

Doing Your Early Years Research Project

Education at SAGE

SAGE is a leading international publisher of journals, books, and electronic media for academic, educational, and professional markets.

Our education publishing includes:

- accessible and comprehensive texts for aspiring education professionals and practitioners looking to further their careers through continuing professional development
- inspirational advice and guidance for the classroom
- authoritative state of the art reference from the leading authors in the field.

Find out more at: www.sagepub.co.uk/education

Third Edition

Doing Your Early Years Research Project

A Step-by-Step Guide

GUY ROBERTS-HOLMES



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

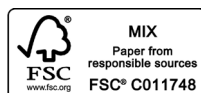
SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

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
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: Marianne Lagrange
Assistant editor: Rachael Plant
Production editor: Nicola Marshall
Copyeditor: Audrey Scriven
Proofreader: Emily Ayers
Indexer: Silvia Benvenuto
Marketing manager: Lorna Patkai
Cover design: Naomi Robinson
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford
Colour Press Ltd



© Guy Roberts-Holmes 2014

Reprint dates: 1st edition was published 2005, reprinted 2007, 2008, 2009 twice, & 2010. 2nd edition was published 2011, reprinted 2012 & 2013.

This third edition published 2014.

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.

All material on the accompanying website can be printed off and photocopied by the purchaser/user of the book. The web material itself may not be reproduced in its entirety for use by others without prior written permission from SAGE. The web material may not be distributed or sold separately from the book without the prior written permission of SAGE. Should anyone wish to use the materials from the website for conference purposes, they would require separate permission from us. All material is © Guy Roberts-Holmes, 2014.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014931160

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

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

ISBN 978-1-4462-8593-0 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-4462-8592-3

**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.**



Contents

<i>About the Author</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Foreword</i>	xiv
<i>Glossary</i>	xvi
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	13
The research process within early childhood studies	17
Everyday research skills	19
2 Your Research Story, Methodology and Research Questions	22
Reflecting upon your personal story	23
Methodology	23
Some research stories	24
Your reflective diary	28
High levels of motivation	29
Professional motivations	30
Focusing on your area of interest	31
The overall research questions and field questions	34
Getting your research questions right: breadth and depth	35
Doing a pilot study	37
3 Ethical Issues in Early Childhood Research	41
Legislation and the participatory rights of children	42
Sociology and the participatory rights of children	43
Children's participation and protection	44
A reflective impact assessment of research on children	45
Your emotional vulnerability	46
Informed consent	49
Informed consent, confidentiality and child protection	50

Informed consent leaflet for children	51
Socially inclusive and respectful relationships with children	54
Informed consent is an ongoing process	57
Negotiating access with the gatekeepers	57
‘Feedback’ and closure of the research	64
Ethical dilemmas are hard to resolve	65
Ethical checklist	66
4 Designing Your Research	69
What is research design?	70
Two research approaches	71
Quantitative research	72
Qualitative research	72
Sampling within your project	73
Triangulation and validity	74
The quantitative and qualitative approaches: an example	76
Action research	78
Action research belongs to you	80
Case studies	84
Small-scale qualitative surveys	86
Broad and deep research	87
Justifying your methods	88
Your research proposal	89
5 Observation: Looking and Listening	94
Why do observations?	95
What is observation?	96
Interpretation	96
Being open in your looking and listening	97
Knowing the context of your research setting	98
Unstructured observations	100
Structured observations	100
Tally counting	101
Observation schedules	102
Event sampling and running records	105
Video observations	106
Observational diagrams	107
Participant observation	108
6 Creative Listening with Young Children	111
Developing cultures of meaningful participation	112
What is creative listening?	113

The Mosaic approach	116
Cameras and ethics	118
Children's photographs and walking tours	119
Children's drawings	124
Children's interpretations of their pictures	125
7 Interviewing Children and Adults	132
Types of interview	133
The interview guide	133
Probing	134
The differences between an interview and a chat	135
Focus group conversations with children	136
Children as researchers	142
8 Writing and Using Questionnaires	151
Three ways to administer your questionnaires	153
Ethical issues and questionnaires	154
Writing your questionnaire	158
Types of question	159
Writing a Likert scale questionnaire	160
9 Presenting and Analysing Your Findings	165
Reducing your data	166
Reducing and displaying your data	171
Using Excel and NVivo software for analysis	172
Inducing and/or deducing the themes and topic codes	174
Using a wide range of data in your analysis	175
10 Writing Your Literature Review	185
Why you should do a literature review	186
Read widely	186
Developing your own point of view	187
What you should read and include in your literature review	189
Using your college/university online databases	191
Using the British Education Index (BEI)	193
How to read a really useful article	194
Synthesising the ideas	197
Write, edit, re-edit and re-re-edit!	197
11 Writing up your research project	200
The steps before your research project	201
Your supervisor	203

x DOING YOUR EARLY YEARS RESEARCH PROJECT

Your responsibilities	204
Your supervision meetings	204
The contents of your research project	205
Title page	206
Acknowledgements	207
Abstract	207
Table of Contents	208
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review	210
Chapter 2: Methodology	213
Chapter 3: Findings	215
Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusions	219
References	222
Appendices	223
Be careful to avoid plagiarism	223
Final preparation and proofreading	224
<i>References</i>	<i>227</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>234</i>

About the Author

In the 1980s and 1990s Guy Roberts-Holmes worked as one of a handful of male nursery and reception teachers in inner London primary schools. Guy thoroughly enjoyed this challenging experience and was eager for more insight into the wider context of early years education, and so completed a Master's degree at King's College, London. Guy 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 carried out an ethnography of a nursery and primary school, leading to a PhD at the University of Nottingham. Guy is the Programme Leader for the internationally renowned MA Early Years Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. His research interests include policy sociology, early years assessment, young children's digital learning, and the professionalisation of the early years workforce.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wife Pamela for her love, support and encouragement for this latest edition! The book continues to be inspired by my fantastic children Justin, Pia and Isabelle, and their wonderful cousins Lucinda, Rose, Mary, Oliver, Jane and Tom. My life has been so enriched by these creative, precious and wonderful young people, and I am forever grateful for their playfulness, intelligence and resilience.

Thank you to the Canterbury Christ Church University 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, and Georgina Moxon. More recently, thank you to the Institute of Education, MA Early Years Education students Anthony Leete, Eleanor Rea and Michelle Palser whose dissertations are inspirational.

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 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 from Y. Lancaster and V. Broadbent (2010), *Listening to Young Children*, Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

Figure 6.1 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*.

Table 11.4 from D. Wyse (2012), *The Good Writing Guide for Education Students* (3rd edition), Sage Publications.

English translation 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 the 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 – Istituzione 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

Research can often seem a lonely business. The initial thinking about the need for enquiry, the creation of resources and relationships to enable research to take place, along with sustaining its implementation, can seem overwhelming. This can be as true for the experienced researcher as it is for the novice. 'Doing Your Early Years Research Project' is a perfect companion. It brings many voices, structures and examples to support and challenge the researcher.

The text can be approached as a narrative of research – taking the reader-researcher through each stage from a developmental perspective. This starts with the building blocks of research: from considerations of what it means to take on the role and identity of a researcher to the creation of questions and aims that will fuel the enquiry. Within the text there are carefully interwoven examples from many individuals' experiences alongside structured activities to offer the reader guidance and helpful conversation at each stage. The journey continues through a consideration of ethics, methodology, the conduct of specific data collection methods and the analysis of data. Each chapter provides a combination of scaffolding for learning about ideas and practices alongside grounded illustrations of actual experiences. These provide an excellent dialogic accompaniment and create a balance of support and critical challenge for the start of research.

The book also addresses ideas and issues that run beneath its approach to the development of the individual as an excellent *researcher* and the conduct of first rate *research*. These include articulate and lively engagement with considerations that must connect with any research with children: the position of young children in society; policy contexts; social exclusion and social justice; power relations and child rights. The reader is enabled to bring their research into contact with debates about how best to form socially inclusive relationships with children, how recent thinking in ethics is reflected in new ideas and practices about young children and consent and discoveries about the benefits and obstacles of using new media in enquiry. Meaning making is key to much of the book's ideas about positive change and research with young children. The ways in which adults and children create transformative connections between their lives and research are held up and examined. From creative listening to observation, from developing interviews to using images and play: the reader is given access to

clear thinking and international perspectives about barriers, possibilities and new insights.

The impressive achievement of this book is to offer access to essential and basic theory and practice, whilst deepening understanding and developing a sophisticated critical framework to support high quality research.

The book is relevant to the practitioner and to the early years student, whilst offering insights to the more experienced researcher. Dr Roberts-Holmes makes enquiry alive and accessible and his text will inspire the reader to see how their research can benefit young children and those who live and work with them.

Professor Phil Jones
Department of Early Years and Primary Education
Institute of Education
University of London

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 showing respect and sensitivity towards 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 that is 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 the complete disclosure of all relevant information and each 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 form 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 towards the ways in which their presence affects the data they collect and how their underlying assumptions make them interpret those data in particular ways.

Sampling This is the way in which a researcher chooses the setting(s), practitioner(s), and 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 they are studying. They also may often use convenience sampling.

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.

Structured observations These are 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 that individual'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.

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.





1 You Can Do Research!

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 own and your supervisor's responsibilities for the project.

Your feelings about doing research

As you start your research project you will probably be feeling a whole range of emotions. The following sections cover a wide variety of emotions that some students stated they felt about their forthcoming early childhood research projects. These students' positive feelings were concerned with the excitement of focusing in depth upon an issue which was of real interest to them and working at their own pace and helping children. The anxieties the students had included being apprehensive about their own abilities and not having sufficient time. These positive and negative feelings about research topics are extremely common. Your early apprehension will help you generate the enthusiasm to successfully complete your research project.

As you read through the students' comments below think about the following questions:

- Which comments do you empathise with?
- Why do you think so many students feel this way?
- How do you feel at the moment about doing your research project? Talk these feelings through with your friends and your supervisor.

I'm looking forward to ...

- The idea of 'digging deep' into an area that really interests me is a real energy booster.
- I'm very excited about my project as it is a topic which I'm fascinated about.
- The idea of doing research gives me 'a buzz'. It's a great opportunity to learn, to evaluate, and to evolve ideas.
- I feel that this is a good opportunity to gain further insight into an area of early childhood studies which really interests ME.
- We can choose exactly what we want to look at and I can work at my own pace.
- I want to make a change for the better and help children through my research.

Anxieties

- I hope I can go into sufficient depth in the area in the short time-span and do the topic the justice it deserves.
- I'm worried about not being able to get enough material together and not having the time to complete the study.

- As a single mum with three children the amount of time I will have to spend on the project concerns me. Will I have enough?
- It feels like an enormous undertaking because I'm just not sure what I will be researching!
- I'm anxious about being out of my depth!
- I am wondering whether I am confident enough to ask professionals the questions I need answering.
- I feel I need a lot of guidance and support and hope this will be available to me.
- I am a bit wary about how to approach my area, however, once I start talking to lecturers and people in the setting I feel that most of these apprehensions will disappear.
- I worry about the ethical issues.
- Am I organised enough to carry out such a project?

Myths about early childhood research

The above range of feelings may arise because for some the very word 'research' can create anxiety. It is important to remember that research is simply a tool (MacNaughton et al., 2010), and as with any other tool, when you learn what it does, why it has been invented and how to use it, it becomes beneficial to you. This means that, because research is just a tool, you are in control of it, rather than it being in control of you. The negative associations that you may be feeling about the word 'research' are not unusual and can stem from commonly held myths and stereotypes. The following wrong and mistaken views about research do sometimes create emotional barriers which can then prevent early childhood practitioners from participating in the research process:

- Early childhood research can only be done by academic professors and experts.
- The research process is so intellectual, complex, mysterious and time-consuming that it cannot possibly be for people like me!
- Research produces hard facts which are unquestionable.
- Research proves things one way or the other.
- There is only one way to do research.
- Research is a strict scientific exercise.

4 DOING YOUR EARLY YEARS RESEARCH PROJECT

- Research is boring.
- Research cannot change anything.
- There are no real benefits from doing research. (Adapted from Blaxter et al., 2010.)

An inclusive approach towards early childhood research

Below are listed some different and more inclusive viewpoints about research which many early childhood practitioners have found to be true for them.

- You already possess many 'everyday' research skills.
- Research can be done by everybody – this means you too!
- Research is simply a tool for you to use.
- Research is fun and hard work.
- Research asks questions about the things that really matter to us.
- Research can initiate personal and professional change and development.
- Research is about developing knowledge.
- Research is about discovery.
- Research is about change.
- Research helps us understand the complex issues in childhood.
- Research helps to further professionalise early childhood studies.
- Research is about questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, myths and 'commonsense' understandings.
- Research is about challenging habitual patterns of behaviour.
- Research can satisfy your fascination with an issue.
- Research can positively benefit you, your work, the children, and the setting you work in.

Which of the above statements do you agree and disagree with? To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

- Early childhood research enables us to see things about children and ourselves as practitioners in new and different ways, to challenge our habitual patterns of thinking, and to possibly act in new ways.

You might be wondering what you can offer to early childhood research. The good news is that early childhood is a rapidly expanding area and you can contribute to that process with your research project.

Your research project within early childhood studies

Although a great deal has been written about early childhood and children, there is still a lot that remains unknown concerning young children growing up in society. Today's complex society increasingly places responsibilities upon early childhood practitioners to understand more about children. New legislation, policies and practice constantly change the ways in which practitioners must relate to and work with the child(ren) in their care. For example, within the UK the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008) poses huge challenges for early years practitioners in implementing its laudable principles and aims. The EYFS has increased expectations of early childhood services and the people who work in them. There is a tremendous need to know more about the various ways in which these changing complex factors influence children and their childhoods.

Childhoods are understood as being positioned within a set of overlapping complex issues (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003). Childhoods are not experienced within a vacuum, rather they are connected to a range of sociological issues such as class, ethnicity, gender and geographical location. Within society children are holistically influenced by the type of early childhood setting they go to, their schools, their health care, and the media. All of these issues impact upon different children in different ways and in these complex ways childhoods are understood in a holistic way. This knowledge of the complexity of childhood leads us to ask many questions about children. This is where the research tool can help us to begin to answer some of those questions. So, as an early childhood practitioner you can begin to see why you must be engaged in research; there is so much more to learn about children and their varied childhoods!

Jane's smart phone research

In the following case study, think about how Jane's reflective observations of children coming into nursery in the morning gave rise to a whole series of interesting research questions. Notice how her thinking challenged her pre-conceived ideas and how the research would lead to improved knowledge and possibly changed practice.



Case Study

Jane had worked in a nursery school for several years and was knowledgeable about early childhood. However, over the past year she had been struck by how many children she saw in the nursery playground playing on their parent's smart phones and she reflected upon how little she knew about what they were doing. When she asked some of the children about this, they showed Jane how they had opened the YouTube application and selected their favourite videos. Some of the children were able to show Jane how they could listen to different pieces of music and also showed her videos of themselves at home! Jane was amazed at how competent, confident and flexible these children were at navigating their way around these smart phones. She reflected upon the differences between the children's competences with this smart-phone technology outside school and the limited ways in which those same children were using computers in the nursery. Jane wondered why there was this difference and how it might be overcome. She also realised how little she really knew about children's technology use other than the negative newspaper articles about young children playing too many games! From her informal observations at school and the anecdotes she had heard, she knew that there was a lot more going on!

Jane wanted to read more about young children and technology. She was determined to 'dig deeper' and find out more about the educational value of smart phones and tablets and computers. She wanted to understand more about what children could do with technology and so she began to note down questions in her research diary. What, if anything, were the children learning whilst they were playing on these devices? What learning dispositions were being developed? To what extent was internet game playing, such as Club Penguin, going on at home? How did children interact with each other on the computer? What was the teacher's role in supporting children playing on the computer? What were the ethical issues around young children playing on the internet and how might these be understood?

The professionalisation of early childhood studies

It is important to note that research is a powerful tool in developing early childhood professionalism (MacNaughton et al., 2010). So whatever your motivations in coming to this book, whether to develop your critical skills in reading about research done by others or because you wish to carry out research for yourself, you will be helping with the ongoing professionalisation of early childhood studies.

You might want to know more about early childhood research for a variety of reasons: for example, it might be a compulsory project as part of your course assessment, or you might be a practitioner working with children in some capacity and wishing to carry out a small-scale study as part of that work with the intention of improving your practice in your institution. Such practitioner action research is increasingly important in developing and improving early childhood practice. This book will help you to ask research-style questions about your own current practice, the collection of evidence, its analysis, and any possible conclusions that can be drawn. Early childhood practitioners are therefore increasingly recognised as key participants in the culture of childhood research.

By reading this book you will inform yourself about what constitutes high-quality, valid research and this will make you a better ‘consumer’ of research and policy. By understanding the process of high-quality research based upon ethical values and principles, you will be able to review and reflect upon the research you have read more effectively and with greater confidence. By being aware of what constitutes high-quality ethical research you will be able to critically evaluate research conducted by others. Such critical reflection upon research carried out by others is central to the process of professionalism within early childhood studies.

By aspiring to be an ‘evidence-based profession’ early childhood practitioners move beyond merely responding to whatever the next government policy or initiative might be and adopt a more powerful and informed position. Much early childhood practice is currently led by government policy. By becoming an informed consumer of research and actually carrying out research yourself, you can generate your own knowledge and understanding. Such understanding is useful in the process of responding to policy initiatives. For example, by having read research evidence on emotional literacy in the early years and perhaps carrying out research on emotional literacy with children you are in a better position to review government policies which address, or omit, emotional development in young children.

The importance of your reflective practice

Some early childhood practitioners incorrectly create a division in their own minds between an imagined ‘academic high ground’ and the ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schön, 1987). They feel that ‘thinking about practice’ (which is what reflective practice is) belongs to an ‘academic high ground’ which is not for them. These practitioners wrongly feel that they should just *do* practice and not *think about*

practice. This is because they incorrectly believe that the ‘practice’ of doing early childhood research and ‘thinking about it’ are disconnected and separate. Such attitudes can act as a self-limiting barrier to one’s potential. Practitioners who engage in reflective practice can produce real-world knowledge grounded within their work. By engaging in a process of reflective practice, practitioners can create real-world knowledge born from experience and critical reflection. Reflection involves thinking about a particular aspect of your work and how to improve it. This process of reflection is personal but it may also be done with your trusted critical friends and/or colleagues.

Reflective practice is about improving practice and generating the theories by which to understand that improvement. Such real-world knowledge produced by early childhood practitioners is as good as that within the ‘established’ academic community. In order to ensure that your real-world knowledge has validity you must demonstrate that it involves critical reflection and a systematic enquiry. The key message is that early years professionals can and do produce original thinking. This is because although people may well have carried out research into your topic area before, nobody has ever done your particular piece of research in your particular setting before. Schön (1987) made a distinction between ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’. Reflection *in* action is about ‘thinking on your feet’, which is what early years practitioners do all the time of course! Reflection *on* action is a more subtle and mature retrospective thinking or ‘thinking after the event’. Early years professional reflective practice primarily involves thinking after the event about what happened and *why*.

Your reflective practice research in your unique early years context may throw up original insights and thoughts about the topic area: ‘[I]f you are not heard, you will continue to be marginalized and not ... be taken seriously’ ... (McNiff, 2006: 49). By engaging in a systematic process of reflective practice research it is possible that your ‘voice’ can be heard in the field of early childhood.

With reflective practice *you* take control of *your* situation: you are the script writer, the stage director, and the main actor/actress. And yes, it is your play! You own the research and it is personal and meaningful to you. This is why reflective practice is so empowering. You become the insider researcher with the passion and enthusiasm to make insightful observations and improvements in your early years setting. You also become the expert doer and thinker. You can generate your theories as to what worked and why and perhaps learn from those changes that didn’t work and the reasons for this. McNiff (2006) has noted that reflective practice generates *sustainable* change because the practitioner is

central. The practitioner creates and implements their own ideas rather than the ideas of an outside expert.

What does reflective practice involve?

Reflective practice is concerned with you investigating and evaluating your early years work. Reflective practice is also concerned with you taking action to improve your personal, social and professional early years context. The main questions that early years reflective practitioners ask are based upon the following:

- What am I doing?
- Why am I doing it this way?
- How can I improve upon what I am doing?

These questions are at the heart of any early years reflective practice research project. From these practical projects it is possible for early years practitioners to generate their own personal theories about what works in an early years setting and what doesn't work. Hence reflective practice is concerned with *both* the practical aspects of doing your job better *and* generating knowledge about why you believe your practice has improved.

Below are some questions which highlight the differences between outsider type questions (traditional research) and insider type questions (action research).

Table 1.1 Outsider-type and Insider-type questions

<i>Traditional research questions</i>	<i>Reflective practice research questions</i>
What is the relationship between children and the outdoor environment?	How can I improve the use of the outdoor area?
What is the connection between management style and increased motivation?	How can I improve my working relationships with my support staff?
Why do early years policy documents generally not include young children's thinking?	How can I listen more carefully to young children's ideas about what they think they should be learning?
What is the relationship between enhanced family involvement and children's learning?	How can I get families more involved in my early years setting?

In the above questions you can see that you, the practitioner, are centrally involved in the research process: 'I' is used in all the reflective practice research questions because you, the practitioner, are central and you are asking questions

about your professional work. You know your setting and yourself and as a well-trained reflective practitioner you also know the sorts of questions you need to ask to improve your practice. Reflective practice thus presents a fundamentally different approach from that of traditional research. Within reflective practice you are much more powerfully positioned since you are in control of the process from start to finish.

Stephen's reflective research questions

In the following example think about the ways in which Stephen's research was professionally reflective and empowering to him as a teacher.

Stephen was a Reception teacher and he had a deep belief in child-led learning through play. However, he was also concerned that over the past year senior colleagues had expected him to be more formally 'teaching' the children literacy, particularly phonics and maths. Stephen felt that his play-based approach to learning was increasingly being challenged, questioned and undermined by the changes going on around him, and he wanted to know more about why these were happening. What policy changes had enabled these changes and why? Stephen reflected upon how he could own the research so that it empowered and further professionalised him. Hence he asked the following questions: How do I make sense of and respond to increased school readiness expectations in the early years? To what extent can I retain my child-centred values and philosophy? What can I do in the classroom to keep child-led learning central?

Reflective practice research as professional development

Reflective practice is centrally concerned with your process of professional development, change and improvement. Practitioner research is an integral part of your critical professional development (Schön, 1987). As a professional you constantly need to reflect upon your work and the ways in which you enhance that work with young children. The underlying principles and values of reflective practice should be integral to everything you do in this regard.

As a professional you will constantly need to reflect upon your work. Increasingly early years professionals need to be accountable. For example, within the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), the required Standard S38 explicitly states that candidates for EYPS are to 'Reflect on and evaluate the impact of practice' (CWDC, 2010: 88). In order to be accountable you will need to be able to justify

what you are doing and why you are doing it. Your reflective practice project will help you understand an issue in much more depth. This understanding will then help you justify your professional actions. The following is a summary of some of the ways in which reflective practice research can help you develop your early years professionalism.

1. A deeper understanding of your values and principles

Reflection involves thinking about a particular aspect of your work and how to improve it. This process of reflection is personal and it may also be done with your trusted critical friends or colleagues. Informed and insightful reflection is a central aspect of personal and professional development. This will lead to an enhanced understanding of your professional values and principles.

2. Increased professionalism

By engaging in the process of reflective practice you will develop your interests and motivation in your work leading to further reflection and development. A positive cycle of personal and professional development can develop from your initial small-scale project.

3. Enhanced working relationships with children, parents and colleagues

Reflective practice is very often a collaborative venture and can involve close working with colleagues, children, families and communities. Reflective practice can be a sociable experience carried out with trusted colleagues or critical friends.

4. Developing your pedagogic skills and knowledge

Critical reflection can arise out of your desire to enhance your teaching skills and knowledge of how you can help children best develop emotionally, cognitively, physically and spiritually. Much practice with young children involves holistic learning. Reflective practice can be sensitive to the subtle and complex learning processes of young children.

5. Increased theoretical knowledge and engagement

One of the great benefits of engaging in reflective practice is that it is your project and you may wish to develop not only your practical knowledge but also your theoretical knowledge of the issues. Your reading other people's ideas about the early years issues, together with your experience and insight, can generate

12 DOING YOUR EARLY YEARS RESEARCH PROJECT

your own knowledge and understanding about what works and why. In this way reflective practice is empowering and can give meaning to practitioners' working lives. Early years workers engaged in reflective practice develop personal 'living theories' (Whitehead, 2006) about themselves and their work. As you share these 'living theories' you will become increasingly confident in your own thinking and theories about your practice. This increased confidence and awareness of *why* you do *what* you do is part of your professionalisation process.

6. Developed self respect, power and self-esteem

Early years workers who engage in reflective practice projects feel more powerful. This is because action research is about you taking the lead responsibility for developing your personal and professional work. This can result in an increased sense of empowerment and enjoyment from your work. Action research can thus initiate positive cycles of personal and professional development. A worthwhile piece of action research that you personally believe in can empower and transform your working life. You will feel more powerful in your work as you come to reflect and change it in various ways for the better.

7. Increased respect for children

Some reflective practice projects involve listening to children's perceptions and understandings. Such projects can highlight what you already know, namely that young children are strong and have immense abilities and competencies if we allow them. It is we adults who need to listen to and see children better.

8. Increased awareness of the wider contexts in which you work

Much of your work as an early years professional will be framed by various pieces of government legislation and policy guidance such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008). As you engage in your research project your awareness will be raised of the wider policy contexts in which you, your work and your early years setting are situated. This increased awareness and knowledge may lead you to further action research projects.

9. Increased confidence with research skills

By carrying through a piece of reflective practice research you will gain experience and knowledge of how to successfully plan and engage with a research project. This will develop your confidence in this key aspect of your professional development. You will be able to answer people who cite research and evidence

with your own knowledge and understanding to justify what you are doing and why. This is a powerful and professional way to engage.

Principles of high-quality early childhood research

Regardless of the topic of your research project there are some basic principles which underpin all quality early childhood research. The underpinning values and principles of high-quality research can be summarised as follows (MacNaughton et al., 2010).

Your research should be:

- critical and political;
- ethical;
- respectful of children's participatory rights;
- purposeful;
- well designed;
- transparent;
- honest about your assumptions.

The critical research stance

Critical researchers would argue that at the heart of their research is a desire to *transform and change people* (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). For the purposes of a small-scale project this transformation is often about the researcher themselves developing their understanding through enhanced knowledge and experience by actually doing the research. Ultimately, critical research is concerned with the transformation of people, their institutions, and thus society itself.

Social justice is at the heart of any critical research. The principles underpinning critical research include fairness, justice, equality and respect. Chapter 2 describes some personal research stories in which all the researchers had issues of social justice they wished to write about. Such social justice issues included race equality, patriarchy and the violent oppression of women and children, unfair gender stereotypes, and a desire to listen to children's perspectives in the schooling process.

The point is to keep a critical stance throughout the research process. In order to do this researchers must continuously ask questions about their assumptions and underlying beliefs and be aware of the power issues in their topic. Issues of racism, sexism, classism, violence and the negation of children's rights do not occur in a political vacuum. Within critical research the interactions and structures which allow such abuses of power and inequalities will need to be understood, discussed and challenged in your written work.

Critical research involves researchers being continuously open to alternative views and perspectives. Being critical can include being sceptical of the use of certain everyday terms. For example, critical researchers challenge the thinking that goes along with the label of special educational needs, preferring instead to work with the ideology of inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2004).

Lee's research: A critical perspective on Chinese and English early childhood differences

As you read the following example think about how Lee's experiences in England have challenged her preconceived ideas about early childhood education. What assumptions has Lee had challenged by her experiences in England? How have her reflective observations and questions further professionalised her?

Lee was a student from China and when she came to England she was very interested to see how much free play, exploring and practical activities went on in English early years settings. Lee was also very intrigued to learn that children's emotional development was a central concern in many settings rather than cognitive learning. In China, Lee was used to much more formalised learning taking place, for example she had formally taught two year olds how to read and write through memorisation. The central prominence given to child-led activities, especially play, and the focus upon learning characteristics and dispositions in England challenged her thinking about early childhood education. Lee wondered why there were such differences in attitudes to learning between the two countries and what she could learn from these different approaches. Specifically she wanted to know more about the advantages and disadvantages of each system.

Ethics are central

Ethical issues must be central to any piece of early childhood research. Ethical issues should continuously permeate all aspects of the research process, from the

questions or hypotheses asked, to the choice of research techniques, and to how the research is presented and fed back to the respondents. All research can potentially be both beneficial and, sometimes, inadvertently harmful. Your research should aim to make a positive contribution to the broader social good within early childhood. Think about the ways in which your project may be beneficial to the children, the setting, and to you. You will also have to try to predict any possible ill effects your research topic and your questions might have. It is therefore crucial at the outset of any research to think through any possible ethical difficulties, problems and concerns that may arise as a result of your research. Think of these possible difficulties in relation to the children, the setting, and you. If you are doing your research as part of a college course, ethical issues might determine whether it is possible to carry out the research or not. So carefully think through any potential ethical difficulties now to avoid disappointment later on. Chapter 4 focuses upon the ethical issues needed in your research.

Children's participatory rights

Increasingly, children themselves are being seen as important people within the research process (<http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk>). Notions of children's participatory rights in issues which affect them are influencing the ways in which research is carried out. Within the research process, listening to children, consulting with them and respecting their views are becoming widespread in childhood research. Children actively wish to participate in the research process, for example in the planning for children's services (Kirby et al., 2003). This process of actively engaging with children demands sensitivity from the researcher. The ethical considerations in participatory research with children are changing the ways in which research itself is understood.

Purposeful research

Your research should have clear aims and be worthwhile. The research topic and what it sets out to do should matter to you and to others. If your research is worthwhile it is likely to be interesting and enjoyable – essential if you are to complete your project! Purposeful, clear aims to the research are also vital in encouraging others to take part in your research.

Your research should be well designed

You should have carefully thought through your research approaches and techniques. How to do this is fully discussed in Chapter 3. Sufficient reading and

knowledge will help to inform your research questions or predictive hypotheses, which should also be well thought through. The research should be well organised and achievable within a particular timescale.

Your research should be transparent

Transparent research allows other people to follow your complete research trail. Hence your research should be clear and honest. When other people read your research they should clearly understand what you did and why you did it. Transparency involves letting people know why you took certain decisions in the research process. Transparency is also important for issues of validity.

Developing reflexivity

Perhaps you have chosen your research topic because you have a passionate personal interest in the area and hold a particular viewpoint, which you wish to prove. Hence, throughout the research you might be on one side of an argument. Being self-aware of such passionate beliefs, biases and assumptions is known as reflexivity. It is important for researchers to reflect and be self-aware of the points of view and biases that they bring to the research topic. Such biases or assumptions may inadvertently prevent a researcher from being open to the possibility of different perspectives and understandings of the topic. However, for the purposes of research it is important that you are honest and transparent about your biases and assumptions. Throughout the research process you will need continuously to reflect upon how your assumptions and biases might influence your project. This process of self-reflection upon how you might be influencing your research is not always easy to achieve. What assumptions are you making about the topic? You should note down the ways in which you feel biased in the area of your research.

Some early childhood research topics remain highly contentious, for example, single parenting, stepfamilies, bullying, gender discrimination, etc. It is hard to remain objective and distant and open to alternative possibilities and viewpoints with such topics. For example, you might choose to look at the issue of bullying within your setting. This emotionally difficult topic might include bullying amongst the children and amongst the staff. You might have chosen this topic because you feel bullied at your workplace, and therefore you might harbour anger and frustration towards that setting. Perhaps, however, for the children and other staff at your setting the anti-bullying policy and practices are effective at preventing and dealing with bullying. Within your setting you must find a range of

opinions concerning bullying. Quite possibly some of these other opinions amongst staff, parents and children will support your experiences whilst others may contradict your experiences. The point is to try to remain open to others' viewpoints and perspectives and to reflect upon your own biases and assumptions.



Activity

Think about the assumptions that you hold regarding your research topic. Write down any strongly held beliefs you have about your topic. Why do you think you hold these beliefs about your topic?



Activity

Carefully read the newspapers/magazines for a week and collect examples of research that affects children and families and early childhood. Then answer these questions about the articles:

- What do you think of this research?
- Does it tell us anything significantly new?
- Was it, in your opinion, worth researching and publishing?
- Who might benefit from the research?
- Does it fulfil the principles for high-quality research?

The research process within early childhood studies

Research within early childhood can be approached in many different ways. Different overall approaches include perceiving research as a linear process or as a recursive spiral process.

In the linear model of early childhood research (see Figure 1.1) it is envisaged that there is a set of more or less fixed stages through which the research must pass in an orderly fashion.

The straightforward stages in Figure 1.1 provide a useful and necessary structure for your research. However, such a fixed model can prove to be rather limiting and constraining.

18 DOING YOUR EARLY YEARS RESEARCH PROJECT

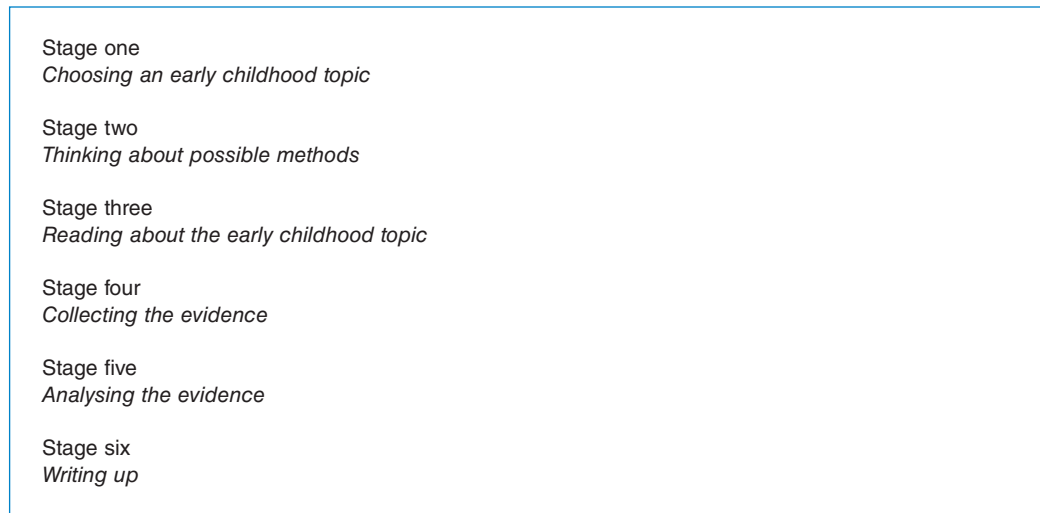


Figure 1.1 The linear research model

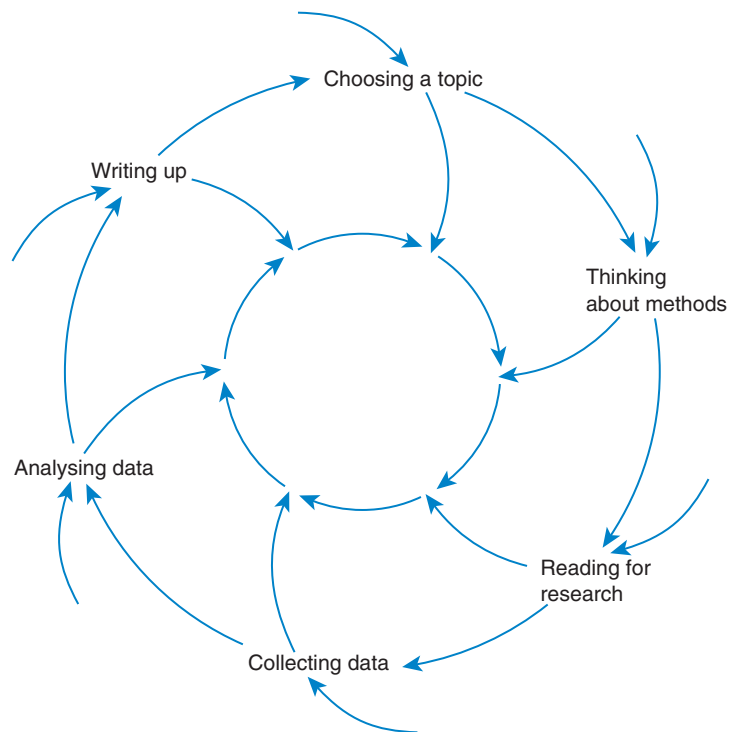


Figure 1.2 The research spiral (Blaxter et al., 2010)

The recursive research spiral is not a fixed process. It allows for the research to be more flexible and open to changes in direction. In this book you are encouraged to revisit any of the research stages in the light of your ongoing understanding, reading and evidence. In the spiral model, research becomes dynamic, fluid and open to change as you progress with your topic. For example, sometimes early childhood researchers can only select their topics after they have read some literature in the area they are interested in. Indeed, reading permeates all stages of the research process. At other times a piece of evidence may emerge in the form of a child's drawing, or what a child says, or a new initiative in your workforce which might lead you into reading and asking different and amended research questions. In these ways the spiral research model is useful because it can be entered at almost any point.

Everyday research skills

To get on your course or be employed within your work setting means that you are already experienced in many everyday research skills – whether you know it or not (Blaxter et al., 2010). However, you are probably unaware of how many research techniques you are already familiar with. Everyday research skills and techniques that you are experienced with will include:

- reading;
- asking questions;
- watching;
- listening;
- selecting and sorting information;
- organising;
- writing;
- reflecting.

You will probably be very good at some of the above everyday research skills but might never have considered such an ability to be a research skill! For example, going on holiday with friends involves using many of the above everyday research skills. Finding out where to go involves selecting and reading appropriate magazines, websites and books. You may also ask friends and family for advice. You will have to reflect upon the reading and your friends' advice to

make a selection of where and when you go on holiday. You might decide to go to a travel agent. You will then have to ask a specific set of questions which might include destinations, costs, carriers, and travel arrangements for small children, elderly people, etc. You might have to think about appropriate clothes, language and money. You will thus accumulate a vast amount of material on destinations and travel which will need sorting and organising. You will then have to make a selection based upon your information. All of the above activities involve a huge amount of planning, organisation and effort. This book will make these implicit everyday research skills, that you already possess, explicit for you. All these natural skills and abilities that you already possess in order to have a holiday mean that you *can* successfully carry out a small research project. Table 1.2 clearly shows the connections between your everyday life skills and research skills.

Table 1.2 The connections between everyday life skills and their more formal research equivalent

<i>Everyday life skills</i>	<i>Research equivalent</i>
Reading	Reading for research; literature review; documentary analysis
Listening	Interviewing
Watching	Observations
Choosing	Sampling and selection of respondents
Summarising situations, events, television shows, films, etc.	Managing your data
Organising events and situations within a given timeframe	Managing your project
Writing	Writing up your project
Reflecting upon life's events and situations	Researcher bias



Activity

Think of an 'everyday' situation that involves using research skills that you already possess, for example, buying a new smart phone, choosing your child's childminder, organising a wedding, buying a car, etc. List what you would have to do and the everyday research skills you would need to employ to successfully carry out the task.

Summary

The principles and values underpinning high-quality early childhood research are crucial in producing critical social research that empowers practitioners, their institutions and the children in their care. This chapter has begun to demystify the process of research by making explicit the everyday research skills that you already possess. Early childhood studies is an area of rapid growth within society. As integrated and holistic children's services are developed throughout society, so early childhood practitioners' responsibilities are increased. Enhanced knowledge about children's complex and varied lives will help to meet these professional responsibilities. Your small-scale research project is an important part of this professionalisation process.

In this chapter you will have:

- developed your confidence to 'have a go' at research;
- understood the importance of your early childhood studies research project;
- appreciated the significance of reflective practice in your research;
- examined the principles underpinning high quality early childhood research;
- appreciated that research is a process and not a one-off right or wrong event.

Recommended reading

MacNaughton, G., Rolfe, S. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (eds) (2010) *Doing Early Childhood Research: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, 2nd edition. Buckingham: Open University Press.

The second edition of this classic textbook is an excellent guide for both novice and experienced early childhood researchers. The first two chapters provide novice researchers with an in-depth and thorough discussion of the process of early childhood research and the principles of high-quality early childhood research.

Wilson, E. (2013) *School-based Research: A Guide for Education Students*, 2nd edition. London: Sage.

This book is an extremely useful 'how-to' guide for early childhood researchers who are working in educationally-based early years settings. Each chapter is clearly laid out and discusses the entire research process from start to finish.