

# Defining Research

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What is research? What is the difference between research and documentary? How do we know if we are *doing* research?

*Research is -*

a rigorous process of asking (a) question(s), gathering data, analysing, interpreting, and proposing (a) response(s).

Here is an example of research that might be conducted by an academic in the Faculty of Education.

*The Question -*

Do the parents of children with intellectual impairments feel that their children are socially included in Queensland primary state schools?

Researchers often share that putting words to the question is often the most challenging component of the journey. An effective research question: is meaningful; is original and yet informed by the research which came before; clearly communicates; matters (*so what* is obvious within the question); is compelling and often irresistible; is focussed and tight; is comprehensive; identifies the stakeholders; is doable and realistic; yields rich data and interpretations.

This question seeks the parent perspective. Rather than asking whether children with intellectual impairments are socially included, the question asks whether the parents feel that the children are included. This connotes controversy. Is there a mismatch between perceptions and statistics? The specific population is identified. The study does not query the social inclusion of all children with disabling conditions, but primary school children with intellectual impairments. The study parameters are also geographically defined. The study will research children living in Queensland and attending state schools.

*Gathering the Data –*

The design of the research is based on the particular posed question. This research seeks parents' perceptions. These might be obtained through such tools as surveys, interviews, or a combination. The nature of this question is such that the researcher will want to pursue the information that yields either a positive or negative response from the parents. The researcher will want to know about the parents' perceptions of their sons and daughters' experience with the school system.

The interviewers probably do not plan to collect data from every parent of every child enrolled in a primary state school in Queensland. The researcher will need to make decisions about recruiting methods and how many parents to include in the research. Although these decisions are complex, the rule of thumb is that the larger the sample size, the broader the breadth of the inquiry, and the smaller the sample size, the greater the depth of the inquiry. For example, if the research that has already been published about parents' perceptions of social inclusion indicates that parents tend to believe their sons and daughters are not included, then the researchers will probably want to define a small sample size to give them the opportunity to inquire deeply with the parents who are included.

#### *Analysing and Interpreting –*

The researcher needs to make decisions about how to deal with the data. For example, let us imagine that the researcher made a decision to interview 10 parents. The researcher audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them word-for-word. Now how will the researcher make sense of the data? What does it mean? One approach to analysing the data is to categorize the responses and look for similarities and differences. For example, the researcher might note that 8 of the 10 parents stated that their children are not invited to birthday parties. One of the ten parents might state that the teacher helps all of the children to find a recess buddy.

Today, researchers in the field of education tend to believe that research is like *the meeting of the horizons* between the researcher and the *informants*. Let us return to our specific example. The researcher brings her own set of experiences, beliefs, knowledge, and values to the research. For example, if the researcher was a former teacher, she might have reflected on what she perceived to be social challenges for her students with intellectual impairments. She is not an objective observer of what the parents tell her. The researcher uses her rich reflections on her prior experiences to help guide her interpretation of the data.

#### *Proposing a Response –*

The researcher must now come full circle and return to the posed question. In this case, the researcher raised the question - *Do the parents of children with intellectual impairments feel that their children are*

*socially included in Queensland primary state schools?* Let us imagine that the results of the 10 parent interviews revealed that all of these parents shared their perceptions that their children with intellectual impairments are not as socially included as their parents would like. The researcher will write a report that includes: the question; rationale, aims, goals and objectives of the research; a review of the literature, clearly linking the literature to the current study; details about the informants and the methods including data collection and analysis; the data, and; the interpretations. The researcher will also address what this data means, and suggest directions for further research. For example, 9 of the 10 parents might have been mothers in this research, and the interviewer might share her belief that future research should also include fathers.

The researcher will want to share her results. She may do this through: workshops to parents and/or teachers; academic conferences; professional development publications for teachers, and; academic journals.

The research journey is exciting and fulfilling, and if carefully conducted and communicated, can have a meaningful impact on teaching and learning.