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**RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES:  
METHODOLOGIES, METHODS,  
PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES  
IN YOUTH STUDIES**

VOLUME 1

## AUTHORS

Julia Cook  
Annie Gowing  
Renata Aliani  
with Jenny Chesters and Hernan Cuervo

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Youth Research Centre  
Melbourne Graduate School of Education  
The University of Melbourne, Vic 3010

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# RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

The Youth Research Centre (YRC) plays an integral role in the development of research projects, research publications and researcher training in the fields of sociology of youth and sociology of education and within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), at the University of Melbourne. Our team includes PhD candidates, early career researchers, mid-career researchers, professors and emeritus professors.

The aim of this series of reports is to showcase the variety of research methodologies, methods and perspectives that our researchers engage with. Each report includes three case studies authored by an individual researcher. Our aim is to cover a range of methodologies and topics that may be of interest to students and early career researchers in the disciplines of education and sociology and, particularly, within the field of youth studies.

Within each report, each case study is a snapshot of an actual research project currently being conducted in the YRC. Our researchers are sharing their experiences and offering their advice for conducting social research in an increasingly complex and diverse societal environment. The practices presented in this series of research reports reflect the innovative and contemporary research methodologies and methods undertaken by YRC staff and students. Some of the methods illustrated here are traditional but employed in new ways; while other methodologies and methods depart from conventional research practices to cover more innovative practices to investigate and understand the multidimensional ways of being young in the twenty-first century.

This report includes contributions from three YRC researchers: Julia Cook, Annie Gowing and Renata Aliani. Dr Julia Cook is a post-doctoral fellow examining Australian young adults' pathways into housing, focusing particularly on home ownership and residential status among young Australians in urban areas. Her project is nested within the Life Patterns Project, a longitudinal project collecting qualitative and quantitative data from two cohorts of Australians. Her research on housing pathways draws on existing data collected by the Life Patterns Project as well as interviews that she has conducted with a subset of the project's participants. Cook's chapter focuses on the benefits and challenges of conducting independent research within a larger project, including setting a distinctive pathway for your research while managing competing project team agendas and directions.

Dr Annie Gowing is a lecturer in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Her overarching research interest in school connectedness covers a range of topics including school climate, school engagement and belonging, whole school approaches to student wellbeing and resilience, and school transitions. Gowing's chapter provides an insight into the dilemmas inherent in being both a researcher and a practitioner in an educational setting. Renata Aliani is currently undertaking a PhD on the implementation of languages education programs in primary schools. Using Q methodology, Aliani seeks to identify the viewpoints surrounding the topic of languages education. For the study, she recruited 104 participants including principals, classroom teachers, teachers of Italian and other languages and parents from schools offering either bilingual or second language programs. Her chapter outlines how Q methodology can be applied to answer contemporary research questions that ultimately pertain to the education of children and young people.

Overall, these three practices are a significant addition to the vibrant field of youth studies. They represent the Youth Research Centre's continuous support for, contribution to and engagement with high quality research and practice for, with and by young people.

**Jenny Chesters and Hernan Cuervo**

# OUR CONTRIBUTORS



## DR JULIA COOK

Dr Julia Cook is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include the sociology of youth and time as well as mobility and housing studies. Her current research addresses the housing pathways of Australian young adults living in capital cities, and particularly considers the mechanisms through which housing tenure choices are reproduced within families. She recently published her first book: *Imagined Futures: Hope, Risk and Uncertainty* (Palgrave, 2018).

Email: [julia.cook@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:julia.cook@unimelb.edu.au)



## DR ANNIE GOWING

Dr Annie Gowing teaches and coordinates subjects in the Master of Education and the Master of Teaching at the University of Melbourne. She also coordinates the Student Wellbeing specialisation within the Master of Education. Her PhD researched school connectedness, which continues to be her research focus but also is an umbrella for a range of research interests including school climate, school engagement and belonging, whole school approaches to student wellbeing, resilience, and school transitions. She has both a social work and teaching background and has worked in schools in both capacities overseas and in Australia.

Email: [annie.gowing@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:annie.gowing@unimelb.edu.au)



## RENATA ALIANI

Renata Aliani is a researcher and PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. Renata's research interests have always centred on the teaching of languages. She is a native speaker of Italian and has extensive experience in teaching Italian as a first and second language, bilingual education, curriculum writing, materials design, evaluation, policy development and consultancy. Renata has taught pre-service and postgraduate courses and has been involved in a range of research projects. She is currently completing her PhD thesis which focuses, primarily but not exclusively, on the teaching of Italian in Victorian government primary schools.

Email: [renata.aliანი@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:renata.aliანი@unimelb.edu.au)

# THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DESIGNING YOUR STUDY WITHIN AN EXISTING RESEARCH PROGRAM

Dr Julia Cook

It is increasingly common for research higher degree students and early career researchers to find themselves working as part of pre-existing, multi-researcher projects. However, the bulk of methodological texts are written with the assumption that the research projects that their readers embark on will begin from scratch and be relatively self-contained. For this reason, many junior researchers may struggle to apply the advice that these texts contain when they find themselves working on a portion of an existing study which already has an established methodology and pool of participants.

This is the situation in which I found myself when I recently began a post-doc as part of the Life Patterns project – a mixed-methods longitudinal study of young adults' pathways through the milestones of adult life. While in some cases conventional methodological wisdom was sufficient to steer the direction of my research, I also found myself faced with several considerations that do not fall under the purview of most methodological advice. In particular, I found that these considerations – which manifest as challenges, opportunities, and something in-between – cropped up at three key junctures: the beginning of the research, the planning of the study, and the process of data collection.

## GETTING STARTED

While the typical process of getting started with a new research project involves developing or honing a strong understanding of the state of the field in which you are working, beginning a project that sits within a larger research program necessitates a further degree of orienting work. Specifically, it is necessary to understand not only the history of your field of research, but the history of the project of which you are a part. The best starting point for this is the most recent funding application for the broader project, as documentation of this type contains specific statements of the rationale, aims and methodological design of the project.

However, familiarising yourself with the existing documentation within the project is only the first step of the broader orienting process. It is important to be mindful of the fact that research projects have a life of their own – they shift along with the interests of the researchers involved, practicalities that often curtail ambition, and the broader social and political climate in which the research is taking place. The best way to understand the current state of the project, and how it has evolved from the original plan put forward in the funding application, is by speaking to the other members of the project team. This also serves as a useful way of getting to grips with the role of each team member – something that will be of great utility once you begin your study.

## PLANNING YOUR STUDY

Once you have developed a firm understanding of the project that you have joined it is much easier to plan your own study. While the conceptual and methodological design of all research projects is dictated by practicalities such as time and funding, existing research programs come with their own set of parameters. Specifically, it is likely that your study will need to complement, if not fit within, the existing methodological design of the project. In order to assess what this will mean for the design of your study it is important to begin with your research topic and questions – what do you want to know, and from whom? It is then important to consider what (if any) data has already been collected. This is especially important for projects that work with the same sample of research participants over time, as duplicating existing data collection risks straining the good will of the participants. However, the imperative to avoid replicating existing data can also be a source of significant opportunity within your research. Instead of beginning your data collection from scratch, you might build upon data and findings that have already emerged from the project and ultimately reach a greater depth of understanding than you may have achieved working independently.

However, it is also important to be mindful of the fact that part of appropriate planning for a research project involves identifying the specific contribution that you will make. This is especially essential in the context of doctoral and post-doctoral research, in which you are seeking to demonstrate a degree of scholarly independence. As such, just as it is important to work within the existing parameters of the project, it is equally important to balance this with a degree of innovation within the design of your research. Scholarly independence and innovation within research can be demonstrated in several ways, meaning that the unique contribution made by your research need not be solely methodological. If the aims of your research are best achieved by working solely within the existing methodological design of the project then your own contribution may be differentiated thematically (by its empirical object of focus) or conceptually (by the theoretical approach that it draws upon and advances).

# THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DESIGNING YOUR STUDY WITHIN AN EXISTING RESEARCH PROGRAM

Regardless of the specific nature of the contribution that you seek to make, it is essential while working as part of a larger research project to work with rather than against the existing design of the project. For instance, while planning the research that I am undertaking as part of the Life Patterns project I decided to focus on the topic of housing. Although this topic had been touched upon in the project, it did not form a focal point of any of the previous output from the project and was not a specific research interest for any of the other members of the project team. In this way it represented a thematic (rather than methodological or conceptual) point of distinction from the broader output of the project. While determining the specific aspect of housing that I would focus on I studied the existing pool of participants, quickly finding that due to the longitudinal nature of the project, individuals who were tertiary educated and working in professional occupations were over-represented. As such, the sample did not lend itself to the study of housing precarity or insecurity, which represents a focal point of housing research. Given that home owners were over-represented, the project lent itself to a study of home ownership. By focusing on home ownership rather than, for instance, housing insecurity, I was able to design my study in a way that took advantage of the composition of the existing sample.

However, while it is important to consider how you will distinguish your own work from that of the wider project that you are part of, it is essential to be mindful of the fact that moving away from the thematic focus and methodological design of the existing study may necessitate the submission of further documentation. In particular, because I focused on a relatively new thematic area within the project and introduced an element of methodological innovation (the use of a photovoice method for part of the research interviews) it was necessary for me to submit an amendment to the original ethics application that had been approved for the project. It is crucial to be mindful of the fact that any changes that you make may necessitate administrative approvals from ethics committees, or perhaps even from the organisation funding the research.

## DATA COLLECTION

The final area of the research project in which the consideration of the fact that I was working as part of an existing multi-researcher project came to the fore was during data collection. Again, the project that I am working as part of has an existing sample of participants and the portion of the sample whom I am collecting data with entered the study in 2005, meaning that they have a strong existing relationship with the project. This essentially means that they have established expectations about their involvement with the project.

For instance, as part of my current round of data collection I am conducting interviews with home owners about the role of parental and family support in their entry into the property market. While there is little existing qualitative research on this topic, one of the few studies that has been conducted involved interviews with both home owners and parents or family

members who supported their entry into the housing market. While it would have been desirable to take this approach in my own work, the participants' existing (individual) relationship with the study meant that it was not feasible. Specifically, throughout the course of their involvement in the study (which has taken the form of annual surveys and, for some of the participants, interviews and discussion-based workshops) the participants have interacted with the project on an individual basis and have spoken and written candidly about their lives. Although there was never any question of breaking the confidentiality of the participants' data, requesting to speak to their parents as part of my research nevertheless fell outside the tone of the existing project in which they had always been approached as independent adults.

Although working with an existing project and an existing sample may put parameters on your research, it can also be of great benefit. For instance, working with an existing sample meant that I was able to access a pool of potential participants who had demonstrated their willingness to participate in academic research, meaning that recruitment was streamlined significantly. The existing data from the study also aided in identifying my prospective sample, and essentially meant that I did not need to go through the time-consuming and labour-intensive process of establishing relationships with gatekeepers and identifying potential participants which research of this type typically involves.

While working with the existing sample it was also important to be mindful of established norms in relation to how the participants were contacted, and what they could expect from their interactions with the project. I found that the participants were generally contacted via email, and then via text after approximately two weeks to follow up if no response was received. I also found that the participants were routinely sent summary reports on the findings of the annual survey. While this arguably signifies best practice, it was nevertheless helpful to be aware of (and fulfil) the expectation of feedback of this type in order to ensure that I was adequately managing the participants' expectations of the project.

# THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DESIGNING YOUR STUDY WITHIN AN EXISTING RESEARCH PROGRAM

## LESSONS LEARNED

Ultimately, while working as part of an existing project presents many challenges that must be managed, it equally presents a host of opportunities. The challenges and opportunities that I have focused on here are predominantly practical and methodological. However, there are a further set of considerations that must be kept in mind when embarking on work of this type. They concern the other members of the team that you will be working with. While it is essential to establish scholarly independence as a research student or early career researcher, it is equally essential to establish good working relationships with your colleagues.

Far beyond simply signifying stakeholders to be managed, the chief investigators and other members of your project team represent invaluable sources of support, mentoring and collegiality. Moreover, they are, in many cases, pre-established collaborators and writing partners. While it is necessary to learn about the roles and research interests of your project team as part of orienting yourself within a study, it is also essential to remember that this work is ongoing. Just as it is necessary to cultivate and manage respectful and productive relationships with your research participants, it is equally important to do so with the other members of your team.



## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Guest and Macqueen's (2008) handbook provides a very helpful and detailed guide to collecting, managing and analysing data in the context of qualitative team-based research.

- Guest, G. & McQueen, K.M. (2008). *Handbook for team-based qualitative research*. Lanham, MD: Altamira.

Several methodological papers have focused on the use of technology to facilitate team-based research. Quartiroli et al. (2017) discuss the use of Skype in processes such as data analysis, while Davidson, Thompson and Harris (2017) discuss data analysis software practices within research teams.

- Quartiroli, A., Knight, S.M., Etzel, E.F. & Monaghan, M. (2017). Using Skype to facilitate team-based qualitative research, including the process of data analysis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(6): 659-666.
- Davidson, J., Thompson, S. & Harris, A. (2017). Qualitative data analysis software practices in complex research teams: *Troubling the assumptions about transparency and portability*. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(10): 779-788.

While considering the conceptual resources that are offered by working as part of a team Creese and Blackledge (2012) have addressed the practice of meaning-making and theory building in team ethnography, while Barry et al. (1999) have discussed what may be gained by practising reflexivity as a team-based rather than individual activity.

- Creese, A. & Blackledge, A. (2012). Voice and meaning-making in team ethnography. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 43(3): 306-324.
- Barry, C.A., Britten, N., Barber, N., Bradley, C. & Stevenson, F. (1999). *Using reflexivity to optimise teamwork in qualitative research*. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(1): 26-44.



# (AD)VANTAGE POINTS IN PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

Dr Annie Gowing

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the opportunities and challenges that exist when conducting research as a practitioner-researcher. My study explored student and staff understandings of school connectedness and had its genesis in my professional experiences as a school social worker/counsellor located in a large secondary school, Woodlands College (a pseudonym), in outer metropolitan Melbourne. This role provided encounters with young people whose connection to school ranged from fractured and diminishing to robust and strengthening and all stages between those two points. The coalescing of the practitioner and researcher roles yielded a unique lens on both practice and research and the advantages and difficulties that are inherent in practitioner-research.

## PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Practitioner research, also referred to as practice-based research (McVey, Lees, & Nolan, 2015), practitioner inquiry (Mockler, 2014), research-minded practice (McBeath & Austin, 2015) and action research (Oolbekkink-Marchand, van der Steen, & Nijveldt, 2014) has been adopted within a broad range of professions including teaching, social work and medicine (Shaw, 2005).

The practitioner-researcher occupies a different space in the research landscape from academic or university-based researchers who are doing what Schiera (2014) calls “capital-R Research” (p.107). The ‘insider’ view of practitioner research necessarily assigns ‘outsider’ status to other researchers, bringing with it a polarising simplification of the two approaches and failing to recognise that practitioner-researchers themselves often move in and out of these two positions during the course of their research (Shaw, 2005).

The beginning point for this study lay in the encounter between my practitioner curiosity about the growing scholarly interest in school connectedness and dissatisfaction with some of the findings based on my day-to-day and moment-to-moment exchanges with young people in a school setting.

## ETHICAL ISSUES FOR THE PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

The practitioner-researcher role immediately raised questions for me about my positioning within Woodlands College, which had also acquired a dual identity as a school and a research site. Viewed from the researcher perspective, additional school events such as swimming carnivals, retreats and assemblies had the potential to be considered as disruptive and unaccommodating to the research endeavour, rather than important events in the life of the school, and greatly anticipated and enjoyed by many students and staff. From the practitioner perspective, such events were highly valued as co-curricular activities that were opportunities for student participation and occasions of celebration and acknowledgement of a broad range of student achievement: they were also regarded as providing relational spaces and experiences that could influence school connectedness.

The relationship between the practitioner and researcher positions was not only complex for me, as the practitioner-researcher inhabiting both spaces, but also on occasions for students and staff. At the time of the study, I had been at the College for four years and subsequently remained there for a further five years after the data collection phase of the study. Although having both a practitioner and researcher role within the College, the researcher role was conspicuous within the school community only immediately prior to and during the data collection phase. My practitioner role provided the substantive identity by which students, families and staff knew me and it was through this role that relationships had been formed with many members of the school community. The nature of the relationship with many students and some staff had been formed within the context of a counselling contact. Even when that contact had ceased, the imprint of the therapeutic encounter was not erased from the relationship, as knowledge of each other within that context continued to exist within the relationship. With other staff at Woodlands College the nature of the relationship was collegial and most students knew me as a staff member in a non-teaching role with a clearly defined function (counsellor) in the school setting and we regularly encountered each other in the many school spaces beyond my counselling room.

During the data collection phase an incident occurred which captures some of the complexity inherent in occupying dual roles. I was conducting a focus group with Year 9 students and the discussion was in the final 10 minutes when a teacher sent a message requesting that four of the students in the group return to class immediately. All the students had provided their own and parental consent to participate and the researcher had given advance notice to all the students’ teachers that they would be absent during this period. The four students were unconcerned and insisted they wanted to stay until the discussion concluded, however the practitioner-researcher was acutely aware of the potential damage to a number of relationships if the message was ignored. The group concluded more hastily than would have otherwise occurred (or was desirable) and all students returned to class. The teacher later shared her displeasure at the late return of her students.

This experience raised a number of practitioner-researcher dilemmas. It is disingenuous to imagine that the two roles can be seamlessly entered and exited. On the contrary, the roles jostled for dominance and constantly overlapped in an uneasy and at times competitive manner. I recognised the students’ right and ability to make a choice to remain in the focus group until its conclusion, viewing their role as research participants as momentarily foregrounded over their student role. This perspective could be seen as self-serving, yet could also be regarded as a commitment to respect the decision that the young people had made about their participation in the research, and to resist the power of the teacher to negate their choice. As the practitioner, I was also acutely aware of the need to demonstrate respect for the teacher’s point of view and not intentionally place the students in a situation where their relationship with their teacher could be compromised.

## (AD)VANTAGE POINTS IN PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

My relationship with the teacher also needed to be treated with care as any fracture could potentially impact on my capacity to deliver a counselling service to students in that teacher's class by reducing the teacher's willingness to refer students to the counselling service, to support her students' use of the counselling service or to allow students to attend appointments during her classes. In this sense, the temporal dimensions of the practitioner role stretched far beyond those attached to the researcher role and required ongoing assessment of any potential impacts caused by the researcher role on the practitioner role. This example reveals the convoluted nature of ethical practice in the research process for practitioner-researchers, requiring constant checking and interrogation of decision-making and its impacts on all aspects of the research endeavour and the practitioner role during and after the research has been completed.

### ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The ethics of conducting research with young people were central considerations in this project, overlapping with the practitioner-researcher concerns particularly around power and participation. This researcher's view of young people as competent and capable sits within a particular paradigmatic understanding of childhood and adolescence and formed the point of departure from which key ethical questions were considered. This positioning of young people has consolidated a place in Childhood and Youth Studies in recent years and represents a shift away from a view of young people as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015). Such a view of young people cannot however be stripped of context and does not naively champion young people's rights to be autonomous and independent in circumstances where their right to protection from a range of harms must be asserted.

In compliance with the standards for ethical academic research, I ensured that students who were in a counselling relationship with me at the time of data collection were not targeted for inclusion. These students were however still free to participate in the study if they wished to do so. To address possible ethical conflicts, I clearly stated in all recruitment materials and in the informed consent forms that if students were currently in a counselling relationship with me, the principal investigator, and they volunteered to participate in the project by way of inclusion in a focus group, completion of a questionnaire, or through keeping a diary, their participation in the study would not affect or influence the counselling relationship in any way. Being an advocate for their right to participate sat alongside my awareness that some students who knew me through my counselling role could be motivated by a wish to please me or, as they might see it, help me with my research. Determining any individual's motivation to participate in research is fraught with complexity and in this project, motivations in addition to those already named, may have included a desire to miss some class time, a wish to follow their friends' decision to participate or equally some students may have had an interest in the topic and wanted to contribute.

Considering motivation to participate in research and implications for the researcher, a single aspect of the research endeavour, highlights the fact that striving for ethical research practice is less about finding answers to ethical questions and is more focused on asking questions and engaging in the questioning in a probing and scrupulously honest manner. Such questioning and reflection are not occasional acts but occur in the researcher's everyday doing and experiencing of the research. Guillemain and Gillam (2004) call these quotidian ethical travails of the researcher "ethics in practice" (p. 264) or "microethics" (p. 265) and contrast them with procedural ethics, which involve the formal university-based process for gaining ethical approval.

The distinction between the two types of ethics is useful and captures the experiential gap between the heavily stage-managed ethical approval process and the less predictable and at times less manageable fieldwork phase of research. Guillemain and Gillam (2004) describe "ethically important moments" (p. 265) requiring the researcher to make decisions and choices where "something ethically important is at stake" (p. 265). This understanding of ethics in action resonates strongly with another experience from the current study, providing what could certainly be regarded as an ethically charged and significant moment for the practitioner-researcher.

This ethical dilemma occurred when a year 7 student who had returned the consent form approached the practitioner-researcher while questionnaires were being distributed. She indicated apologetically that she did not wish to participate, as her friend was not involved, and she would prefer to sit with her and do the activity scheduled by the class teacher for those students who were not completing the questionnaire. The researcher simultaneously felt a flash of visceral disappointment about a loss of a participant and the associated data; empathy and understanding of the student's position and respect for her right to change her mind and withdraw; and a sense of shock that the disappointment had been so powerfully felt. The entry in the researcher's journal conveys the impact of this experience.

Salutary and disturbing experience today. All my pious self-regard as an ethically impregnable researcher and fierce champion of young people's rights suddenly felt fragile. K's decision to make Christmas cards instead of complete the questionnaire breached the fortress and suddenly my disappointment felt like a thinly veiled lust for data which could so easily have taken control. Need to recage that monster but good to know it's there.

This experience was an unexpected encounter with self-as-researcher and in that moment the practitioner role was marginalised. It was a highly influential moment, in which a nascent sense of self-as-researcher fractured and a more relationally sensitive and ethically aware research identity began forming, moving self-scrutiny from a self-consciously correct research activity to an 'in the moment responsiveness' within the research milieu. While there was no ambiguity in this encounter about the right course of action, it nevertheless was an ethically significant moment because it held the possibility of an ethically

## (AD)VANTAGE POINTS IN PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

wrong response (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). It also emphasised the intricate nature of ethical practice as this single occasion contained intersecting ethical considerations relating to consent, autonomy, power and timing and possibly more.

### REFLEXIVITY

In recent years reflexivity has increasingly been promoted as the foundation of ethical research practice (Graham et al., 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Warin, 2011). Requiring a deep and critical awareness and scrutiny of self-as-researcher, reflexivity involves self-evaluation in relation to all aspects of the research process, generating an understanding and explicit acknowledgement of how the researcher both shapes and is shaped by the research process (Berger, 2015).

Questions about positionality dominated in this study and the relational crosshatching of connections and influence on the project were the focus of much early reflection. The potential for reflexivity to cause paralysis was evident at this stage and even after the study began reflexivity at times teetered on becoming a Gordian Knot from which I could not cut myself free. Such paralysis is not the intended outcome of reflexivity (May, 2010), nor is it intended to become the showpiece of the project, spilling endless self-conscious reflections on being self-consciously reflective across the project and displacing the research quest (Denzin, 1997; Finlay, 2002). Being reflexive invited an ongoing vigilance about the meaning of self-as-instrument and an honest scrutiny of the indelible footprint this left on all aspects of the study. Keeping a journal and extensive field notes and returning regularly to their contents, peer debriefing with fellow higher degree students, inviting the gaze of experienced researchers by presenting research in progress at conferences, having searching discussions with supervisors and immersing myself in the relevant literature were all strategies used to inhabit a reflexive position throughout this study, all the while recognising the gravitational pull towards not seeing one's assumptions and holding too much self-regard for one's impregnable ethical and moral standards as a researcher. Reflexivity has required an ongoing commitment to be aware of self-as-researcher and reveal that self throughout the final telling of the research story; a commitment to making explicit the spectrum from unknowingness to confidence that encircled each decision and stage of the study, while avoiding turning the account into a self-indulgent parody of reflexivity at work.

### CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the ethical and relational complexities associated with the role of the practitioner-researcher. Inhabiting that role affords a positional vantage point in the practitioner's workplace that is simultaneously seductively rich in possibilities and scattered with risk. The duality of the role requires relational and ethical awareness and vigilance in decision-making, and transparency and accountability in those decisions. Bringing a critically reflexive self to the researcher role is the point of departure and the travelling companion for any practitioner-researcher.

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# Q METHODOLOGY... IN BREVE

Renata Aliani

## THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

In a globalised world, young people need to see themselves as global citizens, therefore, having the ability to communicate in more than one language is essential. To be able to achieve global literacy, language learning should be made available to everyone (Salzburg Global Seminar, 2017). In Victoria, all schools are required, by legislation, to provide languages as part of a comprehensive curriculum. In 2017, there were twenty-two languages taught in mainstream Victorian government schools (State of Victoria, 2018a). Within this wide linguistic spectrum, Italian is a major community language that it is well established in our society and has a very strong presence in primary school settings (Di Biase, 1994).

Whilst extensive information is provided to support schools implement effective languages programs (State of Victoria, 2018b) and schools can use a range of current approaches to deliver languages education (Cross, 2014), variety is a term that can often be used to describe the programs offered in local primary schools (Bavin & Wales, 1988; Liddicoat, Scarino, Curnow, Kohler, Scrimgeour, & Morgan, 2007). One result of this variety is that time allocation differs considerably depending on the type of languages programs schools are implementing (State of Victoria, 2018a). Furthermore, while schools and governments are committed to delivering languages programs “bilingual education as a form of learning has not been widespread” (Molyneux, 2006, p. 18) and only a few bilingual programs are offered in Victorian government schools (State of Victoria, 2018a).

In 1983, a Melbourne based study comparing two types of languages programs – bilingual and second language – indicated that “each [bilingual] immersion class performed better in every test and significantly better in practically every skill than the comparable class in the second language program” (Clyne, 1983, p. 28). Based on the premise that bilingual programs provide an effective way of delivering languages, are highly successful and can produce better results in the language, if schools have a genuine wish to produce bilingual students, then “the ideal situation for languages would be for learners to begin in the first year of primary schooling with a total immersion languages program” (Berthold, 1991, p. 17).

## THIS STUDY

Although Italian is one of the most widely taught languages in Victorian schools, for many years, there were no Italian bilingual programs in Victorian schools (Gannon, 2009). Amidst this background, the aim of this study is to identify why schools choose languages programs that may not support students in achieving high levels of language proficiency. The research questions that guide this study can be summarised as follows:

1. If bilingual programs are an effective and highly successful model for delivering second language instruction, why aren't there more of them and why is the proportion of Italian bilingual programs so small given that Italian is so widely taught in primary schools?

2. What are the viewpoints about languages education of the educators and parents in schools that offer different models of languages programs?
3. How do these viewpoints impact on or influence the choice of language and program type?

## THE METHODOLOGY

To investigate these issues and identify the viewpoints surrounding the topic of languages education and the implementation of languages programs in primary school, this study has employed Q methodology (access a five minute introduction to Q by Deignan, Powell & Deignan, 2012, at <http://youtu.be/0AejeH6jw2c>). Developed by William Stephenson (1953), Q is unique in that it has characteristics of qualitative research but is grounded in statistical analyses generally found in quantitative research (Newman & Ramlo, 2010). Its “purpose is to reveal subjective structures, attitudes, and perspectives from the standpoint of the person or persons being observed” (Brown, 1996, p. 565). The focus of the methodology is on subjectivity, that is, what constitutes a person's current point of view about a topic and the setting up a Q study requires the completion of six fundamental steps (Barry & Proops, 1999; Brown, 1980; Lee, 2017; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Paige, 2014, 2015; Schmolck, 2014; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Yang, 2018) which are listed and then elaborated below:

1. Identification or generation of a concourse
2. Selection of the Q sample
3. P-set selection
4. Q sort
5. Correlations and factor analysis
6. Interpretation of factors

## IDENTIFICATION OR GENERATION OF A CONCOURSE

In Q methodology, the term *concourse* refers to the totality of opinion statements that surround a topic of interest. The sources of these statements are wide ranging, from interviews, to media, to written documents, to pictures or audio selections. The collection of these statements, or items, forms the starting point of a Q study.

In the current research, the statements about languages education were drawn from state and national language policies spanning 30 years. A total of 44 policy documents were perused and 265 statements collected to form the concourse for the current study. The statements reflected relevant themes about languages education identified in the literature such as: benefits, bilingual programs, implementation, intercultural understandings, language choice, outcomes, proficiency, target language, teachers and time.

An affinity diagram was used as a tool to help organise the information gathered from the policy documents (Kent, 2016). As the example below shows, themes were identified, and statements related to that theme were listed together.

## Q METHODOLOGY... IN BREVE

### BILINGUAL PROGRAMS

The bilingual program does not take time away from other curriculum areas.

Education authorities should establish more bilingual programs.

The number of bilingual programs generally in primary schools should be doubled every 3 years for the next decade.

### LANGUAGE CHOICE

Choices about which languages to offer should be strongly influenced by the wishes of parents and students.

It would be valuable if mainstream schools aimed to offer at least one European and one Asian language in their curriculum.

### TEACHERS

The availability of qualified languages teaching staff with the appropriate level of competence in the target language is essential.

A shortage of qualified languages teachers is a major obstacle to providing languages learning to all students.

## SELECTION OF THE Q SAMPLE

A subset of statements drawn from the concourse is called a *Q sample*. This is the set of statements participants use in the Q sorting activity and need to be – 1) manageable in size, 2) comprehensive, and 3) representative of the larger set of opinion statements from which they are drawn. The number of items in the Q sample can vary from 10 to 100 statements but will generally range from 40 to 60.

To achieve a set of statements that was manageable and comprehensive, all the statements under each theme were checked for clarity, duplication, redundancy and to ensure they were statements of opinion rather than facts. The Q sample for the current research totalled 48 statements.

## P-SET SELECTION

In Q methodology 'P' stands for 'people' and the selection of a *P-set* refers to the selection of participants whose views are sought. Rather than being randomly selected, participants are chosen because of their relevance to the study. Between 40 and 60 participants provides a good range but small numbers give statistically meaningful results because Q methodology correlates individuals rather than statements. What is relevant in a Q study are the views, rather than the number of participants who share them.

For the current study, principals, classroom teachers, teachers of Italian, language teachers and parents were the relevant participants and a total of 94 respondents from schools offering either bilingual or second language programs in Victoria and interstate took part in the research. A further ten participants from two South Australian primary schools offering First Language Maintenance and Development (FLMD) programs were also part of the research bringing the total number of participants to 104.

## Q SORT

The process by which participants rank-order the statements in the Q sample is called *Q sort*. Before participants can undertake a sorting activity, the researcher needs to prepare the materials by randomly placing individual statements on separate cards, preparing a grid for the placement of the statement cards and identifying a condition of instruction which will guide the participants in the Q sorting activity.

The Q sort enables participants to subjectively state their viewpoint about the topic being researched. In the current study the 104 participants sorted the 48 cards by placing them in the grid based on their personal experience and according to what statement was 'most important' or 'most unimportant' to them. The 'zero' column holds the statements that participants are unsure or feel neutral about.

Q sorts are generally followed by interviews so that the participants can elaborate on the sorting activity. Because at each school there would be multiple participants completing the Q sort at the same time thus making it difficult to carry out 1:1 interviews, a post-Q sort recording sheet was developed so that qualitative data could be collected. The post-Q sort recording sheet is included in Appendix 1 and it incorporates a grid to record the placing of the statements, space for demographic details and a series of questions that would allow participants to provide qualitative information about the activity and their views at their own pace and in their own time. In retrospect, adding a question such as "Select two statements you have placed in the zero column and tell me why you have placed them there/what they mean to you?" to probe the placing of statements in the 'zero' column would have further enriched the data.

# Q METHODOLOGY... IN BREVE

## CORRELATIONS AND FACTOR ANALYSIS

There are conceptual differences between Q methodology and conventional factor analysis (see Paige, 2014 for comparison table) and several specialised statistical packages such as PQMethod or PCQ can be used to analyse the Q sorts. These specialised programs generate five types of data files – 1) correlation matrix, 2) factor loadings, 3) Z scores, 4) factor array scores, and 5) distinguishing statements. The scores generated by these programs are used to identify emergent factors that represent the viewpoints shared by participants.

The program PQMethod (Schmolck, 2014) was used to analyse the data collected in this research study and the analysis captured the essence of the perspectives shared by the participants in the research. Five viewpoints were shared by the participants from bilingual and second languages programs and three viewpoints were shared by the participants from the First Language Maintenance and Development programs

## INTERPRETATION OF FACTORS

There are no specific strategies that are used to interpret the factors emerging from the analysis and researchers are advised that if they are to interpret effectively:

it is almost certainly better to lay your own concerns aside, at least temporarily, and to let the factor array govern proceedings. It is the viewpoints themselves, and a genuine desire to understand, that must be foremost throughout the interpretation process (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 148).

Each of the factors extracted in the analysis captures a shared view and interpretation requires the researcher to write a summarising description for each perspective and, as part of the analysis, each viewpoint is given a name.

In the current study, whilst the analysis is not finalised, the viewpoints have been given an interim name. In programs that offer bilingual and second language programs, the five viewpoints about the teaching and learning of languages have been labelled as:

### Viewpoint 1:

Central, equal and valued

### Viewpoint 2:

Keep the status quo

### Viewpoint 3:

Yes, but make them Asian

### Viewpoint 4:

Are they relevant if we speak English?

### Viewpoint 5:

We need to support them

The three viewpoints from schools that offer FLMD programs have been named:

### Viewpoint 1:

Promote cultural respect

### Viewpoint 2:

Support literacy and skills

### Viewpoint 3:

Need good teachers

As well as the factor descriptions, the interpretation of viewpoint will include demographic data, and comments collected in post Q sort interviews and recording sheets and thus provide a more holistic picture of the viewpoints about languages education found in our primary schools.

## CONCLUSION

Given the current debate about the future of work and globalised labour markets, understanding how languages programs are selected and implemented is an important field of research. Understanding the processes that school communities engage with to select the most appropriate languages program for their student population enables policy makers to steer school communities towards adopting programs that will achieve the best results and ensure that Australian students are capable of communicating with their non-English speaking counterparts across the world.

## Q METHODOLOGY... IN BREVE

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# APPENDIX 1: POST-Q SORT RECORDING SHEET AND FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

## PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING

Tell me what the two statements you have placed at +5 (the ones that are most important to you) mean to you?

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Tell me what the two statements you have placed at -5 (the ones that are most unimportant to you) mean to you?

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Identify positive aspects of the current language program? (If applicable)

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Identify possible challenges for the current language program? (If applicable)

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Name one (1) aspect of the current language program that you would like to change? (If applicable)

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Describe your 'ideal' language program?

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**Tell me a little about yourself?**

Age: 20-29 / 30-39 / 40-49 / 50-59 / 60+

Background: \_\_\_\_\_

Language(s) spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

If you are a parent, for each child please specify the gender, age and year level they are enrolled in:

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## FIND OUT MORE

Participant reports and Research reports:

[education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/projects/current/life\\_patterns#publications](https://education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/projects/current/life_patterns#publications)

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