

Education: The Research Context

There are 5 main groups and settings in education whose distinctive characteristics may make them easy or difficult to study:

1) Researching Pupils

Malcolm Hill (2005) suggests that there are 3 major differences between studying young people and studying adults:

- **Power and status:** Children and young people generally have less power and status than adults. This makes it more difficult for them to state their attitudes and views openly, especially if they challenge those of adults. In schools it is difficult because of the hierarchy, meaning the teachers have a power and authority over the students. Formal research methods such as structured interviews or questionnaires tend to reinforce power difference. Sociologists must consider how to overcome these power issues, for example using group interviews. Some students who resent the power of teachers over them may be less likely to cooperate with research, but on the other hand might feel empowered by participating in the research and express their true feelings about school.
- **Ability and understanding:** students' vocabulary, thinking skills and confidence are likely to be more limited than those of adults. Researchers will have to be careful how they word their questions. It may also mean it's more difficult to gain their informed consent. Recalling detail is more difficult for students as their memory is less developed than an adult. However it is important that we remember not all students are the same e.g. class, age, gender, and ethnicity can all create differences between students.
- **Vulnerability and ethical issues:** limited power and ability mean young people are more vulnerable to physical and psychological harm than adults. Therefore the participation of young people should be considered necessary and whether they stand to benefit from it.
- **Laws and guidelines:** child protection laws such as the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (2006) operate a vetting and barring scheme on adults working in schools, which requires the adult to have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. As a result of ethical concerns, organisations such as Unicef, Barnardo's and the National Children's Bureau have developed special codes of practice for researching young people. An advantage of studying students is that because they are legally required to attend school, sociologists will know where to find their target research group – unlike with some other social groups they might study.

2) Researching Teachers

- **Power and status:** teachers have more power and status because of their age, experience and responsibility within the school. They also have legal responsibilities and a duty of care towards the young people they teach. As teachers may see it as 'my classroom', researchers may need to develop a 'cover' if they intend to carry out covert investigations and this may mean representing themselves as a supply teacher, or classroom example.
- **Impression management:** teachers are used to being observed, for example in Ofsted inspections, which makes them particularly good at 'impression management' (Erving Goffman, 1969). This means they can manipulate the impression that people have of us. Some researchers study teachers in their 'back stage' roles e.g. in the staffroom. However this may mean that a newcomer could be treated with some suspicion as they stand out. Teachers also are aware that any critical comments they make about the school where they work could affect their career. Head teachers can also influence which staff are selected to be involved with the research.

3) Researching Classrooms

The classroom is fairly small, confined social space with room for perhaps thirty people or so. Classrooms are also comparatively simple social settings: in most cases there are just two social roles in the classroom – teacher and pupil. All this makes classroom interaction relatively straightforward to observe and analyse.

- **Gatekeepers:** access to classroom can be restricted by gatekeepers, including head teachers, teachers and child protection laws. The more gatekeepers there are to a particular research setting, the more difficult it is for a researcher to obtain and maintain access.
- **Peer groups:** when in school-based groups such as classes and friendship groups, students may be more sensitive to peer pressure and the need to conform. This may affect the way they respond to being researched. It may be necessary to supervise students when they're filling in questionnaires, especially if this is done in class, in order to prevent peers from influencing one another's answers.

4) Researching Schools

Using large-scale surveys or official statistics means researchers can carry out their investigation on a large scale, very quickly.

- **School's own data:** exam results, league tables, Ofsted reports, government inquiries and school policy documents are all examples of secondary data publicly available about schools. Schools are therefore 'data-rich'. However, schools with particular issues e.g. high truancy rates may falsify their data so as not to deter applications. This would reduce any validity of research using these statistics.
- **The law:** because the students are legally obligated to attend school, it means that that researcher knows where everybody is so it makes studying the target population effective. However, since the school's primary role is to educate students, heads and teachers may see involvement in research as interfering with the school's most important function.
- **Gatekeepers:** according to Meighan and Harber (2007) heads sometimes view research negatively. Some situations and school settings may be 'off limits' to a researcher e.g. head teachers' interviews with parents. Beynon and Atkinson (1984) note that gatekeepers such as heads often steer the researcher away from the sensitive situations, such as classes where the teacher has poor classroom control.
- **School organisation:** unlike most other organisations in today's society, many schools are single-sex. This may pose problems where the researcher is of a different gender. The sociologist may become the focus of attention when they might prefer to keep a low profile, for example when conducting a participant observation. Because of the internal structure, timetables and meetings it may affect when and how a study can be carried out. The size of the school and its complexities also creates difficulties who often comment that it takes them months to work out where everything is and who does what in the school.

5) Researching Parents

- Parents can influence what goes on in education for example by how they bring up their children, parent-teacher association contacts and marketization policies encouraging parents to see themselves as consumers. However, class, gender and ethnicity may all affect how willing or able they are to participate in research.
- Access to parents: most parent-child interactions take place in the home, and as this is a private setting it makes access for sociologists difficult. Although lists of parents' names and addresses exist in school records, a school would not normally release such information to researchers. However, the school might well be happy to help a researcher contact parents by using the usual method of sending letters home with students.

The Researcher's Own Experience of Education

Everyone has an experience of education, including researchers. So they could draw on their own experience. However sociologists' personal experience and familiarity with classrooms and schools can dull their awareness of just how different educational environments are from other social settings. Sociologists need to be aware of their taken-for-granted assumptions about schools and classrooms, teachers and students.

Equally, the researcher has probably been quite successful in education which would make it hard for them to empathise with students in an under-achieving, anti-school subculture.

Education is also a prominent political issue, with different political parties, pressure groups and individuals holding conflicting opinions about what should happen in schools. Research into educational issues take place in this political context and the researcher has to be aware that their research may become part of a wider political and media debate.