

# Chapter 2: Case Studies

## Case Study – Explaining Your Project to Someone Else

### Transitions

*I am a mature student in the final year of my degree course. I started the course after ten years working in industry. I had a company car and a good salary. I left this to embark on degree study. I had a partner and a mortgage to pay so I really felt that I was taking the plunge. I remember my first day at University. There were lots of younger students and I was worried that I would not fit in. I also had anxieties about whether I would be capable of degree level study. This personal experience is where my interest in transitions first originated. Even at 30 years of age I found the transition from employment to studying challenging. Managing this huge change in my life was not easy. I was able to relate my experience to the children starting school when I was on placement. My final placement is currently in a Year 3 class in a junior school. I am interested in how the transition process was for these children. They have moved from a small village infant school. There is lots of research in the field that focuses on the transition process for nursery to reception and also more recently on reception to Year 1. There is less on the transition to junior school. For this reason I would like to focus my research around this area. I intend to focus in particular on the children's perspectives. My initial question is: What do children think of the transition process from Year 2 to Year 3?*

## Case Study – Being Reflexive

Jenny's research focused on the experience of mothers returning to work after having a child/children. She was interested in mothers' views and perceptions on the return to work process and the challenges and difficulties that some mothers face during this time. When Jenny had her first child she had not anticipated how challenging she would find it to return to work. She initially planned to take nine months maternity leave and then her son would go to a local nursery near to her workplace. All the arrangements were put in place while Jenny was still pregnant. She visited several nurseries in the run-up to giving birth and decided on a particular nursery which had been recommended to her by a colleague. However, when Oliver was 4 months old Jenny went for a second visit to the nursery. This time she felt quite different than when she had been pregnant. As she walked around the setting she had a lump in her throat and was not sure why. The nursery was lovely and the practitioners were kind and gentle. Jenny then spent two weeks feeling very anxious about what to do and could not think about returning to work. As the nine-months period started to draw to an end she spoke to her line manager. Luckily, they had a very good relationship and she also had three children of her own so could identify and empathize with how Jenny was feeling. After this discussion and chatting with her partner, Jenny decided to take a further three months off work. While she was on this extended maternity leave, a friend phoned her to say that a mutual friend of theirs had started to childmind. This was an option that Jenny had not considered before. She decided to meet this friend for a coffee and as a result Oliver went to the childminder and Jenny returned to work after her 12 months leave.

Jenny realized that she had never really appreciated how challenging it is for some mothers to return to work. Before she had Oliver she had sometimes been quite dismissive when on placement and had often felt that some mothers were just fussing. Similarly, she now recognized the significance of parents feeling confident and contented with their choice of childcare provision. Jenny hoped that listening to other mothers and researching their stories would help to inform and improve her future work as an Early Years practitioner.

## Case Study – Isobel’s Story

Isobel was an Early Years practitioner studying on a part-time BA Early Childhood Studies degree. When she was a young child she had found it difficult to make friends and fit in. Over the years the situation got progressively worse and she felt isolated from many of her peers. As she entered her teenage years she became more and more withdrawn and spent lunchtimes and break-times alone. She was bullied by certain individuals, where objects were thrown at her and verbally abusive comments were made. Several years later Isobel became a nursery nurse in a Foundation Stage 1 class. She was able to identify with certain individuals in her setting who, like herself previously, were finding it challenging to achieve socially and fit in with the group. Isobel felt particular empathy for a girl who was always left out of play activities. As a professional, she now understood the impact on children’s health and well-being and also how this could impact on their learning. When she started to study for a part-time degree her interest in this area deepened. When Isobel started her dissertation module she knew that this was the area she wanted to focus upon. Her dissertation proposal set out an ethnographic, case study approach drawing on her day-to-day interactions with the children in her setting.

Observing and talking to the children would be Isobel’s primary data-collection method. Interviews with fellow practitioners and parents would also be used to give a fuller picture. Her initial research questions were:

- How do practitioners identify children who are struggling to make friends?
- Can children be helped to learn strategies for accessing play?
- What intervention programmes are available and how effective are they?

Her own personal experience impacted positively on her professional practice. Isobel was able to turn her negative experience around for the benefit of the children she worked with. She sought to develop her own knowledge around children’s friendships, through academic reading, researching and writing for her dissertation. Not only would this fulfil the requirements for her degree course, it would also enable her to develop practical strategies to help children’s personal, social and emotional development and learning in her setting. However, as a practitioner in the setting Isobel also had to think carefully about how others might react to her – for example parents and children might feel unable to say ‘no’ if invited to take part in Isobel’s research.

## Case Study – Handa’s Story

Handa was a student on PGCE secondary course and her first language was Urdu. As a child she had started school with some English, which developed well during her primary school years. Despite her positive experience, though, Handa had a close friend who had struggled much more to settle and fit in during her own school years. Handa’s friend felt that she had not been supported enough in school as a learner with English as an additional language (EAL) and that consequently she had not achieved her full academic potential. Handa had also discussed the issue with members of her family and in seeking to find out about their experiences she also received very mixed views. Handa could not recall how she became fluent in English herself and really wanted to investigate the strategies that schools employed to support children with EAL. Her placement school was culturally diverse and she had recently attended an EAL training course that the school ran that sparked her enthusiasm still further. Handa’s research proposal set out a phenomenological and child-centred approach in which she planned to conduct individual interviews with Key Stage 2 pupils in her class and use drawings and circle time sessions to help corroborate her findings. Handa’s initial research questions were:

- Did the school have a policy for EAL learners and how effective was it?
- What strategies/pedagogies were used in class to support children with EAL?

Handa was using personal experience to inform her research. While her own experience was very positive she acknowledged that this was not the case for everyone. She needed to be reflexive and to bear in mind therefore that her own fairly positive experience could cloud her judgement; there could be many reasons why someone has a positive or negative experience. Handa’s positionality also had implications for access and informed consent (see Chapter 3). Questions such as ‘Does the school have a policy for EAL learners and how effective is this in practice?’ could easily leave the school feeling that its practice was about to be openly criticized which would make approval and access much harder to secure. In the end Handa opted to merge her questions into one which would enable her to get at the issues she was interested in without antagonizing the school. Handa’s final question was ‘What policies and pedagogies support the learning of children with EAL?’

# Chapter 2: Checklists

## Checklist – Research Proposal Form

**Topic:** Outline the topic you are interested in studying and how you decided on this. Is this a personal/professional interest? Does it result from previous course work? Has a particular experience led you here?

**Title:** Do you have a provisional title in mind?

**Objectives/Aims:** By conducting your research what do you aim to find out?

**Question:** Do you have a potential question?

**Background and Context:** Why is this subject area important? What is the problem you wish to investigate? What is the issue?

**Literature Review:** How does this fit in with other research?

**Methodology and Methods:** Will your work be qualitative or quantitative? How will you collect your data? What methods will you use, for example interviews, questionnaires, observations, literature searches, content analysis?

**Ethical Issues:** How will you gain informed consent, if necessary, from your participants and/or gatekeepers? What are the potential risks, if any? How will you ensure that no harm comes to your participants?

**Timetable:** List the months you have up until your work needs to be submitted and set out what you propose to be doing in each to ensure that you complete your dissertation on time.

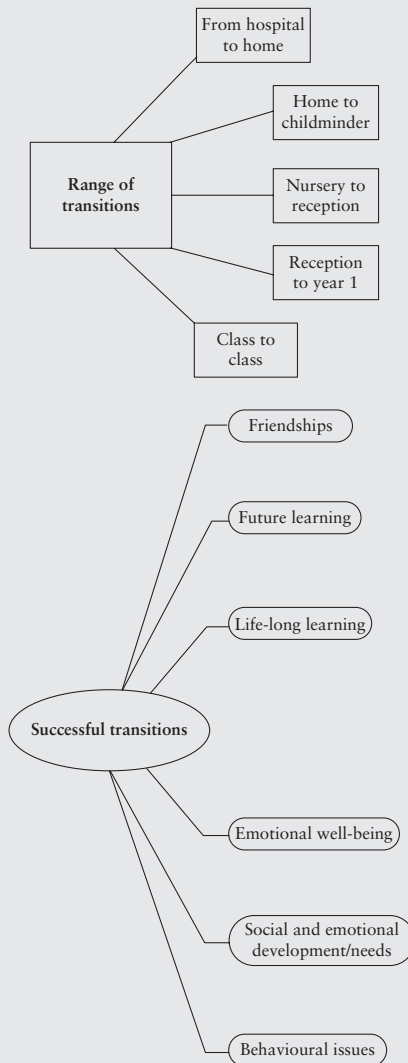
**Conclusion:** What will be the research outcomes? What will be the benefits of the research?

**References:** What literature will you be reviewing? Provide six to ten examples as a starting point.

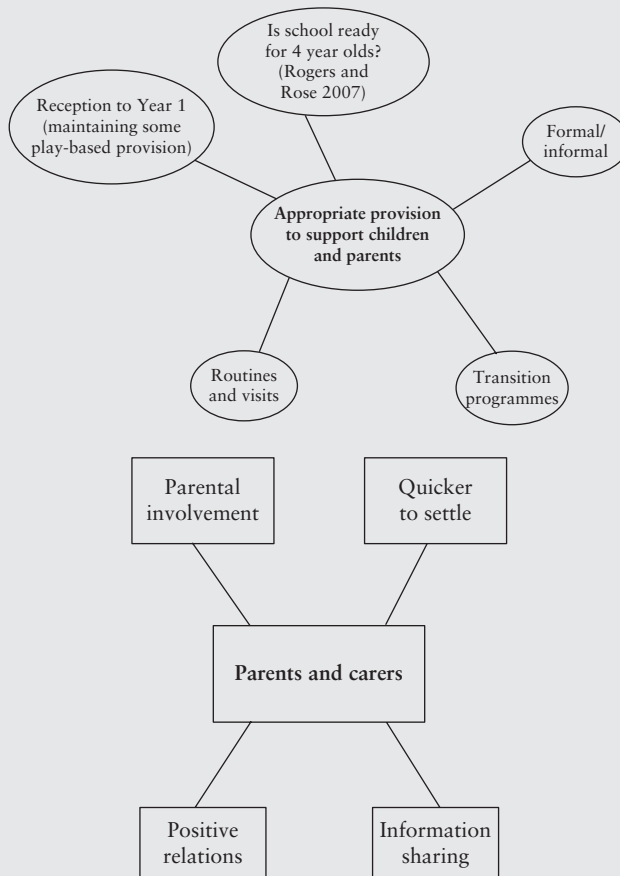
# Chapter 2: Ideas to Use

## Ideas to Use – List and Concept Map Examples

Transitions in Early Years education



## Ideas to Use – Cont'd



- Theory/reading  
Key texts:  
Allingham, 2011  
Trodd, 2013  
Fisher, 2010  
Margetts, 2013  
Brooker, 2008  
DFE, 2017 (EYFS)  
Galton 1999 – 'The 5 Bridges'  
Dunlop and Fabian, 2007 Rogers and Rose, 2007 Bronfenbrenner, 1979  
Fabian, 2007  
O'Connor, 2012  
Cassidy, 2005  
Shields, 2009  
Lam and Pollard, 2006

## Ideas to Use – Sample Dissertation Schedules

Dissertation involving human subjects and the collection of primary data in the field

	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June
Identify questions/aims/objectives										
Review the literature										
Decide on the most appropriate methodology/ methods										
Consider any ethical issues or dilemmas										
Design data-collection tools										
Recruit research participants										
Pilot data-collection tools										
Initial analysis and refinement of data-collection tools										
Data collection										
Analysis and reflection										
Making links between analysis and the literature. Drawing conclusions										
Draft chapters/Writing up										

Dissertation involving library/archive-based data collection

	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June
Clarify research question(s)										
Develop a manageable proposal										
Select appropriate method(s) of enquiry										
Review others' research and other literature										
Secure access/permissions to data										
Collect and evaluate data										
Analyse, reflect on and discuss findings										
Draft chapters/Writing up										



## **Ideas to Use – Write a Dissertation Journal**

What could go into your journal?

- Ideas, thoughts, questions, reflections, concept maps on interest areas
- Notes on what you have read
- References for future reading
- Relevant discussions with tutors, colleagues, peers, friends, family
- Notes on the problem/need for study
- Notes on related materials from newspapers, radio, internet
- Questions around your selected area
- Potential main questions and sub-questions
- Notes/thoughts on possible methods and methodology
- Comments on your own positionality and any implications for your research
- Notes on data-collection sessions

# Chapter 2: Points to Think About

## Points to Think About – Before You Start

Use your course documentation to find the answers to the following questions:

### How much work will the dissertation involve?

- What is the word count and does it include your references and/or any appendices?
- Are there a recommended number of hours per week that you are expected to devote to your dissertation?
- What is the academic credit weighting of the dissertation in relation to the rest of your studies?

\* Remember the individual nature of dissertation study can be highly motivating for many students and there may be a temptation to invest a disproportionate amount of time on the project at the expense of your other studies.

### How long do you have to complete the work?

- When is the final deadline for submission?
- Are there any other/interim deadlines associated with the dissertation?

\* Remember everything will take longer than you think so working back from the deadline can help you to plan your time more effectively. For example, you may be required to submit a research proposal before being allowed to proceed with the dissertation proper and if you are planning primary data collection with human participants then you will need ethical approval before any field work starts.

## Points to Think About – Guidance and Support

### What support and guidance are you entitled to?

- Are there any lectures and seminars accompanying the dissertation?
- Who is your supervisor?
- What are the arrangements for consulting and meeting with your supervisor?
- What other support and guidance – for example, library staff – is available?

\* Remember dissertations emphasize student autonomy, so you have to be proactive; do not expect your supervisor to be chasing you, you will be expected to be able to take the initiative.

#### Student/Supervisor Relationships

It is important to develop a positive working relationship with your supervisor (Bell and Waters, 2014; Cryer, 2006). It might be useful to start the supervision journey by asking the questions.

- 1) What do you expect from your student?
  - To be prepared for your meetings (email prior to the meeting what you would like to focus on. Some bullet points will suffice.)
  - To agree a date to send drafts if you would like a draft read prior to your meeting, as supervisors will be very busy and will not be able to look at things at short notice
  - To engage and participate in sessions
  - To keep to deadlines and maintain contact with your supervisor (let them know if you are having any difficulties that may affect your work)
  - To keep a brief summary of your supervision meeting, including targets to work (Bell and Waters, 2014)
- 2) What do you expect from your supervisor?
  - To inspire and motivate students
  - To respond to emails within the specified timeframe
  - To read and constructively respond to students, work
  - To demonstrate equitable practice with all students

Talking with your supervisor about expectations can avoid any misunderstanding further down the line.

## **Points to Think About – Your Dissertation Theme**

Consider the following points when thinking about the broad theme of your dissertation:

- think back to an incident on a work placement that would suggest a theme;
- consider aspects of your life outside of university that relate to your course – for example, voluntary activity, previous work or family experiences and responsibilities;
- reflect on earlier course work and/or reading during your degree threw up themes, issues or questions that you could now follow up;
- consider current events in the world around you could form a starting point; maybe recent reports in the press and other media have a bearing on your chosen discipline;
- chatting with tutors, colleagues, peers, family and friends might suggest a topic of interest that would sustain your interest over the year;
- do a key word search and a bit of background reading in your library to help you identify a likely looking topic.

## Points to Think About – Your Question

### Is your question relevant?

Your question needs to be clear and concise and relevant to your chosen field of study. It should arise from the literature and/or from your professional practice and should hold out the prospect of contributing to the existing knowledge and research in the field. Ultimately the question you have formulated must be researchable and answerable (Laws et al., 2003). This may sound ridiculous, but it is all too easy to get carried away and become distracted or sidetracked, only to realize too late that you have not answered your question.

### Is your question intriguing?

The question you have selected should allow you to maintain your interest and enthusiasm for the duration of your study. Your *passion* for your chosen focus will see you through those challenging, depressing days when you find yourself struggling to write a section, or when your interviewees have failed to turn up or when things in general just seem to be going wrong (Game and Metcalfe, 1996).

### Is your question realistic?

This is where you need to be sensible and to reflect on the time and resources that you have at your disposal. You need to be confident that you will have sufficient time to collect the data you would need to answer the question, that any costs that might be involved are tolerable and that you have the necessary skills.

### Is your question ethical?

An ethical approach will need to characterize your dissertation from start to finish (see Chapter 5). You have a duty to abide by ethical principles such as doing good, avoiding harm and ensuring informed consent, participant autonomy, confidentiality and anonymity. When weighing up your alternative research questions therefore you will need to reject any that would put these principles at risk.

## **Points to Think About – Positionality**

The positionality criteria below could all impact on your ability to conduct research for your dissertation:

- Sex/gender
- Class/social status
- Race
- Age
- Disability
- Culture
- Religion
- Political allegiances/beliefs

# Chapter 2: Recommended Reading and Further Sources of Information

- Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011), *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People*. London: Sage.
- Ali, S. and Kelly, M. (2012), 'Ethics and social research', in Seale, C. (ed.), *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Clough, P. and Nutbrown, C. (2012, 3rd edition), *A Student's Guide to Methodology*. London: Sage.
- Kodish, E. (ed.) (2005), *Ethics and Research with Children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oliver, P. (2010, 2nd edition), *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Smith, K., Todd, M. and Waldman, J. (2009), *Doing Your Undergraduate Social Science Dissertation*. Abingdon: Routledge.

# Chapter 2: Reflective Tasks

- 1 Start to make notes on your research. Use the subheadings: topic, problem/issue, title, question, what will you read?
- 2 Here are some example research questions. Apply the Goldilocks test and the Russian Doll approach to the questions to evaluate how suitable they are (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012: 41–5).

Goldilocks test: Asks the questions – is it too hot, too big, too small, just right.

Russian Doll Approach: Requires the student to strip back any unnecessary layers to get to arrive at a focused and clear question.

- Are primary schools meeting the needs of the children?
- Is TV impacting on children's learning?
- Can outdoor play improve children's behaviour in the classroom?
- What are children's views and perceptions of the transition process from year six to secondary school?
- How are EAL learners supported in the primary classroom?
- How is the key person approach implemented in an Early Years setting?
- How is breastfeeding promoted to mothers to be?
- Is social class linked to antisocial youth behaviour?
- How do international approaches impact on childhood education?
- Can under threes form relationships with adults and their peers?



# Chapter 2: Research Proposal Template

- 1) Title
- 2) Aims
- 3) Pilot Design
- 4) Main Study
- 5) Research Questions
- 6) Literature to Review
- 7) Sample (Potential Participants)
- 8) Research Methods
- 9) Ethical Issues (potential benefits/negative consequences, obtaining consent, right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity)
- 10) Outcomes
- 11) Timeline
- 12) References

# Chapter 2: Summary of Key Points

- Use lists and visual representations to help generate your ideas for areas of interest and potential questions – for example, concept maps, spider diagrams.
- 'Go large' to help generate potential questions.
- Write a paragraph about your area of interest and the relevant issues. This will help you to clarify your thinking.
- Make sure your eventual question is 'appropriate, intriguing, realistic and ethical'.
- Keep a journal so that you can critically reflect on your study as you go along and at the writing-up stage.
- Remember to adopt a reflexive approach to your work and to be aware of your own positionality. What has influenced you and how have you got to this point? What are the alternative viewpoints? How might your positionality affect how others behave?