Occasional Paper

Research as a Journey: The New Researcher as a First-time Traveller

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BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

This paper uses journey as a metaphor, and to a lesser extent problem solving, to provide a framework for understanding the activity that more early childhood practitioners are finding themselves in – research. For someone setting out on the research journey for the first time the whole experience seems daunting if not overwhelming. Perhaps very similar to taking a first train ride. This is travel into a foreign land where everything is new and our state of arousal is markedly higher than we are used to and, therefore, we are also more stressed. Meanwhile, those around us who are frequent travellers seem to take it all for granted looking relatively relaxed and going about their business without a thought to the new traveller's anxieties. Yes, these frequent travellers can find the right train, respond appropriately to all the heavily-accented information coming across the loud speaker, and appear very relaxed as they wait. And don't you feel obvious standing on the platform – alone – although unbeknownst to you, perhaps, there are other new first-time travellers who are as equally puzzled as you are.

So how did frequent travellers become so comfortable with this business of travel? Were they born to it or did their parents induct them when they were young? What follows is an elaboration of the various elements of the journey into research. Each part of the research journey has tasks and challenges, which I will elaborate on using my other metaphor of problem solving. It is no different to how we think about the strand of exploration in *Te Whaariki* for children. Who is there to support the learner? What is the balance of formal teaching and independent learning about any particular aspect of the problem-solving activity? Is it okay to make mistakes? How can more experienced learners provide a safe environment for early exploration so that the beginner experiences success and does not get discouraged? How do beginning researchers develop working theories for making sense of the research process?

What you are reading now is my own working theory about the research process.

Each research journey provides new learning, which contributes to the skills the researcher takes on the next journey. There will be all sorts of challenges. Some very new and others we have had experience of before. There will be the big questions to answer such as where am I going on this journey and why is it important to make it? And there are the day-to-day sort of problems, those smaller details that still impact on the success of the journey. For example, how will I record data from an interview? Unfortunately the questions, that at first glance, seem trivial can turn out to have much greater impact later on. For the new researcher the problems and questions are coming at you from many different levels. Without previous research experience to see how all these decisions come together to create the journey, managing the experience can become quite stressful.

The following describes some of the different parts of the journey and reflects on some of the things I have learnt. This article is my attempt at a *short travel guide*, if you like, for the beginning researcher.

HOW MUCH BAGGAGE CAN WE TAKE?

I have created this image of a first-time traveller going to a new destination that is really only known by a name. How do we know what to pack for this journey? What will we need along the way and what will we need in order to complete a round trip? If we leave things behind we cannot race back and get them. And in terms of problem-solving, the decisions made earlier impact on the decisions that can be made later on. The temptation of course is to prepare for every possibility, but as many travellers know excess baggage is not only very expensive it can be difficult to look after. So let's look at what we might take with us and consider some of the questions it poses. As I go I write in my travel diary what I have learnt from my own experiences. My intention is not to say "this is how it should be done" but rather it is a record of what I have learnt from my own previous travels.

So what should we pack? For example, do we pop the tape recorder into our bag for the research journey. A classic problem in relation to research, to record or not record an interview. The answer to what seems such a simple question is fraught with often-unimagined consequences. How does the person being interviewed feel about being recorded? Will it impact on the interview itself? What type of recorder should I use? Does it have an internal microphone or will it require hooking a microphone onto each person involved? Does the recorder use mains power as well as batteries? If the answer is that batteries are needed,

how long do they last? (Have you every tried listening to a tape where the batteries are running down and the tape runs slower and slower?)

So I have taped the interview. Now I need to turn it into some sort of data. Transcription, listening to the tape and typing up the verbal record of the interview. Do I have to do it? Who should do this? Does this person have an early childhood background. There can be a lot of jargon and terminology in early childhood speech that we take for granted. In which case we need to get the interviewer to recheck the transcription after someone else has transcribed it. Did I put aside money within my budget to have someone else do it? It can take up to four-to-six hours to transcribe an hour of tape. That can equate to nearly a day's work to conduct an interview and then transcribe it. How many interviews did you plan to do for your research study?

> Travel diary: If the time frame and budget allows for recording and then transcribing then I will plan for it. But I give people the option to say whether they are happy for me to record the interview. Sometimes in an early childhood centre even the office environment can be filled with lots of noise. I know too that the tape will record interruptions. I tell people that I like to use a recorder because it reduces my errors in recall and I don't have to take lots of notes during the interview, which can be distracting. I use a more expensive recorder because the extra time taken to transcribe a poor tape is outweighed by the shorter time to transcribe a better quality recording and the fewer mistakes are made in transcription. I use a stand up microphone that sits on a table rather than attach people to microphones. It seems less distracting. I use mains power where possible. I carry a long extension cord just in case the nearest power point is some distance from where we might have the interview. It is not without its problems, however, as recently I left the cord behind after an interview. Fortunately I did not need it in the interviews that followed that day. Sometimes it is easier to use battery power. I find I can get about six hours of interviews on my tape recorder from one set of batteries. After that I replace them anyway. The cost of a new set of batteries pales in comparison to losing an interview. In my most recent project I have not been using mains power. That could change again if I end up with a tape that did not record.
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> But try as one might it is difficult to be prepared for all possibilities. In my first trip to Titirangi in Auckland, where I was told later that many alternative lifestylers live, I went to interview a mother and child (I had arranged the interviews by phone from Dunedin). They lived in a bus! We had the interview under an awning. That was

> okay, it was a nice day. Recording the interview with the mother was fine as we had our interview under the awning sipping tea. The child was very happy to talk to me but she tended to be up and down from her seat, hoping on rocks nearby and swinging from the clothes line as she spoke. Maybe I should have hooked her up to a microphone so she would have had to sit still! Not to say the experience was not a good one but rather we can never be sure what sort of situations we may end up in. Being flexible is the name of the game. It is important to try and not let the unexpected upset you, as it will further distract what you are able to take away from the interview that follows. On such occasions it is important to review the tape immediately after the interview and fill in as many gaps from memory by making written notes before the memory is lost.

But just when you thought you had sorted out the above problems you realise there are questions about how to transcribe. How much detail do I need? Do I record the way they say things as well as what they say. What formatting instructions do I give the transcriber?

The questions being raised here can only be answered by looking at what forms of analysis you want to use. Analysis you say, but we are still collecting data. And my response is that they are all part of the same journey and the data collection and analysis must be thought of jointly. I say this having learnt the hard way and watching many others also miss this connection. The distinction between data collection and data analysis is paralleled in the distinction between the term research methods and the term research methodology. Research methods is about collecting data in a range of ways, be it interview, postal survey, observation, etc. Research methodology refers to the theory that helps us understand the data we are collecting, why we collect it in a particular form and what to do with it once we have it (analysis). Methodology is very subject or discipline based and you may have heard references to feminist theory, sociocultural theory, symbolic interactionism or behavioural theory, etc. And none of these terms refer to single theories but rather are groupings of theories that are similar but not the same.

WHO IS THIS TRAVELLER - RESEARCHER IDENTITY?

So back to the journey at hand. I have packed my bag with a range of things that I think I will need, or couldn't do without, but how I use them will be dictated by who I am - my identity as a researcher. Now when we are overseas and we are asked "where are we from?", we refer to New Zealand. But if we are asked the same question in New Zealand then we refer to the part of New Zealand that

we come from (my local city council came up with a new slogan last year 'I am Dunedin'). In terms of methodologies, if I am a behaviourist amongst sociocultural theorists, I identify as a behaviourist, but amongst behaviourists I identify as a social learning theorist (one type of behavioural theory). And just as people visiting New Zealand are able to be identified by the way they behave, the way they dress, their use of language etc., so are researchers identifiable by the language they use, the way they conduct themselves and how they use their research methods. Many a comment has been made about the way Japanese tourists to New Zealand use cameras. It seems to set them apart from other camera users. In the same way people's research methodologies (identity) sets them apart from the way they use research methods (tools).

Even though I might use an interview method, the way that I use it is still based on some theoretical understanding about 'what is research'. What is the data I try and collect? So if I'm saying I want a group of people to talk to me and tell me what's happening for them, I must have an understanding of what I consider as appropriate data? What's the best way to collect that? Will an interview give different data from actually observing my area of interest, either by joining in the experience for myself (participant observation), or trying to gather data by observing somebody who is going through that process (non-participant observation)? And of course, how is that different from trying to gather some of that data from a questionnaire? Am I going to get the same sort of data? If it will be different, why would it be different and will it matter? And so that's asking questions about research methodology.

> Travel diary: Something I have learnt from my own journeys as a researcher is that only so much of 'my' identity as a traveller or researcher is established prior to making a journey. The journey itself makes an important contribution, especially by the way that others identify us. We can learn about research methods and methodologies by doing classes, courses and reading. A national identity is probably no more than saying 'I am a researcher'. It is the personal choices we make about our research, which says something about our beliefs.
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> It is very difficult to train for conducting research, using research methods, without making a few journeys. It is a very experiential process, just like teaching. Formal education classes and assignments are important to preparation as an early childhood teacher, but it is from the time with children that teachers learn from making the many professional judgements they do. It is these experiences that teachers reflect on. And, just as our personal identities are shaped by new experiences such as journeys to new places, so to will our research identities be shaped by doing research. We come to new

understandings about the journey and the way we might use particular research methods to enhance that experience. For example, having conducted a number of postal surveys I have a better feel for how people might respond to particular questions. I know which question formats can be 'misinterpreted' against the type of response I would like. And sometimes I have been caught out using the same format and one little layout change will see a question being interpreted in another way. Developing a questionnaire is very much solving a series of problems and having some experiences of this tells me where the likely problems are lurking. But having conducted such questionnaires and learnt from such experience I am more aware of the limitations of such surveys. I accept they have a place and a potential but as a researcher I would not want to see myself as a survey researcher.

Lastly, just as no two journeys are the same, repeating research is never a matter of repetition. I am not the same researcher who conducted the research the first time. I will have learnt new things (knowledge, skills and attitudes) since I conducted the research previously. Some of that learning will have been from mistakes or watching and listening to other people's experiences.

TRAVELLING TOGETHER AND WHOSE ITINERARY?

Having looked at research methods and methodologies, there are still questions unanswered about why we should make research journeys in the first place. In my own initial travels research was undertaken from my motivation to learn. It gave me a chance to look more in-depth at some topics that I was interested in. This is often reflected in the experience of studying for postgraduate qualifications. But over time I am no longer working towards qualifications, I am no longer making journeys on my own and, even better, I do not have to pay for my own trips. Much of the research I am involved in consists of working in teams, each member usually contributing something unique to the journey, and it also involves compromising some aspects of our research identity in order to develop a team identity.

To make these journeys into research even more complicated the trips are being funded by external agencies that designate the destination by supplying the research questions. It is a process of negotiation to decide how to travel to these destinations, timeframes, funding and budgets become more critical. Our research identity, and therefore research methodologies, would say that these questions should be answered in such a way but the research budget will only

run to economy class compromises. There is a lot less reference to research methodologies and most of the discussion centres around research methods.

> Travel diary: I have become a lot more pragmatic and eclectic in my approach to research. Just as I said there are limitations to survey research, the same applies to all research methods. In one negotiation with external funders where we had won a contract based on offering a number of research methods I said this would answer the funder's research questions in a particular way and that because of time constraints we would have to live with that. I said there were questions we would not be able to answer and that was something we agreed to accept.

There is a lot to be said when travelling with others. It is one thing to have a supervisor who you can share aspects of the journey with at certain times, but another thing all together to have another person or persons to share the journey and its experiences with as you go. As an inexperienced researcher there is a lot to be gained from having a more experienced person along for the ride pointing out important features, telling you what to avoid, giving you another person to solve problems with as they arise. There is also that feeling of support as one goes through the various highs and lows of any journey.

TRAVEL AND 'THE PAPER WORK'

Another advantage of having experienced travelling companions, especially for the first time traveller, is having someone to help make sense of border crossings. Starting a journey and turning up to an international border without appropriate paperwork in hand is rather stressful, if not embarrassing. In the same way ethics committees have become a lot more prominent for researchers in recent years. There were times when such things did not exist, and travel had a very 'wild west' look to it. Now ethics committees loom large very early on in the journey. Many research institutions not only want to support researchers to get it right, but they also want to protect their own institutional status. To the new researcher ethics applications appear like a lot of extra paperwork. Yet they are good at forcing us to answer questions we had not considered ourselves. Hopefully, a research supervisor would be doing exactly the same thing. It is an accountability measure to be asked to demonstrate that you are ready to undertake the research. This time the combination of research methodologies and research methods may be called into question depending on the research experiences of the ethics committee.

> Travel diary: For a period of time there were problems created when people on ethics committees did not have an understanding of

qualitative methods (a set of research methods and their corresponding methodologies). In terms of describing travel plans it is like saying I might visit this place and that but I am not sure and have no idea how long I might stay in each place if I do get there. This can make ethics committees rather nervous, as they cannot get the researcher to describe in sufficient detail what is going to happen in advance. At times I have felt that I was inventing questions for an interview to reassure the ethics committee but not particularly sure that I will end up using them. Such is the nature of qualitative approaches. No doubt some parents feel the same way as the ethics committees when their children are venturing out on the big OE. Things have improved now that there is a better understanding of how some of the research approaches work but it doesn't remove the uncertainty for ethics committees in terms of what the researcher might or might not end up doing. In contrast the quantitative approaches appear like well-planned tours with all the details established well in advance, almost like a package tour. All destinations are mapped out well in advance, and as a result it is much easier to reassure the ethics committee.

IS THE TRAIN THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL?

As researchers we tend to have our preferences as to how to conduct research. Just like our travel decisions there are advantages and disadvantages to each. So far I have relied on the image of a train as a main means of transport but that does not mean there are not other ways of making the journey. We all have our preferences about travel. Some of us may hate to fly, but we know it is usually the quickest way to arrive at destinations that are a bit further away. The train is steady, relaxed but with few options as to when and where you can get off. The car is often preferred, as it allows the traveller maximum control of sites seen along the way and deciding one's own schedule. Deciding upon which mode of transport is best is usually a combination of the type of trip we value and the nature of the destination we have set ourselves. This is very similar to deciding which research methodology to adopt. The way we collect and analyse data is often a reflection of our research values (or the funder's) and the particular questions that concern us for a particular journey.

For a while there was a strong debate about quantitative approaches versus qualitative approaches to research. The quantitative approach is about collecting data that can be quickly turned into numbers, whereas, the qualitative approach is usually about retaining the whole picture and gaining contextual information. It was a debate based on what was considered the right way to conduct research.

This has possibly subsided somewhat but one only has to look at the type of articles appearing in particular journals to see where journal editorial boards' preferences may lie. It is pretty much a matter of researcher identity, and adopting one approach over another is making claims about research methodologies and research methods as was described earlier.

> Travel Diary: Even now having a broad understanding and experience of a range of methods and methodologies there are times when I go and seek guidance from those who I believe to be better travelled than myself in either the destination or the mode of transport. The domain of research is so broad that it is very difficult for any one person to be skilled and knowledgeable in all areas. This is why working in teams or having access to supervisors has a lot to offer. It provides a group of people to discuss ongoing issues with that is very difficult to do on your own. Access to such people at critical times is important. I have seen people whose supervisors are so busy that they are not able to give the time necessary to make the researcher feel supported. A difficult situation to be in.

THOUGHTS ON THE JOURNEYS END

As I was able to undertake more journeys I was also able to become more aware of the limitations of doing research. Each project will have its strengths and weaknesses. What is achieved, or the quality of the journey, is dependent on so many different constraints. Yet some of the important outcomes from a project may not be anticipated. And certainly it is difficult to see too many journeys into the future but past journeys are always influencing current ones.

This makes it difficult for those who may only make a few journeys and decide it is not for them. Others will come to it later in life and bring other experiences to bear on the journey. The experiences of a teacher have a lot to offer a research journey, not so much in the detail of what to bring or how to pack a bag, but rather in relating to those you meet along the way or offering views on the value of different parts of the journey. Of course if a researcher is making a journey back to their 'home town' they will have the advantage of local knowledge. On some projects this sort of contribution will be critical to the success of the journey. Without access to the local knowledge the journey may not make much sense or the places visited along the way may be the wrong ones to get a 'full' understanding of the locality. Sometimes a local guide can embellish the daily experience. There is an issue for the tourist seeking an authentic experience. How do you know when you now have a full or correct understanding of the places visited? Sometimes when you tell the stories back 'home' someone who

is familiar with the same places you visited can offer different understandings of what you have seen. There is also the opportunity to share journeys in publications or at conferences. They are important times for our thinking to be tested and challenged. Maybe it requires a few trips before we finally get to 'know' a place. At other times repeated visits continue to reveal new insights so that all we can know is we will never fully understand some locations we visit on our journeys.

Just as any methodology or method will have its strengths and weakness so does the metaphor I might choose to use to describe research. I think there is a lot to be gained, for first-time researchers in particular, by using the metaphor of a journey, but maybe it does not capture all aspects of the process and leaves some questions unasked. In terms of social research to what extent in taking a journey do we forget to think about those being researched, the locals we meet along the way during our journey into a foreign land? More recently references to action research and the community of learners suggest that research is a collective experience as opposed to the view of the traveller in a privileged position (maybe because they carry American dollars) over the locals who rely on visitors for support. To think of research as a journey where I as the researcher collect data that I retain ownership does not allow me to ask what is 'it' I am collecting. To what extent is the interview I record now 'my' interview? Instead I could view myself as the steward offered a taonga. Maybe we need to be more critical of the impact that tourists have and consider whether the journeys contribute to negative outcomes for the people we meet. At this point I find myself still using the metaphor of research as journey, but I see that it may not fit the idea of action research where the place of study is 'at home'.

As an experienced researcher maybe I now need a new working theory to make sense of what I do. That might include relegating the metaphor of myself as a traveller, with a focus on research methods and methodologies, and now conceive of myself as a community member with, amongst other things, a research role and responsibilities. Yes, I have some skills that others may not, but I could now give priority focus to a new metaphor that encompasses the relationships I develop with other community members. In using research for the benefit of the community, as a whole, there is also a sense in which the metaphor allows for political conceptions of research to be facilitated. This is exactly what Kurt Lewin, a key developer of action research, envisaged it to be about (Carr & Kemmis,1986). In their own way metaphors are tools that allow us move beyond our current thinking. They scaffold our learning by allowing us to make mental connections that we would not have made in their absence. So like all scaffolding they have a purpose and a context and we need to decide when they have done their job and then look for new scaffolds to take us to new

learning. This is not to say that the metaphor of research as a journey is of no value but rather I encourage you to use it if it will support you where you currently are in respect of your own research experiences, especially for the beginning researcher. At the same time when the metaphor has done its time don't be afraid to look for others.

CONCLUSION

The idea of thinking that research is like a journey has some appeal. It allows us to consider where we want to go and how we want to get there in relation to research. It also provides the opportunity to consider how personal preferences or values, as well as external influences determine the experience. The metaphor also offers beginning researchers a starting point for making sense of all that is 'research' by linking it to another experience that you are likely to have experienced already. The experience of a 'new journey' contains the excitement, stress and trepidation found in beginning research. It also suggests that we can do a certain amount to prepare but it will never substitute taking the journey for real. Bon voyage!

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