

Doing Your Early Years Research Project

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

2nd Edition

Guy Roberts-Holmes



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

Doing Your Early Years Research Project

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

2nd Edition

Guy Roberts



 SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

© Guy Roberts-Holmes, 2011

First edition published 2005

Second edition published 2011

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.

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
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Library of Congress Control Number: 2010934514

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

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

ISBN 978-1-84920-519-1

ISBN 978-1-84920-520-7 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall
Printed on paper from sustainable resources



**This book is dedicated to my dear brother Paul 'Pablo' Christopher
Roberts-Holmes. Paul's love, warmth, humour and passion for life are
greatly missed by all who knew him.
August 2nd 1964–February 5th 2001**

About the Author

In the 1980s Guy Roberts-Holmes worked as one of the very few male nursery and reception teachers in Inner London. He thoroughly enjoyed this experience and was eager for more insight into inclusionary/exclusionary professional cultures amongst early years staff, which led to his Master's degree at King's College London. He then worked in The Gambia, West Africa for Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) as a lecturer at The University of The Gambia. Whilst in The Gambia he was sponsored by The University of Nottingham to carry out an ethnography of a nursery and primary school, leading to the award of his PhD. He taught at Canterbury Christ Church University College and Swansea University. Currently, he is the Programme Leader for the internationally renowned MA Early Years Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. His research interests include research methodologies; gender; digital learning and the professionalisation of the early years workforce.

Acknowledgements

This book has been inspired by my fantastic children, Justin, Pia and Isabelle and their wonderful cousins, Lucinda, Rose, Mary, Oliver, Jane and Tom.

Thank you to the 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, Georgina Moxon and Minsiew Yap.

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

Figure 1.2 from L. Blaxter, C. Hughes and M. Tight (2001), *How to Research*, 2nd edition, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

Figure 4.6 from P. Clough and C. Nutbrown (2007), *A Student's Guide to Methodology*, Sage Publications.

Figures 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 from Y. Lancaster and V. Broadbent (2010), *Listening to Young Children*, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

Figure 7.1 from A. Clark and P. Moss (2001), *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*, NCB and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, now updated with the Third Stage of Mosaic; deciding areas of continuity and change in *Spaces to Play*.

English trans. by Lella Gandini © 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. © Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini and George Forman, 1993, 1998. Reproduced with permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

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 – Istituto 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/>

Foreword

It is a great pleasure to write the foreword to the second edition of *Doing Your Early Years Research Project*. Since it was first published in 2005 Guy Roberts-Holmes' original book has always been extremely well received by the early childhood and children and family studies students that I teach on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, including many of whom are practitioners and a number of children's centre leaders who are engaging in their first recognised research project. The students comment that they like the clear style, helpful and 'step by step' guidance and also recognise the ethical, reflective and rigorous approach to research with children, families and practitioners that the book fosters.

The welcome publication of this second edition comes at a challenging time for those working in early childhood education and care in England due to the severe financial cut backs and re-organisation imposed by a newly elected government in May 2010. Whilst, at the time of writing, the fine detail of these changes is still to be finalised, it is clear that research in the field by both practitioners and students will become ever more vital to understand, explain and critique the changing landscape of children's services and children's lives. At the same time, although children's need for 'warm human relationships, real and active experience, security and play with other children' may not have changed since Susan Isaacs (1954: 3) work was published nearly sixty years ago, new approaches from sociology, cross-cultural perspectives and post-modern views have challenged traditional discourses (Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke and Hanlon, 2008) and influenced our professional work, understanding of childhoods and significantly the way we research children's lives. Much research is now focused on research *with* children, drawing on children's perspectives rather than just the adult's opinions of the way children live their lives. Thus reflecting the values, beliefs and assumptions many early childhood practitioners and researchers hold in relation to children, including their competence, rights and role within the research (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011 *forthcoming*). *Doing Your Early Years Research Project* reflects this recent development (Kellett, 2010) and guides students towards the successful completion of their project.

One of the real strengths of this book is how students are gently but ethically and persuasively encouraged to engage in reflective research and supported

throughout their project with clear structured guidance and examples from real research projects. At the outset of their research many students are apprehensive and Roberts-Holmes sensitively pilots readers through some of the possible initial anxieties and challenges, focusing on the importance of critical reflection and reflective practice research as part of professional practice in the early years.

This second edition has been updated and enhanced by further consideration of the importance of the underlying theory (methodology) behind the research project and how this methodology determines the design and methods used to gather and analyse data. Here, there is an expanded discussion of research design and sampling approach. Many students new to research find the development of focused research questions problematic and this book offers clear guidance on developing appropriate questions for investigation, with the use of helpful diagrams. Further aspects of the research process such as data reduction, coding and analysing findings are carefully unpicked. Increasingly software such as NVivo is being used to assist data reduction in qualitative research and this edition includes a valuable section introducing readers to using computer software to assist in the organisation, analysis and display of data.

Through reading and using this book students and practitioner researchers, undertaking a range of early childhood and children and family studies related degrees, are well placed to undertake successful investigations and to help evolve the debate and understanding of young children's lives and professional work in early childhood.

Tim Waller
Reader in Early Years Education
University of Wolverhampton

Glossary

Action research Action research or practitioner research attempts to instigate change in the form of improved practice, policy and culture within an institution. Action research is a collaborative and participatory research approach.

Article 12 Article 12 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989) declares that children have the right to hold an opinion about issues concerning them. Article 12 encourages early childhood researchers to engage children in research that affects them and to listen and act upon what children say.

Case study Case studies are useful for finding out more about the detailed, subtle and complex social interactions and processes operating within a narrowly defined context such as a single early childhood centre or family.

Child-centred methodology The ethical values and principles which place children centre stage throughout the research process, for example, the Mosaic approach.

Documentation A range of evidence collected by and with young children about their early childhood institution. Documentation in the form of children's, practitioners' and parents' photographs, drawings, consultations and observations can be built up to provide a mosaic of perspectives on the early childhood institution.

Ethics Ethical research involves respect and sensitivity to the feelings and rights of *all* those participating in your research project. Ethical researchers carefully reflect upon any unintended harm that they may cause to the participants.

Ethnography Early childhood ethnographies aim to provide holistic accounts of the views, perspectives, beliefs and values of the children, practitioners, workers and parents in an early childhood institution.

Focus group conversations A collaborative interview technique particularly effective with young children. Children may be empowered in a focus group in which they feel comfortable.

Gatekeepers Gatekeepers decide whether or not you can proceed with your research in the institution they manage. Headteachers, early childhood centre managers and children's supervisors can all act as gatekeepers.

Informed consent Informed consent refers to the ethical principle of research participants voluntarily agreeing to participate in a research project based upon complete disclosure of all relevant information and the recipient's understanding of this. Early childhood researchers are expected to gain informed consent from all the research participants in their study. Issues of informed consent with young children hinge on whether the children competently understand what is expected of them in the research process.

Interpretivism Interpretivists believe that the social world is continually being created and constructed. Shared understandings and meanings are given to these social interactions.

Interviews Interviews are on a continuum from the closed structured interview to the unstructured consultation. In order to listen respectfully to young children, early childhood researchers focus upon child-centred participatory activities such as children's drawings during the consultation.

Interview guide A set of predetermined field questions which direct the flow of the interview.

Methodology Methodology refers to the principles and values, philosophies and ideologies that underpin the entire research process. Your methodology will inform the questions that you ask, the literature you read, your methods and the analysis. Early childhood studies research is frequently driven by a child-centred methodology in which the child comes first.

Methods Methods are the actual techniques that the researcher uses to answer their field questions. Examples of methods include case studies, questionnaires, interviews and observation.

Objectivity Historically, researchers mistakenly believed in a neutral and disengaged researcher whose beliefs, politics and experiences did not affect the research in any way. In early childhood studies, as in other social sciences, researcher objectivity has been seen as a myth and a fallacy. Hence the need for reflexivity throughout the research process.

Observation schedule An observational checklist on which specific observations concerning a targeted child or children are made.

Participant observation The researcher takes part in the activities with the participants and at the same time reflects upon and researches the situation.

Pilot study A pilot study involves the researcher trialling the interview questions, the questionnaires, the observations and any forms of research methods.

The pilot study can alert the researcher to any potential future difficulties and the research can be appropriately amended.

Positivism Positivists believe that the social world of people operates in a similar way to the natural physical world. Thus notions of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity are not issues within the positivist tradition. The positivist tradition attempts to prove hypotheses.

Probing An interview research technique for eliciting information from the respondent.

Qualitative methods Qualitative research methods usually involve non-numerical data collection, such as interviews, participant observation, diaries, drawings and children's photographs. Qualitative research tends to produce and analyse in-depth and detailed data. Qualitative research methods may be combined with quantitative research methods.

Quantitative methods Quantitative research methods usually involve numerical data collection derived from questionnaires, statistical surveys and experiments. Quantitative research tends to produce and analyse broad contextual data providing overall patterns and generalisations. Quantitative research methods may be combined with qualitative research methods.

Research diary Your research diary is a reflective log of your thoughts and feelings as they occur during the research process. Extracts from your reflective research diary may be used in your research study when triangulated with additional pieces of data confirming your thoughts and feelings.

Research participants Includes all those who work with and provide material for the research project, for example, colleagues, children, workers, teachers, practitioners and parents.

Reflexivity Reflexive researchers are self-aware of their biases, assumptions and interpretations of the research issues. Self-awareness of how the researcher affects the children and adults constantly informs reflexive research. Practitioner-researchers need to demonstrate self-awareness and sensitivity to the ways in which their presence affects the data they collect and how their underlying assumptions make them interpret the data in particular ways.

Sampling is the way in which a researcher chooses the setting(s), practitioner(s), child(ren) that they actually study. Quantitative researchers tend to randomly sample as they are attempting to make their research representative. Qualitative researchers tend to use purposive sampling to explain or understand the phenomena that they are studying. They also may often use convenience sampling.

Structured observations Focused and targeted observations such as specific child observations, event sampling and targeted running records.

Subjectivity A researcher's subjectivity refers to the extent that the researcher's own feelings, biases and interpretations influence the research questions, data collection and interpretation. Hence subjectivity is closely connected to reflexivity. Researcher subjectivity is sometimes used to critique researcher objectivity.

Survey Surveys attempt to produce large volumes of broad and generalisable data using questionnaires with a large sample size. Surveys use a variety of sampling methods.

Social justice Social justice research aims to make a positive contribution to the broader social good for *all* young children, their families and communities. Social justice is at the heart of politically transformative research. Fairness, justice, equality and respect are some of the principles and values underpinning social justice research.

Triangulation Triangulation involves the comparison and combination of different sources of evidence in order to reach a better understanding of the research topic. Thus the researcher's observations, interviews with participants and questionnaires all produce different pieces of evidence which can be combined and compared to give a triangulated analysis.

Unstructured observations Typically these are in the form of reflective diary notes and anecdotal unfocused observations on the early childhood setting. When combined with triangulated evidence from practitioners, workers and parents, they can be included as data in the research report.

Validity The interpretivist and positivist research traditions have different understandings of research validity. For the interpretivist, triangulation of participants' responses is used so that the participants' true voices are seen to be consistent and valid. For the positivist, validity is concerned with the research process and findings being replicated or copied by another researcher.

Contents

About the Author	xi
Acknowledgements	xii
Foreword	xiii
Glossary	xv
1 You can do research!	1
Your feelings about doing research	2
Myths about early childhood research	3
An inclusive approach towards early childhood research	4
Your research project within early childhood studies	5
The professionalisation of early childhood studies	6
The importance of your reflective practice	7
Principles of high-quality early childhood research	11
The research process within early childhood studies	16
Everyday research skills	18
2 Your research story, methodology and research questions	21
Reflecting upon your personal story	22
Methodology	22
Some research stories	23
Your reflective diary	27
High levels of motivation	28
Professional motivations	29
Focusing on your area of interest	30
The overall research questions and the field questions	33
Getting your research questions right – breadth and depth	34
Doing a pilot study	36
3 Ethical issues in early childhood research	40
Legislation and the participatory rights of children	41
Sociology and the participatory rights of children	42
Children's participation and protection	43
A reflective impact assessment of research on children	44
Your emotional vulnerability	45

Informed consent	48
Informed consent, confidentiality and child protection	49
Informed consent leaflet for children	50
Socially inclusive and respectful relationships with children	53
Informed consent is an ongoing process	56
Negotiating access with the gatekeepers	56
'Feedback' and closure of the research	62
Ethical dilemmas are hard to resolve	63
Ethical checklist	65
4 Designing your research	67
What is research design?	68
Two research approaches	69
Quantitative research	70
Qualitative research	70
Sampling within your project	71
Triangulation and validity	72
The quantitative and qualitative approaches: an example	73
Action research	76
Action research belongs to you	78
Case studies	82
Small-scale qualitative surveys	84
Broad and deep research	85
Justifying your methods	86
Your research proposal	88
5 Organising and writing up your research project	93
Writing an academic argument and critical writing	94
The overall structure of your research report	95
Chapter 1: Introduction	96
Chapter 2: Literature review	97
Chapter 3: Methodology	102
Chapter 4: Findings	102
Chapter 5: Discussion	102
Chapter 6: Conclusions	103
References	103
Appendices	104
Avoiding plagiarism	104
The responsibilities of your supervisor	104
Your responsibilities throughout the research	105

The research tutorial	105
Your research timetabling	107
6 Observation: looking and listening	109
Why do observations?	110
What is observation?	111
Interpretation	111
Being open in your looking and listening	112
Knowing the context of your research setting	113
Unstructured observations	115
Structured observations	116
Tally counting	116
Observation schedules	117
Event sampling and running records	120
Video observations	122
Observational diagrams	123
Participant observation	124
7 Creative listening to young children	127
Developing cultures of meaningful participation	128
What is creative listening?	129
The Mosaic approach	132
Cameras and ethics	133
Children's photographs and walking tours	134
Children's drawings	140
Children's interpretations of their pictures	141
8 Interviewing children and adults	148
Different types of interviews	149
The interview guide	149
Probing	150
The differences between an interview and a chat	150
Focus group conversations with children	152
Children as researchers	154
Using structured activities	158
Reflective interviewing	158
A wide diversity of children	160
Tape-recording	161
9 Writing and using questionnaires	164
Three ways to administer your questionnaires	166

Ethical issues and questionnaires	167
Writing your questionnaire	172
Different types of questions	172
Writing a Likert scale questionnaire	174
10 Analysing your data	179
The process of organising your data	180
Reducing and displaying your data	182
Using Excel and NVivo software for analysis	183
Inducing and/or deducing the themes and topic codes	186
Topic coding in qualitative analysis	186
Analysing your data	189
Use a wide range of data	191
Generating categories and themes	192
Sharing your research	202
References	204
Index	211

1



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 supervisor's and your responsibilities for the project.