

# Success with your Early Years Research Project



**Rosie Walker and Carla Solvason**

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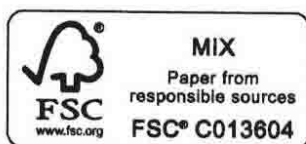
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*The authors would like to dedicate this book to Jacob, Joshua, Oliver and Christopher and to all students with whom we have had the pleasure of working on their independent studies, and without whom the writing of this book would not have been possible.*

# About the authors

**Rosie Walker** is Foundation Degree Partnership Co-ordinator and senior lecturer within the Centre for Early Childhood, Institute of Education at the University of Worcester. She has supervised many research projects with Foundation degree, BA and Top-up students as well as Master's students and is responsible for managing student practice-based experience. Rosie has been involved in research projects with students and has presented her work at EECERA and BECERA as well as publishing within peer-reviewed journals. Previously, she has managed two phase 1 children's centres and is a social worker by professional heritage. Rosie has worked in a variety of childcare settings including child protection teams, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and has worked as a child protection trainer and Guardian ad Litem.

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# Foreword

*Jean McNiff*

Few practices require greater commitment than early years, and few areas are more important for research. The old Jesuit adage of 'Give me a child until the age of seven ...' was always significant: many of the metaphors we live by are formed in our early years, and many mental habits firmly established, none more so, perhaps, than the way we think, our logics and epistemologies. All the more important, therefore, that early years practitioners should research their teaching and caring practices to show how they hold themselves accountable for their work with young children; that they explain how they tread lightly so as not to distort the potential of minds that are in the wonderful process of formation.

A new mind is a miracle. It is an entirely original entity, never before and never again to be replicated throughout all eternity. Each one of us is unique, irreplaceable and unrepeatable. We are each born with the capacity for an unlimited number of creative acts: we are infinitely powerful. We each come into the world as a new beginning, potentially enriching the world by the very fact that we are born (Arendt, 1958). Each one of us occupies our own spot, our allocated place on Earth, and it is our responsibility to use it well. How immense therefore the responsibility of teachers and carers who have the capacity and the political authority to influence those minds, to use their influence well and in the best interests of the emerging mind of the child.

The accounts in this book show how the practitioners involved do this. Further, each account shows how the practitioner accepts the responsibility of explaining how they hold themselves accountable for what they do. There is a nice commensurability here, for young children also are powerful researchers. They spend much of their lives asking 'Why?' and offering their provisional conclusions about how their world works, and how they make sense of their actions in relation to their social and natural world. We are born as action researchers, as people who wish to find ways of improving our learning, and using that learning to improve our practices in the world. Perhaps a main significance of early years research is found in this element of demonstrating accountability in processes of emergence.

The book contains accounts that show this process in action, celebrating the potentials of action research as an appropriate methodology for valuing and encouraging new beginnings. The idea of new beginnings

implies a moral stance, a powerful theme of the book, for emergence itself is ethical, a feature of evolutionary form, a feature of new minds. The evolutionary form is in danger of distortion when power-constituted structures are imposed on it, and open minds are threatened by being forced into orthodoxies that do not value freedom of thought and action. How important, therefore, that practitioners research their practices using a form that is itself dynamic and evolutionary, that celebrates their capacity for originality of mind and the creation of knowledge; that shows the same process of emergence as the minds they are working with and are encouraging to flourish. Action research somehow mirrors the entire process of children and teachers enjoying the experience of learning together, and using their learning to create new futures. This idea requires the celebration of an open epistemology that sees possibilities in everything, especially in the relationships between people, and between those people and their different worlds.

Action research and early years practices go together, as naturally as the new day rising. This book is a celebration of new days. Early years research is a practice for creative thinking for new tomorrows; the book shows us how to do this, and is to be commended for anyone who wishes to find innovative ways to think and act for all new beginnings.

## Reference

Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

# Contents

List of figures and tables	viii
About the authors	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Foreword <i>Jean McNiff</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Considering your research question	7
2 Theoretical framework	21
3 Taking an ethical stance	33
4 Literature review	47
5 Methodology: choosing your research approach	62
6 Gathering data	76
7 Data analysis	92
8 Reaching conclusions and reflecting	108
9 Disseminating findings	122
Final reflection on the qualities of a practitioner researcher	134
References	137
Index	143

# List of figures and tables

## Figures

2.1 Your professional journey towards establishing a theoretical framework	31
4.1 Reasons for doing a literature review	49
4.2 Comparing and contrasting literature sources 1	56
5.1 Developing an approach	73
7.1 Children's centre staff understanding of integrated working	99
7.2 Staff members' perception of roles	100
7.3 Stages of data presentation	102
7.4 Coding category frequency by percentage	103
7.5 Positive comments by coding category	103
7.6 Negative comments by coding category	104
8.1 Research spiral	110
9.1 Stages of dissemination of research	124

## Tables

4.1 Comparing and contrasting literature sources 2	56
5.1 Comparing approaches to research	69
6.1 Triangulating methodology and data	86
6.2 Holistic view of triangulation	88
7.1 Organising and analysing data	97
9.1 Feedback summary	133

# Introduction

The writers of this book have had the pleasure of working with many student practitioners over the years and see this text as a celebration of those students' achievements. In using examples of research projects carried out in a range of settings and by students from differing backgrounds we hope to demonstrate to our readers that anyone can carry out small-scale good quality research. The unique premise of this book is that we use real research by individuals studying on early years courses, from Foundation Degree to Bachelor's Degree in order to demonstrate and explore some key elements of 'good' research. We have found in the past that students lack confidence in the area of research and feel that it is 'beyond' them – we hope that this book goes some way towards proving that it is not. We hope that the use of real examples will help to demystify what tutors are looking for within a research project and will go some way towards interpreting and demonstrating some of the difficult terminology that is used when discussing research.

Within academic tradition research has held a somewhat elevated position which causes some student practitioners to struggle to see how it relates to them. Although there are many similarities between the critical reflective practice cycle and research, students tend to be intimidated by the very prospect of research and to see it as something foreign to their day-to-day practice (Solvason, 2010). As Solvason (2011: 33) points out, 'research plays a part in every aspect of your career path' and involves 'making a concerted effort to look into a topic'. Reflective practice which is inherent in early years practice teaches students to not only consider their own views, but to consider the views of others when working within early years teams, and it is important that we make clear that research is simply a more systematic way of approaching this. In this text we hope to prove that research is as useful and as accessible a tool as any other that students develop during their studies and that it is fundamental to good practice. Rinaldi (2005: 148) encourages us to stop viewing research as the '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'. Our student practitioners are members of a research active community, and as members of that community they need to explore ways of knowing, proving and improving. The student work included in the following chapters provides examples of just this.



It is because of our belief that we are all members of a research active community that we have chosen to explore these concepts with the help and support of our students, just as we would hope that our students explore areas of interest alongside their colleagues in settings. It is important that our research demonstrates research 'with' and not research 'on' participants and settings as our students are a part of the early years ideology that is created and perpetuated; they are not separate from it (McNiff, 2011). In other words, the research that you carry out is part of an ongoing process of quality which asks practitioners to consider their values, beliefs and personal strengths, and engage in a thoughtful and holistic view of practice and their own contribution to practice (Appleby and Andrews, 2012).

Because of this active involvement in the world of early years care and education we need to investigate our areas of interest using an approach to research that is beyond ethicality, but that embodies kindness, respect and humility (Pring, 2004). Within this text we explore how this can be difficult at times due to the troublesome nature of research and particularly when one has the sometimes conflicting roles of student, practitioner and researcher.

It is important that practitioner research takes an appreciative stance, building upon existing strengths and looking for areas of further development. These areas for improvement apply foremost to yourselves as developing professionals but also to the settings within which you practice, as conduits of quality early years practice. As such your own development and improvements in the setting are intertwined within your research. As students, research can enhance your knowledge, understanding and practice, and improve your employability prospects. Settings should be encouraged to embed a culture of research within their day-to-day practice, so that the quality of practice can be enhanced and developed continually in the light of new discoveries. Rather than being a rite of passage for students, research can become a meaningful undertaking which continues throughout your career, a skill that is central to early years practice and essential if we are to develop and improve practice for children and families.

For these reasons it is important to start with the purpose of the research, what you want to explore within a limited time frame and with limited resources, before beginning to consider what the best methods are to do this. The passion and sense of exploration and curiosity we hope to engender in children is important for us to hold on to as students and practitioners. As professionals we continue on a learning journey and it is important to remember that this continues throughout our working lives. Research is not a 'one off'. As students, you are most often part of the community that you are researching; this is why the purpose of what you are researching and how it benefits you and the setting is such an important starting place. Research is not solitary; as Pascal and Bertram (2012a) suggest it should be carried out in mutually beneficial

partnership with others, for immediate use, and have a strong ethical base. This ethicality embodies far more than simply gaining permissions, but should really consider Stern's (2011) kind and sensitive approach in working with the setting, acknowledging potential power imbalances and pitfalls as part and parcel of the research.

The role of being an early years practitioner and researcher is inextricably linked and our underpinning belief is that research in this field should be rooted in praxeological values in being carried out with and not on settings. Pascal and Bertram (2012b: 485) have drawn our attention to a developing model of praxeological research which:

At its heart is a process of critical self-evaluation, reflection and action (praxis) with the guiding purpose of advancing practice and supporting practitioners to develop a more profound understanding of their work, and, therefore, a more effective delivery of services to children and families.

It should be carried out in real-world situations within the company of others: 'to discover why we do what we do' (Pascal and Bertram, 2012b: 485), for immediate use and have a strong ethical base. This does not only mean gaining permissions but in using Stern's (2011) virtuous and caring approach in joining with the setting, acknowledging potential power imbalances and pitfalls as part of the research and including of the voices of children and parents. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012: 602) discuss the principle of attachment, '*reflexive attached commitment*' which includes close and intense working with the research setting and its participants, and with yourself as the main 'instrument' and 'important inquiry tool' of the research being clearly integrated into your written submission to ensure rigour.

## **So, how does this book 'work'?**

The book draws on six studies from students who provide a reflective introduction to each study. This will contextualise the study and explain a little bit about the student practitioner who wrote the text, their background, their aims in carrying out the research and the significance of the particular focus area. In taking this approach, we have sought to model good practice in using the voices of those most closely involved in work-based inquiry. We have also sought positive examples from our colleagues' work to support the points that we make. This book is not intended as a critical appraisal of existing literature.

Each of the chapters that follow is built around sound examples of students' work that look at an element of research. Extracts are used as a starting point to explore and build on what the students exemplify in structuring their own research project. Sometimes the extracts are lengthy, allowing you to fully see their thought process and how their approach has developed. Following the relevant excerpt/s from the

study there will be discussion about it; its strengths, what ideas can be taken from it, how it could be built upon and how it relates to other foci within the book. We work systematically through each of the primary elements of research, but this does not imply that all research projects must be presented in this way.

The studies chosen were all of high quality, but they are not held up as exemplars to be replicated, but rather as studies you will (as early years practitioners and social scientists) be able to relate to within your day-to-day practice. Each study covers an area of concern within early years practice and shows how the researchers have tackled this within a variety of settings. You will notice that although the references used by the students are shown in the body of the excerpts, full reference lists are not given at the end. This is because we do not wish the subject matter that the student is exploring to become a focus within this book. These topics are used outside of the context of the full study. We have not corrected the references the students have used so be aware that these may not always be accurate. It is important for you, as researchers, to build up your own body of theory and references. The aim of the book is not to 'spoon-feed' anyone in terms of undertaking research, but to support you in understanding how to engage with this important strand of your practice and academic work, and to get a tangible idea of how sound research might 'look'.

The book is written by two authors who have each written chapters. Therefore, you may see some differences in style between the chapters, although we have worked closely together to make sure that our approach is consistent.

This text aims to empower you as students by using the work of peers and acknowledges that doing research can be a struggle. It will draw out issues of reflective practice by posing points for reflection, including questions and dilemmas during commentary on the studies. The book aims to offer the type of advice given in research tutorials, using real small-scale studies as examples of good practice and drawing out key learning points from these.

## **The studies**

### **Samantha**

Sam is currently the manager of a busy nursery within a rural area. At the time of undertaking the study she was a Foundation Degree student. She has considered practice at the setting in terms of literacy. Sam's motivation and concern on discovering that parents at her setting wanted more development of their children's literacy skills led her to formulate a tool for impacting on quality through her action research project. This is considered more fully in Chapter 2.



## Emily

Emily is a family support worker in a children's centre in a large town set within a rural locality. She was a Foundation degree student at the time of the research and was concerned to explore the potential effects of proposed budget reduction for the centre on practitioners and ultimately how this would affect children and families. In view of the potentially sensitive nature of this study, Emily gave careful thought to ethicality, and this is discussed in Chapter 3.

## Leanne

Leanne was a BA student at the time of writing and had 15 years' experience as a teaching assistant. She chose to research into how much time should be spent in adult-led and how much in child led activities within a reception class. She has taken a new innovative direction, in that she has reflected after each section of her study. This has been highly effective in helping the reader to understand her thought process and how her learning at each stage has been integrated into the research process. You can see this clearly with the literature review in Chapter 4.

## Nikki

Nikki was a family support worker in a busy urban children's centre while undertaking her BA Top-up degree in Early Childhood Studies. At the time, her centre was concerned to develop partnership working with parents who would have an input into shaping services. She believes that the significance of the parent-child relationship should never be underestimated by any early years practitioner. Her passion for this area of work led her to analyse the existing practice at the setting, specifically within the 'Stay and Play' sessions she was responsible for leading. Nicky has carefully considered the approach she needed to take for her research to formulate a research design that fitted the scope of the project and her resources. This is explored more fully in Chapter 5.

## Harriet

At the time of writing her study, Harriet was a third-year student doing a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Professional Practice. She had taken advantage of some undergraduate research funding to work in Thailand and India and wanted to build on this experience in her research. She undertook her study to learn about how children from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds learn to develop in a social context in the educational setting within the UK. She wanted to find out how the 'home corner' within a nursery setting can provide positive interaction between children which maximises social development for children from diverse ethnic groups. Like Emily, she has had to consider her ethical approach to the sensitive subject and this is examined in Chapter 6.