**Week 2: Observation and Other Forms of Field Research and Writing your Research Question**

**OBSERVATION**

**Ways to undertake observation in field research are:**

* *Structured observation*. This may involve the use of interaction schedules, which usually rely on coding categories. These categories are highly selective and may involve the possibility of bias. The major question becomes *what* to record has to be decided a priori. Structured observation often involves making an observation of what is happening every nth minute.
* *Unstructured observation*. Here the danger is that we tend to look through the unique lens of our own culturally constructed values. Unstructured observation involves the teacher-researcher in verbatim recording of what occurs.
* *Shadowing*. This is where the researcher "shadows" someone and records everything they do or say.
* *Participant observation* is where we observe by being a participant in what is happening. There are a number of difficulties with this approach. The most frequently cited is The Observer's Paradox. It is very difficult for an observer to remain detached in such a situation and the researcher's own behaviour might influence the outcomes of the results. These problems can affect the rapport the investigator establishes with the group.

**TASK:** which of the four observational methods appeals to you most and why?

**Problems with Observation:**

* Very often researchers are looking for underlying rules and patterns but we need to remember that these may be *imposed* on the data by the researcher in order to understand what is happening.
* There are always concerns with the reliability, accuracy and truthfulness of the information. Very often people filter what they want to say. They may have divided loyalties and feel they cannot speak freely. One way to attempt to minimise or identify this is to subject the results to member checks. Triangulation can also be used to check on the accuracy of what people are saying or reveal different perspectives. Sometimes the timing of events can become distorted and may need checking.
* Problems with transcription. There is always the problem of misinterpretation because when we speak we do not speak in full sentences with marked punctuation. Sometimes meaning is conveyed by tonal movement and stress patterns which are difficult and time consuming to transcribe.

**TASK:**  given the issues above, will you choose to use some kind of observation in your project? If so, how will you try to minimise the problems?

**OTHER FIELD RESEARCH**

**TASK:** Look at Table 5.2 of the reading “Field research in literacy classrooms”. Select two or three data collection tools you’ll use in your research project.

**DECIDING ON YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION**

**Some Tips**

* Avoid rushing to your research question. A good research question requires critical and creative skills, and takes time and work to get it right.
* Note the difference between the focus of the research or the general area of investigation such as bullying or gender, and the research question which needs to be made explicit. If our research focus is gender, the research question might be related to community attitudes and how these find expression in relation to sport. So the research questions might be What are the community attitudes towards the participation of girls in sport in a particular region? Or, if evidence is already in we might ask How can community attitudes towards the participation of girls in sport be changed in ??
* Avoid problems of misinterpretation by conceptualising all of the core concepts contained in your research question unambiguously. This means paying close attention to the definition of terms. For example what is "gender"? How does it differ from sexism or sexist behaviour? What constitutes bullying? When does teasing escalate into bullying?
* How does prior definition affect the research outcomes? Can you think of any other related terms which might need clarification?
* Given the process of interculturality in the Territory, you will need to pay particular attention to possible cultural misunderstandings.
* Avoid posing long and complicated research questions. Your research question should be clearly and simply stated. Use sub-questions to identify other important facets of the research.
* The research method you adopt will derive from your question. Avoid basing or tying your research question to a particular method.
* The research for the Teacher Researcher must be manageable. Avoid posing research questions that cannot be answered clearly, wither in general or by the methods that are feasible for you to use.
* Avoid asking questions that have already been answered. Replicating a research study or question to verify a finding or to test if it is applicable in a different social context is different from being ignorant of previous studies in your field. Know *why* you are carrying out the research.

**WRITING YOUR QUESTION**

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|  | Good education research questions often emerge from problem statements -- either problems that come out of the literature or problems observed in classrooms.  For example, a teacher might observe his female students perform less well on science tests than males.  Some educational literature (theoretical and empirical) suggests male students outperform female students in higher level mathematics and science classrooms.  Thus a problem statement --The existence of an academic gender gap between male and female students in science and mathematics -- can emerge from teachers' experiences in their classrooms and the literature on gender and education. |

1. First identify your issue problem area (gender, literacy, bullying etc.) and a statement about that area.

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2. The next step is to turn a problem statement into a (manageable) research question.

* A question like, "Why do male students perform better on science tests?" is too broad and is not feasible to answer in one research project.
* If a teacher-researcher is interested in the causes of the gender difference in a particular school or classroom, a better 2-part question would be:  "Do secondary males' and females' differ in their attitudes towards science?"  and "Do these attitudes influence their performance on science tests?"
* This teacher-researcher would be drawing on the literature that suggests the gendered ways students view academic subjects may impact their performance.  A clever teacher, after determining whether students' attitudes differ and what attitudes are most important to alter, could change his/her teaching practice to see if doing so increases the females' scores (without, of course, lowering the males') -- this is what action research is all about!

**TASK:** The following table lists problem statements for gender and bullying.

a) In groups or alone, write a research question for at least one problem statement.

b) Then think of two problem statements based on your experiences and readings in education.  Write research questions for those problem statements.

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| **Problem Statement** | **Research Question 1** | **Research Question 2** |
| Students labelled EBD/ADHD are disproportionately low income, minority boys. | What are teachers' understandings of EBD/ADHD diagnoses and gender? | How do teachers interact with EBD/ADHD boys in their classrooms? |
| Recently attendance had dropped at the school and parents have complained that their students are being bullied. |  |  |
| A new anti-bullying program has been implemented in the school, but no one is certain that it's working. |  |  |
| Indigenous females in remote communities are attending and completing secondary school at much higher rates than Indigenous males. |  |  |
| There are a disproportionate number of male primary school teachers. |  |  |
| Problem Statement 1: |  |  |
| Problem Statement 2: |  |  |