal contact between researcher and participant.
- Transcription:** A method of deciding what is described and how it is represented so that audio or video data are transformed for the purpose of analysis.
- Video methods:** Methods that allow researchers to produce and analyse audiovisual data including pre-existing video data, video diaries, researcher produced or elicited video films, etc. Analysis may treat the video as record or as an impression of events.
- Video stimulated recall/reflection/dialogue:** Video of participants in action is used to stimulate their recall of, or reflection and dialogue about, the recorded event or interaction. It is used to probe what participants were thinking or feeling at the time. Control of the selection of units of analysis can be shared or handed over to participants.