3 GETTING INFORMATION FROM PEOPLE

3.1 Introduction

This section examines how you can collect evidence for your project by obtaining information from people and recording it in some way. It is possible to obtain information from people in a number of ways. Sometimes it can be collected directly, as is the case with individual and group interviews; sometimes it can be collected indirectly by asking people to keep diaries or to complete questionnaires.

As you saw in Section 1, in order to provide evidence for your project, information needs to be collected and recorded systematically. Some of the methods suggested here may require little more than formalizing something which is already part of your teaching role or administrative routine. Others require more time – perhaps time to liaise with colleagues. You may also require additional resources, such as a tape recorder or a computer. The method(s) you select will depend on the nature of your research and what is practicable in your circumstances.

When you begin to read this section, you will already have identified some preliminary research questions you'd like to pursue. This section will help you select an appropriate method, or combination of methods, to carry out your own research activities. The following approach is suggested:

- first read sub-section 3.2, on deciding what information you need;
- skim sub-sections 3.3–3.5, on methods of obtaining information from people, to get a general understanding of which one(s) are most likely to be of use to you (use the headings to help to identify these);
- read more closely sub-section 3.6 on comparing methods: considering the pros and cons of different methods will help you to decide on an appropriate method, or combination of methods;
- finally, read closely those 'method' sub-sections (from Sections 3.3–3.5) that you wish to draw on in collecting your own information.

3.2 Deciding what information you need and how best to obtain it

You may already have some of the information you require, derived from informal discussions with your colleagues and/or from documentary sources. In deciding what new information you require, there are four points to consider: *what type* of information is required; *whom* you will approach to obtain this information; *what to tell* your informants about your study; and *how* you are going to get the information.

This sub-section considers the first three points, later sub-sections discuss how to set about obtaining information from adults and children.

What type of information is required?

Section 1 identified three different types of inquiry: exploratory, explanatory, and predictive. In this section I shall show how specific research questions relate to the purpose of your study and the type of information you need to collect. Thinking about the relationship between the purpose of your study, the information you need to collect and your research questions will help with the design of your research activities. As was pointed out in Section 1, inquiries may have more than one purpose, and the distinction between exploratory, explanatory and predictive inquiries is not always clear cut. In the examples which follow, I shall pretend, for the sake of clarity, that it is clear cut.

Example 3.1 Staff and school development

The head of an inner-city primary school wanted to initiate discussions about formulating a school development plan (SDP). She thought that this was an important step because SDPs are a recognized means of managing change in schools faced with innovations in curriculum and assessment and with the introduction of local financial management of schools (LMS). The head began with a brainstorm by the staff. This raised staff development as a major concern. As a result of this consultation the head decided to draw up a self-completion questionnaire that was given to each member of the staff and which sought information about each individual's needs for professional development.

You can see from this example that the purpose of the head's inquiry is to produce a school development plan. When staff raised their professional development as a concern, the head came up with a specific question: 'What are our priorities for staff development in relation to the SDP?' In order to answer this question she needs to find some way of surveying the attitudes and opinions of all her staff. Individual interviews would be very time-consuming and would require a great deal of timetabling and organization. Her solution is to design a questionnaire which staff can complete in their own time. Questionnaires are discussed in sub-section 3.5.

predictive studies

Now let's look at an example of a predictive study. You will remember from Section 1 that predictive studies allow one to test hypotheses about causal relationships. Example 3.2 describes a predictive study carried out by a group of advisory teachers responsible for co-ordinating induction programmes for probationary teachers. They were recruited by their LEA to investigate why some school-based induction programmes were more successful than others.

Example 3.2 What makes school-based induction effective?

An induction scheme had been in operation within the local authority for five years. An earlier authority-wide survey of probationers had indicated that probationary teachers expressed a high measure of satisfaction with the provision made for them by teachers' centres but that the provision within schools was much less satisfactory and experience was much more variable. It was apparent that probationers judged some aspects of school-based induction as being more important than others. One important factor was whether or not the probationer obtained a regular release from teaching and another one was thought to be connected with the role of the 'teacher-tutor' responsible for facilitating induction within the school. Other factors were also identified, such as whether the probationers were on temporary or permanent contracts. The induction co-ordinators needed to find out more about the relative importance of these different factors. They decided to conduct in-depth interviews with a new sample of probationers from schools in their authority. They also decided to supplement the information they gained from these interviews with their own observations in these probationers' schools.

exploratory study

hypothesis

This example shows how information resulting from an initial exploratory study (the authority-wide survey), can lead to a more focused predictive inquiry. The induction co-ordinators were able to formulate a specific hypothesis: 'Successful school-based induction programmes depend first on probationary teachers being allowed a significant amount of release time, and secondly on them establishing a good relationship with their teacher tutor'. If this hypothesis held good for a new sample of probationers, then the induction co-ordinators would be able to make some specific recommendations to their LEA.

In order to test this hypothesis they needed to establish whether the majority of their new sample of probationers identified the same factors as the probationers taking part in the original survey. As a further test the co-ordinators decided to check the information they obtained from the interviews with information from their own observations. Unlike Example 3.1, where it was not feasible for one head to interview all staff, in this example time-consuming, in-depth interviews were appropriate, as there was a team of people to do them. Sub-section 3.4 gives advice on conducting interviews and designing interview schedules. You can find out more about observation in Section 4.

explanatory study

Finally, let's take a look at an example of an explanatory study (this example comes from an ILEA report, *Developing Evaluation in the LEA*).

Example 3.3 Why are pupils dissatisfied and disaffected?

‘[Miss Ray, the teacher with responsibility for BTEC courses at Kenley Manor, was extremely concerned about the fourth-year pupils.] Throughout the year on the BTEC course, [these pupils] were dissatisfied and disaffected. At the suggestion of the evaluation consultant, the deputy head agreed to relieve Miss Ray for four afternoon sessions to investigate the causes of pupils' dissatisfaction and to suggest changes. Miss Ray was to visit a nearby school to look into their BTEC course where it was supposedly very popular. Miss Ray, who had often complained about 'directed time' and lack of management interest in the BTEC course, got so involved in the project that she gave a lot of her own time (about 45 minutes interviewing each pupil after school in addition to group discussions and meetings with staff) and produced a report with some recommendations to the senior management. The main grievance of the BTEC pupils was the low status of the course as perceived by other 4th years. The room allocated to BTEC was previously used by the special needs department and two of their teachers were probationers and according to one pupil had 'no control' over them.’

(ILEA Research and Statistics Branch, 1990, pp. 10–11)

Miss Ray's study sought an explanation of why the BTEC course was not popular so that she could make appropriate recommendations for change to the senior management team in her school. Miss Ray obviously needed to sample pupils' opinions on the course. Individual interviews with pupils in her own school provided her with this information. To gain a broader picture, however, she was advised to compare her school's course with a similar, but more successful, course at another school. She needed to find out how the other school's BTEC course was taught and group discussions with staff provided this information. Sub-section 3.4 gives advice on interviewing children and discusses how to manage and record group interviews.

open-ended interview questions

closed questions

When you have decided what sort of information to collect, you will need to think about the types of questions to ask your informants. In this section, I shall make a distinction between *open-ended questions*, which allow your informants to give you information that they feel is relevant, and *closed questions*, which impose a limitation on the responses your informants can make. This is a useful distinction, though it isn't always clear cut (people don't always respond as you intend them to). Open-ended questions will provide you with *qualitative* information. Closed questions may provide information that you can *quantify* in some way (you can say how many people favour a certain option, or you can make a numerical comparison between different groups of informants).

informant's diary

Information that you collect in the form of diaries or logs kept by others, and much of the information from face-to-face interviews, is likely to be qualitative. It is possible to design questionnaires so that you quantify the information they provide if you wish. (See also 'The qualitative/quantitative distinction' in sub-section 1.5.)

Who will provide the information?

As you can see from the three examples discussed above, deciding who can provide you with information is as important as deciding what information you need. You would have to make similar decisions in all three cases about who to approach, how many people to approach, when to approach them and so on.

You first need to identify who has the information that you require, then to obtain access. Setting up interviews, arranging group meetings, and getting permission to interview pupils or staff in another school can eat into valuable research time before you have even collected any information. You will need to consider this alongside the time which you have available for data collection (carrying out interviews, chasing up questionnaires and so on), which is also time-consuming. You may need to limit your study and not collect all the information that you would ideally like.

validity

Consider carefully whether the compromises you consider will undermine either the validity or reliability of your research. In connection with the former you have to be assured that the information you obtain does address the questions you pose. How can you be sure of this? You will need to weigh up various approaches at this stage. One approach may be more time-consuming than another, but the information may be more valid. Do not compromise where the validity of your study is at risk.

reliability

sample

As far as the reliability of the information is concerned, you need to be sure that your informants are representative of the population you are investigating. If you feel you might be compromising the reliability of the data by covering too wide a population, limit your research by focusing on one particular group. It is important that you have a sufficient number in your sample if you wish to make general claims that apply to a larger population. Make a note of any limitations in the size and nature of your sample at the stage of data collection and be sure to take these into account when you come to the analysis and writing your report. If, for example, you can only approach a limited number of people for information you will have to be very tentative about your findings.

When deciding who to approach, refer back to your research question(s). In Example 3.1 above, you can see how important it would be to have the initial reactions of *all* members of the staff to the formation of a school development plan, and I discussed why questionnaires were a more appropriate means of data collection in this case.

In Example 3.2, there would need to be a sufficiently large number of probationers in the study to be able to make generalizations about the probationers' experience of induction with any degree of confidence. It would also be important for those selected to be representative of the total population of probationers. If the intention was to compare the experience of different groups of probationers, for example probationers in primary and secondary schools, it would be necessary to select a sample representative of both these sectors.

In Examples 3.1 and 3.2, identifying who to ask for information was straightforward. In Example 3.3, however, it was important for the teacher concerned to identify key informants both inside and outside her school. She was aided by her local evaluation consultant who was able to tell her about a nearby school where the BTEC course was popular with pupils. Sometimes it is relatively easy to find out who is likely to be of help to you just by asking around. If you draw a blank with informal contacts, however, you may find that key people can be identified by looking through policy documents, records, and lists of the names of members of various committees. Section 6 gives advice on how to get access to documentary information, and also gives the names and addresses of a number of national educational organizations.

What to tell people

confidentiality

Collecting information from people raises ethical issues which need to be considered from the outset. Whether you can offer a guarantee of confidentiality about the information you are requesting will influence the presentation of your findings. Some points to consider are:

bias

- *Should you tell people what your research is really about?* Bound up with this question is your desire to be honest about your research interest. At the same time, however, you do not want to influence or bias the information which people give you. Sometimes informants, particularly pupils in school, think there are 'right' answers to interview questions. One way of getting over this is to make a very general statement about the focus of your research before the interview and then to share your findings with your informants at a later stage.
- *Should you identify the sources of your information when you write up your research?* In Example 3.2, the study of probationary teachers, it was fairly straightforward to offer a guarantee of confidentiality to those who participated: large numbers of probationers were involved and anonymity could be ensured. Where practitioners are doing research within their own institution, as in Example 3.3, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality can be more of a problem. In this example, the names of the teacher and school have been changed, but you can imagine that in a local context it would be fairly easy to identify people and institutions. One way of dealing with this problem is to show your informants your record of what they have said, tell them the context in which you want to use it and seek their consent to that use. In discussing your interpretation of the data with them you will be able to check your understanding of the situation with theirs. Any comments that they make may also furnish you with additional information.

Deciding what information you need, who to ask and what degree of confidentiality you can offer informants will affect how you plan your research. Try to make some *preliminary* decisions on these points before reading the sub-sections that follow.

3.3 Keeping diaries

researcher's diary

informant's diary

Section 1 discussed how practitioner-researchers can use research diaries to record their own observations and reflections. It is also possible to get other people to keep diaries or logs over a set period of time and to use these written accounts as a source of data. This method relies very heavily on the co-operation of the informants. Its attraction as a method of data collection is that it can provide quite detailed information about situations which you may not have easy access to, such as someone else's classroom. Burgess (1981) gives some useful guidance as to how diaries in particular might be used as research instruments:

> ... Researchers might ... ask informants to keep diaries about what they do on particular days and in particular lessons. Teachers and pupils could be asked to record the activities in which they engage and the people with whom they interact. In short, what they do (and do not do) in particular social situations. In these circumstances, subjects of the research become more than observers and informants: they are co-researchers as they keep chronological records of their activities.
>
> The diarists (whether they are teachers or pupils) will need to be given a series of instructions to write a diary. These might take the form of notes and suggestions for keeping a continuous record that answers the questions: When? Where? What? Who? Such questions help to focus down the observations that can be recorded. Meanwhile, a diary may be sub-divided into chronological periods within the day so that records may be kept for the morning, the afternoon and the evening. Further sub-divisions can be made in respect of diaries directed towards activities that occur within the school and classroom. Here, the day may be sub-divided into the divisions of the formal timetable with morning, afternoon and lunch breaks. Indeed within traditional thirty-five or forty-minute lessons further sub-divisions can be made in respect of the activities that occur within particular time zones.
>
> (Burgess, 1984, pp. 202–203)

The form the diary takes (whether it is highly structured, partially structured, or totally unstructured) and what other instructions are given to the informant depends on what is appropriate in relation to your research question(s).

Often, asking people to keep a log or record of their activities can be just as useful to you, and not as time-consuming for them, as asking for a diary. Logs can provide substantial amounts of information. They tend to be organized chronologically, and can detail the course and number of events over brief periods of time (a day or a week), or they can provide less detailed records over longer time intervals (a term or even a whole year). Examples 3.4 and 3.5 illustrate some possible uses for diaries and logs.

Example 3.5 on page 44 (drawn from Enright, 1981, pp. 37–51) shows how a diary can be used to explore certain phenomena in detail. It was not desirable in this instance to be prescriptive about what should be recorded or to impose any structure on the diary. This diary was kept by an individual teacher for his own use but the observations were shared with another teacher who also taught the class.

Example 3.4 Using a staff log to support a home–school liaison project

A junior school (with 130 children in six classes) had obtained an INSET grant of £1,000 for a one-year project entitled 'home–school liaison' within the school development plan. There was a history of lack of liaison with parents and the teaching staff were aware that this needed to be rectified. The head hoped that the liaison proposed would bring about changes in other areas of the school. The school had a stable teaching staff but there had been many changes at management level. There was some discontent, discouragement and disunity among the teaching staff.

Staff kept a log for one year in which they recorded initiatives designed to involve parents in school life (shown in Figure 2 opposite). Positive and negative reactions were also recorded and discussed. The log provided the staff with a cumulative record which helped the reviewing, planning and formative evaluation of the project.

2 May	appointment of teacher with special responsibilities (incentive A) for SDP. She will undertake 3 hours home visiting weekly and co-ordinate all the work.
4 May	social evening: parents, teacher, governors and friends. Discussion (informal): development planned. shared reading. friends association (including community).
June - July	6 Wednesday afternoons. Topic: Olympic games. children split across ages into 8 groups with a teacher. parents invited to join us each week.
Activities offered:	fresco production, computer skills, flags and design, sports and athletics, gymnastic dance, science themes and construction skills. history of Olympic games and sportswear design. sports equipment and rules (practical and art).
19 July	Consultant Evaluator met full staff for initial review of progress with SDP. SDP as part of full school learning. priority to set up a new room for parents. positive spin-off of shared open afternoons. Children had enjoyed these. Discussion about the importance of strategies to bring parents into school - to develop a coherent and common approach to the children's learning.
October - November	6 open afternoons with cross-school groupings and parents invited. Skills: wood work. computer skills. puppet making. patch-work. cookery. art. model construction.

Autumn term: Development of shared-reading scheme. Work on class reading corners. Meetings with parents. Home visiting continued throughout the term.

13 October:	Consultant Evaluator met head teacher and deputy head. Objective discussion on events so far. Problem - of involving parents. slow pace of change. facilitating staff reflections.
26 January	Consultant Evaluator met head teacher and deputy head. Thoughts about National Curriculum and overall long term planning across curriculum areas. what has been achieved/learned? where do we focus next? has the quality of education been improved for the children? has the SDP contributed to needs of staff/school/wider community.

Figure 2 Part of the school's log.

Example 3.5 Keeping a diary to share with a colleague

The teacher kept a diary, written up in considerable detail every evening, over a seven-week period at the beginning of the summer term. He repeated the exercise the following year, for the same period with the same class. He shared the information with another teacher who taught the same class and who added her own comments.

The detailed information recorded in the diaries enabled the teachers to explore questions and illuminated key issues which enabled some conclusions to be reached. For example, some insight was gained as to how good discussion among children can be effected.

In both of these examples the log and diary were kept over a considerable period of time, and yielded a lot of valuable information. Diaries and logs do not have to be kept for long periods in order to be useful, however. Asking people to keep a record over a few days or a couple of weeks can be just as revealing. Also, it may already be the practice in your school for teachers to keep *informal* day-to-day records of children's progress or what happens in their classroom. Gaining access to these accounts and just looking at a limited sample over a week or so can provide you with a great deal of information. *Formal* written records, such as developmental guides or observations made of children's behaviour, are highly confidential, and you will probably need to seek formal permission in order to use them as a source of evidence.

confidentiality

Older children may also be asked to keep diaries. In Example 3.3, Miss Ray could have asked a selected number of her BTEC pupils to keep diaries of what happened during their lesson times as an alternative to interviewing them. As with all practitioner research, it is important to respect people's rights to anonymity and confidentiality when asking them to share their diaries and logs with you. This is just as important a principle when dealing with children as when dealing with adults.

3.4 Face-to-face interviewing

Interviewing is one of the most popular methods of obtaining information from people, and researchers frequently have to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews as opposed to questionnaires. In general, the attraction of the interview is that it is a two-way process which allows you to interact with the informant(s), thus facilitating a more probing investigation than could be undertaken with a questionnaire. The use of individual interviews, however, is very time-consuming.

I set out below some general advice on the use of interviews, whether individual or group. The approach you adopt will depend on the nature of your research questions and the time and facilities that you have available.

Individual interviews

When you interview someone you are establishing a relationship with them, however briefly. Interviews are not simply a means of extracting 'pure' information from someone, or eliciting their 'real' beliefs and attitudes. What your informant tells you will depend upon their perceptions of you and of your inquiry, upon how they interpret your questions, and upon how they wish to present themselves. This is not to suggest that your informant is deceitful, but that they will provide you with the version of the information that they think is appropriate.

With this qualification, it is possible to provide some practical guidance on planning and conducting interviews.

interview schedule

Designing the interview schedule

1 First, set out the information you require. Depending on your research question, this may be a very detailed list or it may simply be some broad areas which you expect to cover in the interview (an *aide-mémoire*).

2 Place the information or areas in some logical sequence. Begin with a non-threatening question which will help to put the interviewee at ease. Leave the more sensitive questions to the end.

confidentiality

3 Decide on a preamble which will tell your informant what the research is about, and say how you anticipate using the information. If you are able to do so, give a guarantee about confidentiality. Whether you can do this or not you should in any case offer the interviewee the opportunity to see either your transcript (if you are using a tape recorder) or that part of your report which uses the information they have provided. At the end of the interview ask the interviewee whether there is anything they would like to add to what they have said. Also, ask whether there is anything further that they would like to ask you about the study, thank them for their co-operation, and tell them when you will be in touch again to let them know the outcome.

4 Consider the phrasing of the questions. Do not use 'leading' questions. Use language which is easily understood by the informant(s). Do not use multiple questions. Only address one question at a time.

For example, a leading question might be: 'How often do you punish your pupils for late attendance?' A more appropriate non-leading version of this question would be, 'How do you deal with problems of late attendance in your classroom?' An example of a multiple question would be, 'Does your child do any writing at home, and if so what do you do when she or he asks you how to spell a word?' This question would be much better dealt with in two parts, 'Does your child do any writing at home?' and 'What do you do when your child asks you how to spell a word?'

open-ended interview questions

closed questions

5 Decide whether to use open-ended or closed questions or a combination of the two. Closed questions limit the range and type of answer that people can give. Often people are asked to choose one of a set of pre-determined options as an answer to the question. For example, a survey of how English primary school teachers plan their work might include the following question:

When planning your work for the term do you:

(a) first choose which national curriculum statements of attainment you wish to cover and then plan your work round them?

(b) plan your work first and then fit the statements of attainment to your chosen activities or topic?

(c) neither of these?

Because closed questions limit the range of possible answers, analysing the information you collect is much easier than when people have given you a wide variety of answers to each question. This can be important if you have to interview a large number of people. The other side of the coin is, of course, that the alternatives you provide may not contain answers which reflect your interviewee's attitudes, opinions and practice. Your interviewee may choose the option which most nearly matches their viewpoint, or they may choose an option like (c) above.

In either case, the validity of your interview data is at risk, because you are failing to get some information people would provide if they had the opportunity.

An open-ended version of the question above might be phrased:

> When planning your work for each term, how do you make provision for covering the appropriate national curriculum statements of attainment?

Open-ended questions have several advantages. People are free to respond as they wish, and to give as much detail as they feel is appropriate. Where their answers are not clear the interviewer can ask for clarification; and more detailed and accurate answers should build up a more insightful and valid picture of the topic. Open-ended interviews are, however, likely to take longer than those based on a series of closed questions. You will need to tape-record the interview (if possible) or take detailed rough notes, and transcribe the tapes or write up your notes afterwards. You will obtain large amounts of data which you may later find difficult to categorize and analyse.

You may wish to use open-ended questions, followed by a series of prompts if necessary, as well as some more closed questions.

6 Once you have decided on your questions you will find it helpful if you can consult other people about the wording of the questions. Their comments might point out ambiguities and difficulties with phrasing which you have not spotted yourself. It is always wise to conduct a pilot and revise the schedule before you start interviewing for real.

7 If you are working collaboratively, each interviewer needs to conduct a pilot run. You will need to compare notes to see that you both interpret the questions in the same way.

8 Finally, you must consider how you will process and analyse the data.

Setting up the interview

1 First, you must obtain permission to interview pupils, staff, or other personnel.

2 Next you need to think how to approach the people concerned to arrange the interviews. Will you use a letter, the phone or approach them in person?

3 Where will the interview take place? How long will it take? You need to negotiate these arrangements with those concerned.

4 Will you use a tape recorder? If so, you should seek the permission of the interviewee to use it. Will you need an electric socket or rely on batteries? Is the recording likely to be affected by extraneous noise? All these things need to be planned in advance.

Conducting the interview

1 Before you actually carry out an interview check whether the time you have arranged is still convenient. If it is not, and this can frequently be the case, you will have to adjust your schedule.

2 As an interviewer, you need to be able to manage the interaction and also to respond to the interests of the interviewee. It can be useful to indicate to the interviewee at the start of the interview the broad areas that you wish to cover and, if the need arises, glance down to indicate that you want to move on to another area. Also, allow for silences – don't rush the interview. It is important to establish a good relationship with the person you are interviewing.

3 If you are using a tape recorder, check from time to time that it is recording.

After the interview

1 Reflect on how the interview went. Did you establish good rapport with the interviewee? Did you feel that the information you obtained was affected by your relationship with the interviewee? In what way? (Consider, for example, your sex, age, status and ethnicity in relation to those of the interviewee.)

2 Make a note of any problems experienced, such as frequent interruptions.

3 Record any observations which you felt were significant in relation to the general ambience of the interview.

4 Make a note of any information which was imparted after the interview was formally completed. Decide how you will treat this information.

5 Write and thank the interviewees for their help with your study and promise feedback as appropriate.

Interviewing children

Interviewing children may be a problem if you are also their teacher. Children will be affected by the way they normally relate to you. It can be difficult for them (and you) to step back from this and adopt a different role. If children regard you as an authority figure, it will be hard to adopt a more egalitarian relationship in an interview. They may also be unwilling to talk about certain subjects. It is particularly important to try out interviews with children, maybe comparing different contexts, or individual and group interviews to see which works best.

Below I have set out a few points of guidance on interviewing children.

open-ended interview questions

1 Open-ended questions often work best. Decide what questions you would like to ask in advance, but don't stick too rigidly to them once the child really gets going. Making the child feel that you are listening and responding to his or her answers is more important than sticking rigidly to your schedule.

2 Children are very observant and very honest. It is important that they feel at ease, so that they can talk freely. Deciding where to conduct the interview, therefore, is very important. Very young children may find it easier to talk to you in the classroom where you can relate the discussion to concrete objects, work on the wall, etc. Older children may be easier to interview on their own away from the gaze of their peers.

3 Decide whether to interview the child alone or in a pair. Children are sometimes franker alone, but may feel more relaxed with a friend.

4 You may need to ask someone to interview the child on your behalf (or arrange for someone to look after the class while you do the interviewing).

5 Start off by telling the child why you want to interview her or him. Here it is very important that you explain:

(a) that the interview is not a hidden test of some kind;

(b) that you are genuinely interested in what he or she has to say and want to learn from it (so often in the classroom teachers ask questions which are not for this purpose – children don't expect it);

confidentiality

(c) that what he or she says will be treated in confidence and not discussed with anyone else without permission.

6 During the interview either make notes or tape record (if the child is in agreement).

7 If you make notes, the best technique is to scribble as much as possible verbatim, using private shorthand, continuing to be a good listener meanwhile (difficult but not impossible). Then within 24 hours read through your notes and fill them out. Remember, if you are not a good listener the child will stop talking!

8 After the interview, show the child your notes and ask if it will be all right for you to discuss what has been said with other people. Be ready to accept the answer 'no' to part of the discussion (though this is rare in practice).

Group interviews

The guidance given above on individual interviews and interviewing children is also relevant to group interviews. You should, therefore, read all this material if you are contemplating using group interviews.

A group interview may be used in preference to individual interviews in some situations. Children may prefer to be interviewed in groups. Or there may be a naturally occurring group (e.g., members of a working group) that you wish to interview together. Group interviews may be useful at the beginning of your research, enabling you to test some ideas or gauge reactions to new developments or proposals. Initial group interviews of this nature can give you broad coverage and generate a lot of information and, perhaps, new ideas. Often in this situation the answers from one participant trigger off responses from another, giving you a range of ideas and suggestions. This can be more productive than interviewing individuals before you have sufficient knowledge of the area of investigation. Much depends on the time you have available for your research. Using a group whose knowledge or expertise you can tap can be a fruitful and time-saving means of obtaining information. There are, however, some points to bear in mind when running group interviews.

The group dynamic

A group is different from the sum of its parts. The composition of the group is important. Do people know one another? Will some people be in awe of others' opinions? May some fear a hidden agenda?

Groups, it is said, typically 'form, storm, norm, perform and mourn' (Mulford *et al.*, 1980). You need to take this into account for group interviews to be successful. For the group to 'form' there needs to be some way of including everyone, making them feel that they are members of the group. Each person needs to say something within the first five minutes, if only to introduce themselves. Typically there follows a period of 'storming', when the group is working out the issues of power and control and when personalities emerge. A 'brainstorm' of issues could be quite fruitful at this stage. 'Norming' happens as people settle down and recognize that it is permissible to hold different opinions. The group is then ready to 'perform' and the questions on your schedule can be addressed. There should be a feeling of constructive activity. As the interview nears its end, the stage of 'mourning' is reached. This is a vital point. It is a process that has to be managed by the person convening the interview to indicate to the group that it is almost complete. At this point you could ask whether there is anything else that anyone wants to say, or whether there is anything else that they want to ask about your study or the interview itself.

A good group is one that reaches the 'performing' stage. The most basic ingredient for this to happen is for there to be an atmosphere of trust within the group. Recognizing the natural stages in the formation of a group, however, will help you facilitate the formation of a good group. It will also help you to sort out the information obtained at different stages of the interview. Not all information will be useful to you. The comments and responses people make during the 'storming' and 'performing' stages are likely to be more valuable than those occurring during the 'forming' or 'mourning' stages.

The composition of the group

A group should number no more than eight people. You need to consider whom you invite to participate. You may wish to ask people who are likely to have different points of view, as such interviews are useful for exploring issues.

Organizational factors

The group interview needs to be arranged so that it will not be disturbed. Contextual factors, such as where you hold the interview and the seating arrangements are also very important. You need to consider whether you want to create an informal friendly atmosphere, or a more formal, 'round-table', 'business-like' atmosphere. Who should sit next to each other? Where are you going to sit? And so on.

Recording information

Consider how you will record the discussion. It is much harder to transcribe a tape of a group interview than of an individual interview, but, if the group agrees, it is still worth the effort to record it. If you can arrange it, you might consider asking another person to take notes and look after the tape recorder for you, leaving you free to concentrate on establishing a rapport with the group.

It is worth practising recording and transcribing before recording your actual interview. You may find it hard to tell what is happening, or who is speaking, especially if more than one person speaks at a time. Asking people to identify themselves before they speak can make transcribing easier. (See also sub-section 4.7 on transcribing from audio- and video-recordings.)

Managing the discussion

In a group interview, it can be difficult to ensure that you cover what you had planned and still allow for some flexibility. You will need good memory and concentration so that you can remember what has been covered and link in new topics and issues. Try also to involve all members of the group. If you feel that the discussion is moving too far away from your brief, use a deferring statement – say you have a number of questions on this subject that you will come to later, but that you would like to explore A and B now. Avoid getting locked into a discussion with one person as this isolates the others. You have to balance breadth with depth. Watch for non-verbal cues from members of the group who are showing signs of frustration or boredom.

Many of the observations discussed above draw on the experience and expertise developed by Social and Community Planning Research (see Robson, 1986).

Now let's take a look at some practical examples of the use of interviews. Look first at the project report by Ann Ryding which appears at the end of the *Module Guide*. In her section on research methods she describes how she set up some interviews with a group of fourth-year junior school children to explore how they might contribute to a paired-reading scheme.

In Example 3.6, from Kingsmead Primary School in London, parents, teachers and children were interviewed individually following a series of conferences which had been set up in the school. The ILEA Primary Language Record handbook (ILEA/ CLPE, 1988) recommends holding language and literacy conferences to give children the chance to talk to their teachers about their experiences, achievements, likes and dislikes as language users. The conferences help teachers make formative assessments of children's progress, find out about their concerns, suggest new learning strategies, and so on. At Kingsmead it had been decided to try including children's parents in these conferences. Here members of staff wanted to evaluate how useful the conferences had been to all concerned.

Example 3.6
Using interviews to evaluate language and literacy conferences

Questions asked of parents

1. What did you think of the Conference?
2. Successful because_______
   Unsuccessful because______
3. Did you have any fears about it?
4. Did it change your understanding of what happens in school?
5. After seeing the teacher, has your child been affected in any way?
6. Would you repeat this exercise or change it?

Questions asked of children

1. What happened when your mum/dad got home after the Conference?
2. Will this meeting between your parent and your teacher help you in school?
3. After the meeting, did it change you in how you should behave in school?
4. Do you think it's a good idea to have meetings with your parents and teachers about you?
5. Do you want another one?

Questions asked of teachers

1. Was the P.T.C. Conference useful?
2. Would you like to repeat the exercise again?
3. Would you change the format?
4. Has it taught you anything about the parents?
5. Has it taught you anything about the children?
6. Will the information affect and influence your teaching?

As you can see, Example 3.6 uses fairly informal open-ended interview techniques, but the interview schedules were given a standard format because it was important that each child, parent and teacher was asked the same set of questions. As you can imagine, this example involved considerable numbers of people and took quite some time to carry out. An alternative to interviewing the parents and staff might have been to give them written questionnaires, and it is to these that we turn next.

3.5 Using questionnaires

Employing written questionnaires which people can take away and fill out in their own time is generally seen as fairly economical with time. However, this method does assume, first, that the respondents understand the questions in the terms intended and that they understand what information is required; and, secondly, that they have this information and are willing to divulge it. If the first condition is not met then the data will not be valid and worth processing. If the second condition is not met, and your questionnaire has a low response, the information you obtain may come from an unrepresentative sample of the population you want to survey, and will be unreliable. In either case, the value of any findings is undermined. It is a fairly skilled task to design a questionnaire relevant to your research question(s), and yet appropriate for the people to whom it will be administered.

Quite often you will need to weigh up the relative advantages and disadvantages of using questionnaires as opposed to interviews. The use of a questionnaire administered by the researcher *'in situ'* discussed below has some of the features of an interview. This method allows you to interact with the respondents and explain what is expected of them and, if necessary, clarify the questions. The response rate for *in situ* questionnaires is much higher than for postal questionnaires.

Below I shall consider some general points about the use of questionnaires, whether administered individually or *in situ* with a group. What form your questionnaire takes and how you administer it will depend upon your research question(s) and the people you want information from. I shall give some examples of different types of questionnaire towards the end of this sub-section.

Questionnaires administered individually

Some preliminary points to consider

The following considerations will influence what you ask and the way you ask it.

- How will you administer the questionnaire? Is it to be posted, or, perhaps, handed to colleagues? If it is for people you know this will affect the style of the questionnaire and the approach you adopt.
- How do you persuade people to respond? Who will own the information – you, your department, your school? How will it be used? Of what value could it be to the respondents? Don't ask for more information than you need, and don't expect too much of the respondents or you may not gain their co-operation.
- Will the questionnaire be anonymous? If it is, is this likely to affect the way in which people respond? How will responses from staff be affected if they know that the head of department, head or principal might see these? Even where questionnaires are anonymous, it may still be possible to identify individuals by their answers which may indicate their role within the institution or local authority. In this case, how will you treat this data? As always you need to be scrupulous about preserving people's anonymity and/or confidences.

- When is the questionnaire to be administered? For example, suppose you want to evaluate an in-service course, at what point do you use a questionnaire? Before the course, during the course or on completion? How will you deal with those people who drop out? You could consider using a telephone follow-up with a small sample of those who do not complete the course to find out why.
- How are you going to process the information and analyse it? Consider the facilities, the time and skills available. If you are going to collect quantitative data you may need to use some sort of statistical analysis. If this is the case you should get advice from your tutor before you collect the data. If you are going to collect qualitative information, how will you process it? Section 5 of this handbook gives advice on these issues.
- It is useful to find out whether any studies have been undertaken previously in your area of interest. What did they find? Could you use or adapt any questionnaires employed before? It is most unlikely that you will be able to use exactly the same questionnaire, but it is common practice to use other researchers' questions where these are relevant to your study as this allows you to compare your findings with those of other people.
- Have you made arrangements to pilot your questionnaire? This will help you spot any likely problems in administering the questionnaire, and any difficulties or ambiguities in question wording.

Devising questions

- As a first step you should list the information you require: sort this under broad headings, then identify specific items.
- When you start formulating questions you must take care over choice of language: don't make this too complex, or too simple for your respondents. You should avoid obscure terminology, acronyms and abbreviations. Don't use vague or over-general terms that are likely to be interpreted differently by different people, e.g. 'democracy', an 'effective' course. Sometimes it is useful to break down the idea you are trying to get at into items that typify what you mean. For example, if you were interested in how democratic decision-making processes were in a school, you might identify several specific questions that you felt would provide evidence of this, such as:
  (a) Are parents involved in any of the school's key decision-making processes? (If 'yes', which one(s)?)
  (b) Are children involved in any of the school's key decision-making processes? (If 'yes', which one(s)?)
  (c) How are your governors elected?
  (d) At meetings does everyone have a chance to have their say?

  Remember that it is worth trying out individual questions on others to get the wording right, as well as trying out the whole questionnaire.
- Are there equal opportunities implications to consider? Are there, for example, standard ways in your local authority of asking people for information about ethnicity and sex?
- Will the replies tell you what you want to know? How do you know? If they do not, then this will affect the validity of your data and undermine the whole research exercise. Check for bias and leading questions.
- As with interviews your questions should be clear, concise and unambiguous. You should try not to use multiple questions, and should avoid double negatives.
- You should consider grouping questions about similar issues together.

- Sometimes you may want to use a four- or five-point scale as a way of getting answers to your questions. For example, you can ask your respondents whether a particular event happens:

  Never, occasionally, frequently, always. (Please ring the term that most nearly applies.)

  Example 3.9 (opposite) provides an illustration of scales used in a questionnaire designed for young children.
- Are you using 'closed' or 'open-ended' questions? When it comes to written questionnaires issued to a large number of respondents use the latter sparingly – they take a lot of time to process.

The design of the questionnaire

- Use only one side of the paper.
- Give the questionnaire a heading showing what it is about.
- If the questionnaire is not to be administered personally, you should provide a covering letter or a paragraph of introduction at the beginning.
- Keep the questionnaire as short as possible. Space out the items. (Dense print is off-putting and will affect the response rate.)
- Do you need to insert a column on the right-hand side to help you process and analyse the information?
- Give clear instructions in capital letters, e.g. 'TICK' and 'WRITE IN'.
- Where the information you are requesting is of a sensitive nature you should give people the choice to opt out. For example, if asking for the ethnic background of the respondent you could have a category 'I prefer not to answer this question'.
- Order the questions so that the straightforward non-controversial questions come first and the more sensitive ones last.
- Try to order the questions so that they come in a logical sequence.
- You may need a 'Don't know' or 'Not applicable' category.
- It may be useful to have an 'Other' category with a 'PLEASE SPECIFY'.
- It is a nice gesture to finish the questionnaire with 'THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP WITH OUR STUDY'.
- Always review your questionnaire periodically in the light of the information gathered and any feedback respondents provide about difficulties in completing it.

Questionnaires are never perfect. Ideally they should be custom-built for a specific purpose. Beware of 'off-the-shelf' versions – as pointed out above, these will require adaptation, a pilot and (usually) revision.

Questionnaires in situ with a group

The guidance above on questionnaires administered individually also applies to questionnaires given to a group or class *in situ*. Here I shall consider one or two points that are specific to questionnaires so administered.

There are many advantages to the practitioner-researcher in administering questionnaires to a class or a group. In the first place, there is an enormous saving in time and possibly also in cost. Secondly, the response rate is almost certainly going to be much higher and the information obtained will be much more representative of the population and is, therefore, likely to be more reliable. Thirdly, if you administer questionnaires yourself, you will be alerted to any difficulties people experience with the wording or format. You will be able to explain to the respondents what is required. If the exercise is not taken seriously you will know that the data you have collected should be discarded as they are unreliable. This could happen if a class was disruptive, or if another member of staff acted to influence pupils' attitudes towards the study, as in Example 3.7.

Example 3.7 Problems in administering a questionnaire

A researcher wanted to discover whether a course on job opportunities would influence secondary school pupils' attitudes towards different types of work. In particular, she was interested in whether pupils' attitudes towards women's and men's domestic and work roles would change if they were taught subjects and acquired skills in 'non-traditional' fields (for instance, girls in CDT and boys in 'homecraft'). She devised the questionnaire shown in Figure 3, which was given *in situ* to classes of secondary pupils before they started their course on job opportunities. Another, identical, questionnaire was given on completion of the course. The skills pupils were learning about in the course related to the list of jobs given in the questionnaire.

SECTION II

The following questions are about jobs which people do outside of the home. Again for each job we would like you to say whether YOU THINK it is

very much a MAN'S job
more of a MAN's job
either a MAN or a WOMAN's job
more of a WOMAN's job
very much a WOMAN's job

There are no right or wrong answers. It is not a test, it is what YOU THINK which is important. For each job tick the box which most nearly matches YOUR VIEW.

	very much a man's job	more of a man's job	either a man or a woman's job	more of a woman's job	very much a woman's job
garage mechanic (repairing cars)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
electrician (wiring a house)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
painter and decorator	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
printer (printing books)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 3
Questionnaire on gender attitudes (from ILEA Research and Statistics Branch, 1985a).

piloting

When piloting the course in a secondary school the researcher was present when a male class teacher who had been asked to administer the pilot questionnaires gave them out and instructed the class to 'fill in this rubbish and get on with some work'. The researcher realized that if the information in the main study was to be reliable then the administration of the questionnaires *in situ* had to be undertaken by the person responsible for the evaluation, *not* the class or subject teacher.

There are some particular points you need to consider when using questionnaires *in situ*.

- *Organizational factors*: There needs to be a suitable place and adequate time to complete the questionnaire.
- *The person(s) administering the questionnaire*: It will be clear from Example 3.7 that, ideally, you should administer the questionnaire yourself. Where this is not possible, you need to brief an alternative (suitable) person.
- *Absentees*: While the response rate is likely to be very high for questionnaires administered in this way, you still need to take account of people who are absent on the day the questionnaire is given. This absence could bias the information you obtain. For example, if a study of absenteeism in the fifth year were undertaken in which pupils were asked about their attitudes to the curriculum, the staff and other pupils, it is likely that the pupils present in class would be unrepresentative of the fifth-year group as a whole. You would need to follow up pupils who were absent on the day of the survey to obtain their views.

Let us examine some examples of the use of questionnaires by teacher-researchers in the field.

Example 3.8 Questionnaire to assess staff development needs

During the production of a school development plan, it became apparent that there was a need for information about the staff's perceptions of their needs for professional development.

The questionnaire in Figure 4 was designed by the staff development committee and the format agreed at a staff meeting. It was circulated to individual staff members through the internal mail.

Name:__________________ Role:__________________

Date:__________________

SECTION A

1. In the context of your present job description which aspects of your role give you most satisfaction and why? Please be as specific as you can.

2. Which aspects of your job description do you find most irksome and why?

3. Are there parts of your present job description for which you would like more training? Please give details of why and how you feel those needs could be met.

Figure 4 A staff development questionnaire (from Hilary Street, London).

Example 3.9 is part of a questionnaire which was given *in situ* to eight-year-olds. Here the researcher was interested in whether the adoption of a developmental approach to teaching literacy would have an impact on children's enjoyment of reading and writing. The questionnaire was administered jointly by the children's class teacher and the researcher. As you can see, it did not necessitate any writing by the children. Children were asked a question for each numbered row (e.g., 'How much do you like writing a story?) and they had to tick the face indicating their response.

Example 3.9 Questionnaire administered to primary school pupils

Evaluation: INSET provided by the Language Development Team
Example of a 'Smiley' Questionnaire for 8-year old pupils.
Children were asked a question for each numbered row - eg. 'How much do you like writing a story?'

Source: The Hackney Literacy Study ILEA RS 1175/38

(ILEA Research and Statistics Branch, 1988)

Example 3.10 is taken from a postal questionnaire sent to a sample of probationary teachers. This postal questionnaire was later followed up by in-depth interviews with a new sample of probationary teachers, as mentioned in Example 3.2.

Example 3.10
Questionnaire on an induction programme for probationary teachers

We would like to know whether any of the following aspects of living and teaching in London are causing you difficulty:

	Much difficulty	Some difficulty	Little difficulty	No difficulty at all	
Having suitable living accommodation	☐	☐	☐	☐	(56)
Having sufficient money	☐	☐	☐	☐	(57)
Transport difficulties	☐	☐	☐	☐	(58)
Tiredness, feeling fatigued	☐	☐	☐	☐	(59)
Lack of social life	☐	☐	☐	☐	(60)
Holding the children's interest	☐	☐	☐	☐	(61)
Discipline problems	☐	☐	☐	☐	(62)
Conflict with school staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	(63)
Getting professional advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	(64)
Obtaining suitable teaching materials	☐	☐	☐	☐	(65)
Devising a suitable classroom organisation	☐	☐	☐	☐	(66)
Other (specify)	☐	☐	☐	☐	(67)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION WITH OUR SURVEY OF EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

(ILEA Research and Statistics Branch, 1985b)

These examples provide a range of questionnaire styles and techniques. Some, like the one in Example 3.8, are relatively open-ended and unstructured and will provide qualitative information. Others, such as the one in Example 3.10, are very highly structured and will give you quantitative information. The type of questionnaire you design will depend very much on who you want to get information from and what your research question is. Advice on analysing both quantitative and qualitative information from questionnaires is given in Section 5.

3.6 Reviewing methods

It will be clear from the examples above that the various methods of obtaining information from people – diaries, interviews and questionnaires – can take very different forms. Each method can be structured, semi-structured, or completely unstructured.

Which method you decide to adopt, and what form it will take, will depend very much on your research question(s) and on whether your study is predictive, exploratory or explanatory. If your study is predictive or explanatory, then it is likely that the instruments you adopt will be more structured than if it is exploratory.

Remember that adopting more than one method is often advantageous. Your prime consideration is the most appropriate method given your circumstances and the resources available (your time and that of colleagues, the expertise required and, possibly, also finance and equipment). I set out below the main advantages of the approaches discussed in this section and also some of the pitfalls associated with them.

Ways of collecting information

Diaries and logs

What the method can do	*Limitations*
Enables you to gain information about events you cannot observe.	You may get different amounts and types of information from different respondents.
Can be used flexibly	Probably time-consuming to analyse.

Individual interviews

What the method can do	*Limitations*
Does not run the risk (as with questionnaires) of low response rate.	Takes time to administer.
Allows you to probe particular issues in depth.	Respondents will be affected by their perceptions of you and your research, and what responses they feel are appropriate.
Likely to generate a lot of information.	Takes time to write up and analyse.

Group interviews

What the method can do	*Limitations*
More economical on time than several individual interviews.	It may be hard to manage a group discussion.
Some respondents (e.g. children) may prefer to be interviewed as a group.	Respondents will be affected by others present in the interview.
May allow you to 'brain-storm' and explore ideas.	Note-taking may not be easy. Writing up notes and analysis is relatively time-consuming.

Questionnaires (posted and handed out)

What the method can do	*Limitations*
Questionnaires do not take much time to administer, so useful for a large sample.	Response rate may be low and you could get a biased sample.
Everyone is asked the same questions.	Danger of differing interpretations of the same questions – respondents cannot ask for explanations.
Can be designed so that analysis is relatively simple.	People's preferred responses may not be allowed for in your questionnaire.

Questionnaires in situ

What the method can do	*Limitations*
Take less time to administer than individual interviews.	Less flexible than individual interviews.
Higher response rate than postal questionnaires.	If you are not present while the questionnaire is administered responses may be affected by something you aren't aware of.
If need be, you can ask others to administer the questionnaire.	

Open-ended versus closed questions

I made a distinction above between asking open-ended questions, which provides qualitative information, and asking closed questions, which may provide information you can quantify. The main features of each approach are set out below.

Open-ended questions

- Allow your informants some degree of flexibility in their responses – they can select what seems relevant.
- Particularly useful if you're not able, or don't wish to anticipate the range of possible responses from informants.
- You may discover something unexpected – providing greater insight into the subject of your investigation.
- In interviews, you can probe – ask informants for clarification or further information.
- Open-ended interviews probably take longer to administer; you will also need to write up a set of interview notes, which takes time.
- Analysing open-ended information from interviews or questionnaires is relatively time-consuming.

Closed questions

- Limit the response(s) your informant can give.
- The choice of responses you allow may not cover your informants' preferred response(s).
- Probably take less time to administer in interviews.
- Analysis takes relatively little time.

In this section I've also stressed that it may be beneficial to use a combination of open-ended and closed questions, depending upon your research interests.

Further reading

Section 3

BURGESS, R. (1984) 'Keeping a research diary' in BELL, J., BUSH, T., FOX, A., GOODEY, J., GOLDING, S. (eds) (1984) *Conducting Small-scale Investigations in Education Management*, London, Harper and Row/The Open University.

Robert Burgess discusses the use of different kinds of diaries in educational research, including diaries kept by researchers and by informants. He also considers how diaries may be used as the basis of interviews with informants.

WRAGG, E.C. (1987) *Conducting and Analysing Interviews*, Rediguide 11, Nottingham, Nottingham University School of Education.

The Nottingham University Rediguides are short booklets that provide practical advice on various aspects of research. The 'interviews' Rediguide gives suggestions for planning and conducting interviews, and provides a checklist for using this method.

LOGAN, T. (1984) 'Learning through interviewing' in SCHOSTAK, J.F. and LOGAN, T. (eds) *Pupil Experience*, London, Croom Helm.

In this brief article, Tom Logan discusses some of the problems he has encountered in interviewing young people about their experiences in school and what he has learnt from these problems.

OAKLEY, A. (1981) 'Interviewing women' in ROBERTS, H. (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Although Ann Oakley is discussing interviewing women, the points she makes are relevant to interviews in general. Oakley discusses the contradiction in textbook advice about the need for professional detachment and the need to establish rapport in an interview. She argues that you can find out about people more effectively by establishing a non-hierarchical relationship with the interviewee and by not seeking to minimize your own personal involvement.

DOUGLAS, T. (1983) *Groups: understanding people gathered together*, London, Tavistock Publications Ltd (reprinted 1990 by Routledge).

This book describes the processes that operate in both 'natural' groups, such as families and friendship groups, and 'artificial' groups such as teams and committees. It discusses the characteristic ways in which groups came together and offers suggestions on the effective management of groups.

YOUNGMAN, M.B. (1987) *Designing and Analysing Questionnaires*, Rediguide 12, Nottingham, Nottingham University School of Education.

Youngman provides several examples, discusses the practicalities of devising and administering questionnaires and gives help with analysis.

4 SEEING WHAT PEOPLE DO

4.1 Introduction

This section examines how you can collect evidence for your project by watching, and recording in some way, what people do: what activities they engage in; how they behave as they carry out certain activities; how they talk; what kinds of work they do. The section also looks at the outcome of children's work – using children's writing as a main example: what can you say about children's work, and how can this be used as a source of evidence for your project?

You are already, necessarily, observing as part of your teaching. Your observations are recorded formally when you assess children or comment on their work. In addition to such formal observations, it is likely that you continually notice how children are behaving, or reflect on how a lesson has gone. Such observations may not be formally recorded, but will probably inform future work, such as how to group children so that they collaborate better or how to follow up a particular piece of work.

In order to provide evidence for your project, you need to observe systematically and to record this in some way. Some of the methods suggested in this section will formalize what you already do as a part of teaching. Others require more time, or access to additional resources – perhaps a cassette recorder, or a colleague you can work with. The method(s) you select must depend upon your own professional context (including other commitments and demands upon your time) and on the nature of your research.

This section assumes that you have already identified some preliminary research questions you would like to pursue, and that you are devising specific research activities to help you answer these questions. You may still wish to refine your research questions in the light of your consideration of methods and discussions with your tutor and colleagues.

You should use this section to help you devise an appropriate method (or set of methods). I suggest the following approach:

- First read sub-section 4.2, on deciding what to observe.
- Skim sub-sections 4.3–4.8, on methods of observation, to get a general impression of the material that is most likely to be useful to you. Use the headings to help identify material. Look through *all* the sub-sections initially, even those that might not seem relevant. You may find you can draw on ideas from a different context and adapt these to suit your own interests.
- Read more closely sub-section 4.9 on reviewing methods. Recognizing the pros and cons of different methods will help you decide on an appropriate method or combination of methods.
- Finally, read closely those sub-sections (from 4.3–4.8) that you wish to draw on in devising your own observation method(s).

4.2 Deciding what and how to observe

You may derive ideas for making observations from other published studies you've read, from sample projects in this module, or from discussing your research with colleagues – but the most important factor to consider is how the observations can fit in with your own professional context, and inform your own research questions. Four points to consider are *what to observe; what types of observation* to carry out; to what extent you should *participate* in the event you're observing; and *what to tell* those you are observing about what you are doing.

What to observe

Since you cannot observe everything that is going on you will need to sample, that is, to select people, activities or events to look at.

People

If you're observing pupils, or pupils and a teacher in class, which pupils, or groups of pupils, do you want to focus on?

- Do you want to look at a whole class? If you teach several classes, which one(s) will you observe? Are you going to focus on the pupils, or the teacher, or both?
- Do you want to focus on a small group working together? Will this be a pre-existing group, or will you ask certain pupils to work together? Will you select children at random, or do you want to look at certain children, or types of children? (For instance, is it important that the group contains girls and boys? If you teach a mixed-age group, do you want to look at older and younger children working together?)
- Is your focus to be on one or more individual children? How will you select the child(ren)? Is there a child with particular needs that you'd like to observe more closely?

Similar decisions need to be made if your focus is on teachers (or other people) in a range of contexts. For instance:

- Do you want to observe the whole staff (e.g. in a staff meeting)?
- Do you want to 'trail' an individual colleague?

Activities and events

You will also have to make decisions about the contexts you wish to observe, when to make observations and what types of activity to focus on.

- If observing in class, which lessons, or parts of the day, will you look at?
- Will you focus on certain pre-selected activities or look at what happens in the normal course of events? In the latter case you will need to consider how far what you observe is typical of the normal course of events – what counts as a 'typical' afternoon, for instance?
- If you're looking at children's work, how will you select this?
- If you're looking at meetings, how will you decide which to observe?

In each case, it is important to consider why you should focus on any activity, or group of pupils, etc. How is this relevant to your research question(s) and professional context? (See also 'Sampling' in sub-section 1.6.)

What type of observation?

qualitative
quantitative

When you have decided what to observe, you need to consider what kind(s) of observation to carry out, for instance whether to use *qualitative* or *quantitative* methods. Examples 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate these. Both are examples of observations carried out by teachers involved in the development of this module.

Example 4.1 Observing children writing

Christina Wojtak, from Hertfordshire, was interested in how young (six-year-old) children judged their own and others' writing, and whether their judgements would change after certain types of teaching. She worked with the children to help them produce their own books, which would be displayed in the book corner. Christina observed the children to see how they responded to their writing tasks.

There are several questions one could ask about children's responses. Some may be open-ended, such as how the children behaved as they wrote. How (if at all) would their behaviour change over the few weeks of the project?

Other questions may be quite specific, such as how many pieces of writing different children produced. Over certain (specified) periods, how much time did each child spend (a) working alone; (b) discussing with other pupils?

Example 4.2 Monitoring classroom interaction

Staff in a CDT department wanted to encourage more girls to take up technology but were worried about the male image of the subject. They had also noticed that boys seemed to dominate interaction during lessons. John Cowgill, head of CDT, decided to monitor classroom interaction more closely – comparing Year 8 pupils' behaviour in CDT and home economics.

open-ended interview questions

As with Example 4.1, questions about interaction may be open-ended, such as how girls and boys behaved in whole-class question-and-answer sessions. How were they grouped for practical work, and how did they behave as they carried out such work?

Other questions may require more specific information, such as how often the teacher asked questions of boys as opposed to girls. How did different pupils get to speak during question-and-answer sessions: by raising their hands and being selected by the teacher, by 'chipping in' with a response, or by some other means?

field-notes

In both examples the initial open-ended questions would lead the observer towards the use of qualitative methods, to noting down what was going on. The observer's detailed field-notes would form the basis of their account of the lessons.

The more specific questions would lead the observer towards the use of quantitative methods, to recording instances of certain specified behaviour. The information can be presented numerically: a certain number of pupils behaved in this way; 70 per cent of pupils used this equipment, 40 per cent used that equipment, etc.

open-ended notes

As you can see from Sample Projects 1 and 5, Christina opted for open-ended notes and John opted to focus on particular types of behaviour.

open-ended observation

The examples above are concerned with observations of activities and of classroom interaction, but the same principle applies to observations of pupils, or teachers or other adults, in other contexts, and to looking at children's work. Depending on your research questions, you may wish to use qualitative or quantitative observation methods, or a combination of both. Used in combination, quantitative and qualitative methods may complement one another, producing a more complete picture of an event. Open-ended observations may suggest particular categories of behaviour to look for in future observations. Or initial quantitative research may suggest something is going on that you wish to explore in more detail using qualitative methods. (See also the discussion of the qualitative/quantitative distinction in sub-section 1.5.)

field-notes
observation schedule

I shall discuss below examples of observations using quantitative and qualitative methods. I shall make a broad distinction between field-notes and observation schedules. Field-notes allow you to collect qualitative information. Observation schedules are *normally* used to collect quantitative information, but some provide qualitative information. Section 4.9 reviews the methods I have discussed and considers what they can and what they cannot tell you.

To participate or not to participate?

participant observation
non-participant observation

A distinction is commonly made in research between *participant* and *non-participant* observation. A 'participant observer' is someone who takes part in the event she or he is observing. A 'non-participant observer' does not take part. In practice, this distinction is not so straightforward. By virtue of being in a classroom (or meeting, etc.) and watching what is going on, you are, to some extent, a participant. When observing in your own institution, it is particularly hard to maintain the stance of a non-participant observer, to separate your role as observer from your usual role as teacher. John Cowgill (Sample Project 5) commented that, although observing in other colleagues' lessons, he was interrupted by pupils and occasionally found himself intervening to help a pupil, or on safety grounds.

Michael Armstrong, whose study *Closely Observed Children* documents the intellectual growth and development of children in a primary school classroom, comments as follows:

> I was acutely conscious … that teaching and observation are not easy to reconcile. On the one hand, the pressures of classroom life make it exceptionally difficult for an individual teacher to describe the intellectual experience of his pupils at length, in detail and with a sufficient detachment. Conversely … to observe a class of children without teaching them is to deprive oneself of a prime source of knowledge: the knowledge that comes from asking questions, engaging in conversations, discussing, informing, criticising, correcting and being corrected, demonstrating, interpreting, helping, instructing or collaborating – in short, from teaching.
>
> (Armstrong, 1980, p.4)

Michael Armstrong's solution was to work alongside another teacher, to give himself more time for sustained observation, and to write up detailed notes of his observations, interpretations and speculations at the end of the school day.

As part of your planning, you need to decide whether to combine observation with your normal teaching or whether you wish (and are able) to make special arrangements that free you from other duties and give you more time to observe. This will affect what you observe and what methods of observation you choose.

What to tell people

Watching people, and writing down what they do, has certain ethical implications. If you are observing adults – say in a staff meeting – it may seem obvious that you need to get their permission first. But it is equally important to consider the ethical implications of observing young children in a classroom. Such issues need to be considered as part of planning an observation, because they will have an impact on what you observe, how you carry out the observation, and how you interpret the results of the observation. Some points to consider are:

- *Should you ask people's permission to observe them?* This must depend on the context and purpose of the observation. For instance, if the observation were being carried out entirely for the observer's benefit, it might seem necessary to ask permission (perhaps from parents in the case of very young children). At the other end of the spectrum, you probably feel it is a normal part of teaching to keep a note of how pupils are progressing, not something that would require special permission.
- *Should you tell people they are being observed?* Bound up with this question is the notion of the observer's paradox: the act of observing is inclined to change the behaviour of those being observed. It is likely that the more you tell people about your observation, the more their behaviour will be affected. Some researchers compromise: they tell people they are being observed, but are rather vague about the object of the observation. They may say more about this after the event. You may feel that you can afford to be more open; or that, as a colleague or teacher (rather than a researcher from outside), it is important to retain an atmosphere of trust between yourself and those you work with.
- *Should you discuss the results of your observation with those you have observed?* This is partly an ethical question of whether people have a right to know what you're saying about them. But discussing observations with others also lets you check your interpretations against theirs. It may give you a different understanding of something you have observed.
- *Should you identify those you have observed?* In writing reports, researchers often give pseudonyms to people they have observed or institutions in which they have carried out observations. As a teacher, you may find it more difficult to maintain confidentiality in this way – the identity of those you refer to may still be apparent to other colleagues, for instance. One solution may be to discuss with colleagues or pupils how much confidentiality they feel is necessary, and how this may be maintained.

(See also sub-section 1.4, 'Ethics and practitioner research'.)

Decisions about sampling, what types of observation to make, how far you will participate in the events you're observing, and what you will tell those you observe will affect the type of research you can carry out. Try to make *preliminary* decisions on these points before reading the sections that follow.

4.3 Monitoring class or group activities

This sub-section discusses a variety of ways in which you can watch what people do or the activities they are involved in. Several examples come from classrooms. However, any method of observation will need to be tailored to your own context. Something that works in one classroom may not in another. Many of the ideas suggested here may also be used in other contexts, such as assemblies or meetings, corridors or playgrounds.

Recollections

If you are teaching a class, you will necessarily be observing what is going on. You can focus these observations on the research question(s) you are investigating. If you have sole responsibility for the class, however, you will probably find it difficult to take notes while actually teaching. How difficult this is depends on a variety of factors: the pupils themselves, the type of lesson you are interested in, how work is organized, and so on. If the class is working independently (for instance, in groups)