

Guest Editorial: Methods for research in professional educational psychology

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It was almost 20 years ago that *Educational and Child Psychology* last had a special themed issue on the topic of research methodology (Lunt, 1998). Indeed, it was also the first time that this theme had been selected, a matter for which there was a very clear reason, namely, that a research orientation by the profession was at that time still at a very early stage of development. For this assertion there is abundant evidence, extending throughout the two decades preceding the special issue, from the time of Gillham's (1978) *Reconstructing Educational Psychology*, which called for, and indeed was a major catalyst in promoting, a move from a preoccupation with individual assessment to wider systemic and strategic roles. At the start of that period, Wedell and Lambourne (1980), in a survey for the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP), indicated that educational psychologists in England and Wales spent a very small fragment of their professional life engaged in research. At about the midway point, MacKay (1987) found a very low representation of work by educational psychologists in over 800 articles in five major journals of central relevance to the profession. At the end of the period in question Lindsay sought to carry out a partial replication of this finding and found no articles by practising educational psychologists published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* for the period 1993-97 (Lindsay, 1998).

It was not that the impetus for a research role was lacking within the profession, as the importance of such a role had been frequently asserted over a long period of time

(for example, Carrol, 1976; Gray, 1991; Lindsay, 1981; MacKay, 1987; Thompson, 1979). It had also been acknowledged that the development of research skills was a key task which the profession must address. In outlining the features which educational psychology services would require through the 1990s, participants in an exercise conducted by Gersch et al. (1990) viewed skills in research and evaluation methodology as essential in assisting education authorities in their role as an enabler of change. Farrell and Lunt (1994) in proposing radical change in the system of training in the UK set out a core curriculum for educational psychology training courses. One of the seven areas listed was: 'Research and evaluation: including research design and analysis, evaluation methodologies, quantitative and qualitative research methods.' They proposed that all applied psychologists should possess expert knowledge in this area.

However, things were changing within the profession in ways that would increasingly match educational psychologists' acknowledgement of the importance of a research role to a commitment to applying this in practice, leading in turn to a need for having access to the necessary research tools in terms of methodology. Six changes may be noted here.

First, the profession became actively engaged in seeking to turn the rhetoric of changing paradigms into reality. In 1995 the Leverhulme Trust, one of the largest research funding providers in the UK, commissioned a strategic review of educational research which would inform future funding policy. As part of that review, Webster and Beveridge (1997) reported on the place of research in educational psychology services. While the majority of educational psychologists who took part in their survey felt that their professional training had been inadequate to equip them with the research skills they required, all without exception acknowledged the potential

importance of research within their role, and 70% of respondents indicated some level of both past and current research activity. In Scotland, a research orientation was increasingly promoted from the mid-1980s onwards through the Government's Professional Development Initiative, which provided modest funding to every psychological service to allow one or more psychologists to carry out research projects within a theme agreed with the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists and the (now) Scottish Division of Educational Psychology. This allowed for staff to be released for a period totalling about a month in the course of one year, with a support and coordination programme provided at national level.

Second, while the respondents to the survey by Webster and Beveridge felt that a major shift was required in convincing local education authority administrators and school managers of the relevance of offering research services, available evidence was indicating that the recipients of educational psychology services in fact endorsed the research role. In a series of studies by Boyle and MacKay, while teachers continued mainly to value the traditional psychology roles of assessment and counselling, and rated educational psychologists' actual involvement in research as being very low, when asked to what extent they thought they *should* be involved in this area, the response rose to 80% who answered 'much' or 'very much' (Boyle & MacKay, 1990; MacKay & Boyle, 1994). Similarly, MacKay (1997) reported a high level of support for the research role in a survey of 48 primary school head teachers, noting that this represented a positive change when compared with previous research. A further shift was noted a decade later, with key staff in 126 primary and secondary schools reporting higher levels of educational psychology involvement in strategic and research roles and at the same time higher levels of satisfactions with the services offered (Boyle & MacKay, 2007).

Third, there was increasing recognition of the importance of evidence-based practice and the need for the role of the 'practitioner-researcher' in educational psychology (Greig, 2001; Lindsay, 1998). The journal of the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) which, with its change of name in 1985 to *Educational Psychology in Practice*, had become much more a traditional academic journal rather than a source for dissemination of news within the profession, adopted from 1997 the subheading, 'Theory, research and practice in educational psychology'. In 2002 *Educational and Child Psychology* recognised the increasing importance of this field with an issue on the theme of 'Educational psychology and evidence' (Miller & Gibbs, 2002). Frederickson noted the gathering momentum of evidence-based practice within education, and its implications for educational psychology services in relation to the research competencies needed and the contribution to be made to developing the evidence base (Frederickson, 2002).

Fourth, there were increasing expectations that one of the strategic services which educational psychologists would offer to schools, to education authorities and to Councils would be research expertise and the provision of a range of research initiatives. In some instances this was formalised. In Scotland, MacKay's proposal for educational psychology services to be based on a matrix of five core functions operating at three levels was endorsed by the Scottish Government (MacKay, 1999). The five core functions were consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research, and the three levels were that of the individual child or family, the school or establishment and the local authority. This matrix became the formal requirement of services a short time later, with the function of research being subject to inspection on the same basis as all other services (Scottish Executive, 2002).

Fifth, a major impetus to research competencies and a research orientation was provided by the increased availability of training via the practitioner Doctorate in Educational Psychology from the late 1990s onwards, a move which had for a considerable period been supported by the profession and particularly by the University training programmes (Lunt, 1998). This led in turn to a change in the training route in the UK to a doctoral level qualification and a larger proportion of the profession having the skills required to carry out research initiatives and to provide research expertise to others.

Sixth, changing paradigms in research methodology increasingly led to the introduction of methods which were particularly well suited to practitioner research, and which lent themselves in a variety of ways to the work being undertaken by educational psychologists. This indeed was the key focus of the 1998 special issue. There had been growing criticisms of traditional psychology for its 'over-commitment to a positivist epistemology and methodology' (p. 4). A striking feature had been the emergence of qualitative methods, and it was noted that the paper by Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) was one of the first papers on qualitative research methods to be accepted for publication in a mainstream psychology journal in the UK.

Thus, in the midst of these various developments, the previous themed issue dealing with research methodology was published. Understandably, its focus was overwhelmingly on the new qualitative paradigms, with every paper either setting out an aspect of qualitative methodology or redefining the position of the scientist/practitioner in terms of new as opposed to traditional paradigms.

In this respect the focus of the current issue is a broader one. Qualitative paradigms are fully embedded in mainstream research in psychology, and as would be expected they feature in this issue. However, it must also be stated that positivist paradigms

using quantitative methods and traditional tools of statistical analysis continue likewise to have a key position in educational psychology research just as they do in wider research across the whole field of psychology. These too are therefore appropriately represented.

The papers selected for this issue draw from the work of practitioner-researchers using a range of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Kennedy and Monsen provide an overview of Vivienne Robertson's Problem Based Methodology (PBM), a post-positivist approach to action research developed to improve practice in education by solving 'problems', viewed as constraints on solutions, by integrating research, expertise, professional judgement and the views of clients. They outline the theoretical basis of PBM and the importance of espoused and in-use 'theories of action' which inform problem-solving and practice. They also provide a case study of its application to work with practitioners in early intervention to support the view that the approach can be used to improve outcomes for clients by increasing the effectiveness of practitioners.

Hill and her colleagues report on a significant research study funded by the Children's Commissioner for England which aimed to examine the experiences of a potentially very vulnerable population of children and young people – those in residential special schools. They applied and adapted a range of methods for engaging these participants as co-researchers, for hearing their perspectives and for considering how their wellbeing and rights were being promoted and facilitated by their schools.

Sutcliffe, Oxley and Hughes explore the benefits of qualitative approaches to research, focussing on three different methodologies, and using 'worked' examples from their own research to demonstrate how these might function in practice. Sutcliffe critically examines Grounded Theory, one of the most popular qualitative methods in

the social sciences. He argues that Grounded Theory offers a unique and valuable perspective to educational psychologists considering practitioner research into a complex social process, and provides a powerful alternative or, indeed, complement to quantitative methods.

Oxley's paper provides an overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach which, while popularly used in the health sciences, is not yet commonly employed in educational psychology. She argues that IPA lends itself neatly to educational research. IPA places particular emphasis on the perceived experience of the individual, and recognises the value in exploring the idiosyncratic accounts of small samples of 'expert groups' – thus permitting a richer and more holistic picture to emerge. Oxley contextualises the methodology using her own research, which explores the experiences and perceptions of senior school leaders, in relation to behaviour management systems in school.

Hughes makes the case for education professionals to use Q methodology, both in research and more broadly in practice. Citing his own research as an example, Hughes argues that Q methodology provides a critical, respectful and person-centred approach which 'hears' a range of voices, including those often considered marginalised. He posits that the 'novel' nature of Q, including the card sorting activity which is at its heart, offers the benefit of involving those young people who might be less able or willing to converse – thus including those views which might be 'silenced' by other methodological approaches.

Boyle, Connolly and MacKay provide an overview of systematic review and meta-analysis and illustrate the procedures and decision-making involved by means of a commentary on the analysis of data from a previously published study. They argue that the methodologies have relevance for educational psychologists and outline

developments informed by a critical realist perspective and implementation science which have implications for the effective use of the approaches to synthesise the findings from complex programmes of intervention.

Carroll reports the findings from a survey of publications by educational psychologists and argues that the results reveal a shift over the years towards the greater use of qualitative research methodologies by practitioners. He uses commentaries on a series of four studies of pupil absenteeism in primary schools to illustrate the relevance of the contributions that quantitative research can make to an understanding of attendance problems and argues for the wider use of these research approaches by educational psychologists.

Finally, we recognise that research competencies within educational and other branches of applied psychology are diversely distributed. Active researchers range from those whose memory of 'stats' is that which has mainly been forgotten from their undergraduate Psychology degree, to those for whom a discussion of artifact correction versus meta-regression is their opener for small talk. The former proceed most surely when they have adequately consulted the latter, who are generally more than happy to advise, and we trust that all who are concerned with research in educational psychology at any level will find increased familiarity with the diversity represented in this selection of papers.

Clearly, any single issue of a journal covering research methodology must be seen as a signpost rather than a manual. The diversity of qualitative methods alone is vast. The two-volume *SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Given, 2008), as well as providing an alphabetical coverage of terms and techniques, sets out over 100 qualitative 'approaches'. Many of these have textbooks exclusively devoted to them. Similarly, the *SAGE Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences (QASS)*

series ('The Little Green Books') runs to 175 volumes. With due recognition of the extent and complexity of this field of study, the editors trust that this 'signpost' will be found useful to the profession.

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