

# Sampling

## Educational research

### Part of the life

Educational research is part of the life of university lecturers in departments of education. Nearly every year a huge range of initiatives, from those that focus on one school to those costing hundreds of thousands of pounds which concentrate upon national studies, are carried out and published. The British Educational Research Association is one of the leading networks of educational researchers in the United Kingdom and it holds annual conferences and publishes a respected peer-reviewed journal from which most of the examples below are taken.

The following paragraphs provides a compact overview of the kind of issues addressed by educational research. They show that, while teaching and learning are important, plenty of other topics catch the eye. Much of the research is grounded in observation and fieldwork, but some is more philosophical and conceptual.

At the conclusion, short comments are made about possible implications for Christian teachers.

### Pupils

Swain (2004) investigated the construction of masculine identities among pupils aged 10–11 years old. He carried out fieldwork in three primary schools in the Greater London area. The schools crossed the socio-economic range, one working class, one middle-class and one a private fee-paying independent school. Arguing that the construction of masculinity is 'inextricably linked to the acquisition and status within the peer group', he wanted to discover whether, in the different schools, masculinity was constructed differently. The cultural and educational resources available to

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pupils varied from school to school. For example, in the independent school and the middle-class school it was much more difficult to secure status by exhibiting bad behaviour in lessons or around the campus, whereas in the working class school it was much more difficult to secure status by academic achievement. Sporting prowess was the most obvious option available in each school, although culturally-valued knowledge connected with image and fashion or the latest computer games was also common to this age group as a whole. Swain concluded that 'boys who use a set of resources and interactional skills to establish high status in the dominant pupil hierarchy in one school will not necessarily be able to sustain this position in another'. This implies that socio-economic factors help to determine masculinity, and that boys who move from one type of school to another may well have trouble adjusting in the new environment.

A rather different study by Norwich and Kelly (2004) examined the views of 101 boys and girls aged 10–11 and 13–14 with special educational needs arising from moderate learning difficulties. There is an international move towards the inclusion within mainstream schools of children with disabilities. At the same time importance is now attached to the child's voice in decision-making. A significant proportion of pupils in mainstream schools preferred learning support in withdrawal settings while a significant minority in special schools preferred to be in a mainstream setting. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties, however, experienced "bullying" in both mainstream and special educational contexts with the result that educational policy preferences are difficult to decide unambiguously. This is because mainstream pupils did not report more in-school "bullying" overall than special school pupils. Norwich and Kelly write: 'On the contrary, mainstream pupils received significantly less "bullying" than special school pupils from other main school pupils or from neighbours and outsiders'. (The word "bullying" is put in inverted commas since some of the behaviours like teasing or name-calling identified by pupils would not fall within a strict definition of bullying that involved physical harm.)

Fearn and Francis (2004) examined student perceptions of teaching and learning in theology



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and religious studies within higher education. They obtained questionnaires from 1,103 students taking A-level religious studies. An earlier study had shown that twice as many students were motivated to study religion by the 'religious studies' approach to the subject than by other approaches. Yet the motivation to study religion remains linked to the students' own religious faith because practising churchgoers are likely to hold different views from non-churchgoers. The data also demonstrates that studying religion both at A-level and at undergraduate level is a highly feminised activity. At the same time, males who expressed an interest in religion emphasise quite different aspects of the subject than females. For example, in the study reported here, females are more likely than males to be interested in Hinduism, Judaism and Sikhism. Similarly, females are more likely to be interested than males in the subject of religion and the media, in biblical languages, in the Pentateuch and in the foundations of Christian ethics. Males are more likely to be interested in the philosophy of religion, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Reformation – though many of these differences do not reach statistical significance because of the generally higher level of interest among females.

### **Teachers**

MacDonald (2004) reported on attempts to make primary schools in Scotland less hierarchical and more collegial. Classroom teachers were to be regarded as experts in learning and teaching and the idea was that teachers should together agree school-wide collective activities based on their expertise. In brief, headteachers were to be leading professionals rather than inaccessible administrators. A case study of one school with 300 pupils and 13 teachers in central Scotland showed that teachers found it very difficult to treat the headteacher as one of themselves. This is partly because of the way that access to the headteacher's study was restricted and partly because, even when given an opportunity to participate in the development of programmes within the school, several teachers declined on the grounds that they were not expert in committee work. So MacDonald concluded that teachers tend to cling to a subordinate persona even when they are officially encouraged to discard it. Hierarchy

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and subordination appear to be ingrained in the teacher psyche.

A study on the emotional impact of performance-related pay on teachers in England was carried out by Mahoney, Menter and Hextall (2004). They interviewed 76 teachers in nine primary and secondary schools between 2001-2003. The study showed that the early days of the threshold process were fraught with difficulties and that women teachers in particular felt exposed and vulnerable. Headteachers' stances towards the policy were translated into a range of approaches. In one instance when the classroom teacher saw that it was not in her headteacher's interest to fail her as it would raise questions about his management of the school, she applied. The threshold process was consistently regarded as a hoop to be jumped through rather than as an accurate indicator of performance and, despite pay rises, there was little evidence in the study that the threshold has done anything to redress the deep alienation many teachers feel. Moreover there is a danger that concern with creating and collecting evidence has diverted teachers' attention from teaching. It may be that there will be a cultural shift away from relationships with pupils as the basis for teaching and learning; instead, children will be seen as a means towards a financial end. Unresponsive children will be perceived as an impediment to financial reward. Yet the lack of transparency in previous systems for rewarding teachers or promoting them was also clearly damaging to the morale of staff. This study, therefore, needs to be repeated once the dust has settled to discover whether negative emotions have faded away. In the end, the threshold may function mainly as a mechanism for removing exceptionally poor teachers.

## Schools

As an example of research on schools in general, Wrigley (2004) explored the school effectiveness research paradigm. This has been behind many of the policy initiatives of governments since the late 1980s. The received view is that schools are more or less effective in promoting the education of pupils with the result that, once the right policies and strategies are in place, we can expect better teaching and learning, ie better standards. Government policy has concentrated upon the role and function of headteachers who, in many readings of the evidence, are the key people to lift or lower educational achievement within the classrooms of their schools. Wrigley's critique suggests that the school effectiveness paradigm is mechanistic and fails to examine environmental influ-

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ences when tracing causal relationships. This critique, which is not based upon empirical methods but is rather a critique of the methods that are used in many research studies, is much more favourable to school improvement paradigms that focus on qualitative methods and on the ownership of improvement by the whole staff rather than by external agencies, inspectors, management gurus, politicians and the media.

## Conclusion

Of the many conclusions that could be drawn, here are four. First, research may function as a critique, whether by rational argument or the production of new empirical evidence, of received opinion. Christian teachers who find themselves swimming against a stream of fashion may be drawn to research to test their intuitive perceptions against educational reality. Second, educational research can give us a stimulus for curriculum innovation or for understanding the world of children. It may keep our own interest in education alive and fresh. Third, debate within the arena of professional researchers is usually much simplified by reporting in the media or when research is translated into government policy. Only if you take care to read good research reports can you expect to avoid being carried along by uncritical bandwagons. Fourth, educational research may help us to understand the complex social and micro-political forces acting upon us for good or ill: in understanding our context, we may understand ourselves; and in understanding ourselves, we may better serve God.

## References

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