5. The application of sociological research methods to the study of education.
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Introduction

The 2008 AS Sociology Specification requires students to understand research methods "in context" (such contexts being either Education or Health) and the basic mechanics of the examination questions has been outlined by the specimen question papers; students will be required to:

a. Apply a given research method (such as questionnaires or interviews) to a given educational issue or problem (such as gendered subject choice).

b. Illustrate the method using examples from real-world research.

While some publishers and their authors have, for whatever reason, gone overboard with the education / methods link-up - giving it far more space / attention / prominence than it really deserves – it’s clear that this new type of question will test and stretch students in ways they are not used to being tested and stretched. This being the case it’s likely that teachers will also find themselves having to change their teaching strategy to place far greater emphasis than is probably currently the case on research methods / methodology when citing or discussing educational research.

While this is all well and good, a cursory scan of educational research generally reveals a dearth of methodological information (although recent research does include methodological details) which makes it difficult for teachers to pass-on details about research methods in educational studies to their students.

This document is an attempt to, if not exactly fill the gaping void, provide some methodological details about research studies that students can potentially incorporate into their exam answers. Having said this, although linking methods to education is going to be important, the real skill required of students is in the exam itself – the ability to think about and apply research methods in the heat of the exam to a given situation – and it is this that probably needs to be practiced during the AS-level course.

In this respect the “methods in education” question raises some novel problems for students and teachers – not the least being that students have to understand a range of specific methods (advantages and disadvantages etc) and then apply them to a given (unseen) topic (such as “gendered subject choice” given in the specimen exam paper). Looking at the mark scheme for this question it becomes apparent that what’s required is generally:

"The strengths and weaknesses of the selected method will be accurately identified in some detail…Material drawn from Item B and reference to examples of research studies employing the selected method will be relevant, accurate and sensitively interpreted. Material will be interpreted and applied to the research issues identified in Item B in a more explicit manner".

In other words, students need a good understanding of a particular research method to get the bulk of the available (20) marks. The problem, however, is how to use “reference to other studies” in an answer.

A detailed understanding of the research methods used in educational studies is going to be a big ask for AS students; the examiner, therefore, will probably settle for mention of some relevant studies in an appropriate way – such as illustrative material for particular points made about a research method; for example, knowing that Sue Sharpe (Just Like a Girl, 1976) used content analysis for part of her research and being able to discuss “content analysis” in terms of research methodology as it might apply to a question based around, say, gendered subject choice.

One “teaching solution” here is to identify for students the research methods writers used in their work as and when appropriate. In this way students will build-up a “research methods in education” glossary as they cover education in a fairly unobtrusive, naturalistic, way.

Finally, when approaching “methods in education” it’s important to keep in mind:

1. This question is only a relatively small part of the overall mark. Even if students do the "list advantages and disadvantages" of methods (rather than apply them to a given topic as they should) they’ll still get some marks.

2. The question is a stimulus response type – students are given something about the topic around which a method can be applied / evaluated.

3. Most students will be able to construct a reasonable answer based on the material / their knowledge of a particular method - their ability to reference further studies is going to be the icing on the cake (i.e. a small part of a relatively small part of the exam).

4. AQA aren’t going to choose stimulus material that’s too obscure - students should be able to look at the question, read the stimulus material and then key into the work they’ve ordinarily done in their classes.

5. This is AS level - the examiner’s cannot reasonably expect students to have a vast depth of knowledge about loads of different potential studies, their methodology and so forth.
a. The role and purpose of education, including vocational education and training, in contemporary society.

Statistics


Cox, Peter (2004) “A Fair and Equal Education for All? Is egalitarianism alive, and well, in schools?”: Paper Presented at the Annual AARE Conference, Melbourne Anonymous survey of 800 students, in which students’ beliefs and attitudes toward subjects, and their reasons for subject choices were examined

Experiments: Natural


Nash, Robin (1972) “Keeping In With Teacher”. Testing the effect teacher perceptions have on pupil behaviour and achievement.

Case Study


Lupton, Ruth (2004) “Do poor neighbourhoods mean poor schools?”: London School of Economics. Study conducted between 1999 and 2001 in four schools which all served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country.

Experiments: Laboratory


Interviews: Structured

AS Sociology For AQA

Interviews: Non-Structured


Interviews with parents from four schools which all served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country.

Mackenzie, Jeannie (1997) “It’s a Man’s Job...Class and Gender in School Work-Experience Programmes”: Scottish Council for Research in Education.
Perceptions of gender roles, peer pressure, role of school staff, influence of parents, and fears and expectations about work placements. Interviews with teachers, employers and pupils.

Mirza, Heidi Safia; Davidson, Julia; Powney, Janet; Wilson, Valerie; Hall, Stuart (2005) “Race and sex: teachers’ views on who gets ahead in schools”: European Journal of Teacher Education Vol. 28, No. 3: Routledge

Interviews with young school girls.


Interviews with school-age children.

Study of the effects of social class background on children’s oral language development. Interviews with students, ages 10 and 11 years, in their last 2 years of primary schooling.

Observation

Study conducted between 1999 and 2001 in four schools which all served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country.

A school term of observation in each of 3 British urban primary schools.

Observation: Participant

The first case study of a comprehensive school based on (overt) participant observation.

Content Analysis


Norman, Fiona; Turner, Sue; Granados-Johnson, Jackie; Schwartz, Helen; Green, Helen and Harris, Jill (1988) “Look, Jane, Look” in Woodhead, Martin and McGrath, Andrea (eds) “Family, School and Society”. Analysis of children’s books.

Survey: Questionnaire

Around 25,000 students questioned in the three years following their graduation.


Survey of English Secondary schools.

In terms of research into differential educational achievement there are a couple of interesting points to note:

1. A range of studies have used official statistical data to test the idea of differential educational achievement; such studies have effectively used secondary data to establish (or less-usually refute) the existence of differential achievement.

2. A further dimension here is that attempts to understand the reasons for differential achievement have overwhelmingly used non-structured (focused and unstructured) interviews.


MacBeth, John; Kirwan, Tony; Myers, Kate; McCall, Jim; Smith, Iain and McKay, Euan (2001) “The Impact of Study Support”: Department for Education and Skills Research


Carter, Rebecca and Wojtkiewicz, Roger (2000) “Parental involvement with adolescents’ education: Do daughters or sons get more help? “: Adolescence Vol.. 35, No. 137. The investigation used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), which collected information from approximately 25,000 eighth-grade students. Several types of parental involvement were analyzed for gender differences, including school discussion, parent-school connection, parental expectations, parental attendance at school events, and three measures of parental supervision (checking homework, limiting television watching, and limiting going out with friends).

Crespi, Isabella (2003) “Gender socialization within the family: a study on adolescents and their parents in Great Britain”: Centre of Studies and Research on Family. Measured the different dimensions of gender socialization using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The survey began in 1991 and samples around 5,000 households and 10,000 individuals each year.


There were three school types in the study: mixed ability schools (predominately mixed ability in all subjects, with setting in no more than two subjects in Year 9), partially set schools (setting in no more than two subjects in Year 7, increasing to a maximum of four in Year 9), set schools (streaming, banding or setting in at least four subjects from Year 7).


Phase 2: Each participating country tested and surveyed a nationally representative sample of 14-year-olds. A teacher questionnaire and a school questionnaire were also used. The teacher questionnaire gathered background information about the teachers, as well as questions about their attitudes, views and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in citizenship education. The school questionnaire, completed by the head teacher gathered general information about the school.


Questioned Year 7 and Year 11 pupils after their exams, asked about values, career aspirations, family background and peer group affiliation.

MacBeth, John; Kirwan, Tony; Myers, Kate; McCall, Jim; Smith, Iain and McKay, Euan (2001) “The Impact of Study Support”: Department for Education and Skills Research Report No. 273

Student self-report survey.


30 young women from a school in Trinidad (aged 16 and 18 years) participated in semi-structured interviews concerning their career choices and attitudes toward marriage and relationships.


A survey of the values of 2,500 people between the ages of 15 and 75.
Lupton, Ruth (2004) “Do poor neighbourhoods mean poor schools?”: London School of Economics. Interviews with parents from four schools which all served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country.


Mackenzie, Jeannie (1997) “It’s a Man’s Job...Class and Gender in School Work-Experience Programmes”: Scottish Council for Research in Education. Perceptions of gender roles, peer pressure, role of school staff, influence of parents, and fears and expectations about work placements. Interviews with teachers, employers and pupils.

Mirza, Heidi (1992) “Young, Female and Black”: Routledge. Questionnaire given to 62 young women aged 15 to 19 years from working-class backgrounds, and 198 of their black and white male and female peers.


Power, Sally; Edwards, Tony; Whitty, Geoff and Wigfall, Valerie (2003) “Education and the Middle Class” Open University Press. In-depth interviews with 350 mostly middle-class young people considered academically promising when they started secondary school. The researchers followed them up in their mid-twenties to see if they had fulfilled their potential. Roughly half went to independent schools and half to state grammar and comprehensive schools.

Sammons, Pam; Smees, Rebecca; Taggart, Brenda; Sylva, Kathy; Melhuish, Edward; Siraj-Blatchford, Iram and Elliot, Karen (2002) “Special educational needs across the pre-school period”: Institute of Education. Interviews with parents at entry to the study.

Walker, Barbara (1996) “Understanding boys’ sexual health education and its implications for attitude change”: Economic and Social Research Council. Interviews were conducted with 39 boys and young men (11 and 21), including people from as wide a range of background and experience as was available. The relatively small sample allowed the time to explore at length issues which were important to the boys themselves, rather than simply following a pre-existing interview agenda.


MacBeth, John; Kirwan, Tony; Myers, Kate; McCall, Jim; Smith, Iain and McKay, Euan (2001) “The Impact of Study Support”: Department for Education and Skills Research Report No. 273 Structured group interviews at a number of the schools. Three specially developed interview schedules were used; one for students who participated in study support, one for students who did not attend, and one for staff other than the study support coordinator, who were involved in the delivery of study support at the school.


Nash, Robin (1972) “Keeping In With Teacher”. Interviewed teachers to understand how they conceived of their “ideal pupil”.

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Berridge, David; Qureshi, Tarek and Wenman, Helen (2000) “Where to turn? Family support for South Asian communities”: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The study was located in the new unitary authority of Luton as a case study. Focus groups were organised with the four main South Asian ethnic and religious groups involving 53 parents. Social workers were interviewed responsible for work over the previous year with 20 South Asian families. Four of these were developed into more detailed individual case studies involving discussions with parents. Key senior managers were also interviewed.

Kerr, David; Lines, Anne; Blenkinshop, Sarah and Schagen, Ian (2002) “England’s results from the IEA International Citizenship Education Study”: Department for Education and Skills. Phase 1 of the international study


Lupton, Ruth (2004) “Do poor neighbourhoods mean poor schools?”: London School of Economics. Study conducted between 1999 and 2001 in four schools which all served neighbourhoods within the top 3% most deprived wards in the country.


Francis, Becky (2000) “Boys, Girls and Achievement: Addressing the Classroom Issues”: Routledge. Classroom observations used to examine how boys and girls saw themselves as learners; showed the impact of gender constructions on pupils’ learning and behaviour.


Keddie, Nell (1971) "Classroom Knowledge" in Young, M.F.D. (ed) "Knowledge and Control": Collier-Macmillan. Observation of staff meetings, classes.


Mirza, Heidi (1992) “Young, Female and Black”: Routledge. 62 young women aged 15 to 19 years from working-class backgrounds, and 198 of their black and white male and female peers were interviewed and observed in their homes and classrooms over a period of 18 months.


Nash, Robin (1972) “Keeping In With Teacher”. Exploring the impact of teacher’s expectations on pupil achievement.
c. The significance of educational policies, including selection, comprehensivisation and marketisation, for an understanding of the structure, role, impact and experience of education.

Statistics


Survey: Questionnaire


Wilkin, Anne; Kinder, Kay; White, Richard; Atkinson, Mary and Doherty, Paul (2002) “Towards the development of extended schools”: National Foundation for Educational Research. Analysis of proformas returned by 79 LEA officers from 78 different LEAs, itemising examples of extended schools in their authority.

Interviews: Structured

Wilkin, Anne; Kinder, Kay; White, Richard; Atkinson, Mary and Doherty, Paul (2002) “Towards the development of extended schools”: National Foundation for Educational Research. Telephone interviews with 79 LEA officers from 78 different LEAs and key personnel in 50 schools (25 primary, 20 secondary and 5 special) displaying evidence of an ‘extended’ school approach.


Fielding, Michael (2001) “Students as Radical Agents of Change”: Journal of Educational Change, Vol. 2, No. 3. Project in which “students became researchers” as they investigated and reported on various aspects of their schooling.

Interviews: Non-Structured

Davies, Peter and Adnett, Nick (1999) “Market Forces and School Curriculum”: Staffordshire University, Business School Working Paper No. 991. A study of secondary and tertiary education in two small to medium sized towns, with the focus on three secondary schools (an independent, a grant maintained and an LEA financed comprehensive) in the more competitive of the two local markets. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with headteachers, deputy headteachers responsible for the curriculum, and heads of department.
d. Relationships and processes within schools, with particular reference to teacher/pupil relationships, pupil subcultures, the hidden curriculum, and the organisation of teaching and learning.

**Statistics**


**Survey: Questionnaire**

Cano-Garcia, Francisco and Hughes, Elaine (2000) “Learning and thinking styles: An analysis of their interrelationship and influence on academic achievement”, Educational Psychology, No. 20. Students completed Learning styles and Think styles inventories which were then analysed and correlated to exam performance.

Howard-Jones, Paul; Pickering, Sue and Diack, Anne (2007) “Perceptions of the role of neuroscience in education”: The Innovation Unit, University of Bristol. Questionnaire (open and closed questions) asking educators about their thoughts, beliefs, views and knowledge on the link between neuroscience and education.

**Interviews: Non-Structured**


Lees, Sue (1993) “Sugar And Spice: Sexuality and Adolescent Girl”: Harmondsworth. Individual interviews and group discussions with 100 girls (aged 15 and 16) and 30 boys at 3 different schools.


**Content Analysis**


**Observation: Participant**


Coffield, Frank; Moseley, David, Hall, Elaine and Ecclestone, Kathryn (2004) “Should we be using Learning Styles? What research has to say to practice”: Learning and Skills Development Agency. Examined theories about learning styles and scrutinised some of the leading commercial products in this field. The aim was to identify the most influential models and instruments of learning styles, to look for evidence to support their claims and to assess the likely impact on students’ learning.


McRobbie, Angela and Garber, Jenny (1976) “Girls and subcultures” in Hall, Stuart and Jefferson, Tony (eds.) “Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain”: Hutchinson. Touches on questions about the nature of subcultures and subcultural behaviour (analysis of different texts).

**Experiments: Laboratory**


Cano-Garcia, Francisco and Hughes, Elaine (2000) “Learning and thinking styles: An analysis of their interrelationship and influence on academic achievement”, Educational Psychology, No. 20. Students completed Learning styles and Think styles inventories which were then analysed and correlated to exam performance.