

## **Student experience podcast transcript: Alexandra Scherer**

**Could you tell us about your research project? We are particularly interested to hear about the research design and the research methods that you chose.**

For my research project, I looked at children's responses to the representation of other children in award-winning picture books. The research design involved participant observation of children reading and having literacy lessons in the classroom, followed by the use of picture books which served as trigger materials as a base for paired interviews. The books I used had won the Kate Greenaway award for illustration the previous year (2008). I then used semi-structured interviews to interview the children about those books. I used a Grounded Theory based approach to analyze the data once I had transcribed it.

**What sparked your interest in this subject?**

I have long had an interest in children's literature, and this became linked with children's readings of books when I started teaching.

**Could you tell us how you came up with those questions?**

Mainly with the help of my supervisor, and from reading around the literature to identify gaps I wanted to address in this research.

**How did you go about the literature review? Can you illustrate the steps that you took?**

I started by searching for the main relevant texts, and looked into their bibliographies, with the intention of exploring and mapping what else had been written in this area. I then wrote this up, looked at other material I had read and made a critical analysis and synthesis of this in order to position and focus my research question further.

**Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?**

I thought I had found an area which no-one had written anything about at one point, which was centred on research with young children reading. If I was making the claim that no-one had written anything about this, I needed to be sure and so I had double check sources, articles and various journals, to ensure that there was not something more up to date that had been written.

**What prompted you to choose this research design and method?**

Because I wanted to explore a particular substantive area but I also wanted to ensure that the participation agenda, and the children's opinions who I was researching were heard in the end result, I also sought to write questions which were achievable with the resources and time frame I had available.

**What factors influenced your choice of research methods?**

I thought that due to the potentially sensitive nature of the data that was going to be collected, qualitative methods lent themselves to my research best, and the fact I was working with young

children in paired interviews as a way of eliciting information seemed to be the best way forward, particularly based on my experience of teaching children of the same age. I used participant observation, too, as a way of getting to know the children in their school environment, and this helped me gain a sense of the everyday nature of the setting.

**Did you need to secure access to an organization in order to do your research? If so, how did you go about it?**

I did need to secure access, and as this was through 'insider research,' so I had access through the senior development officer for schools to the particular London borough where the research was going to be taking place. I emailed her initially, and then contacted the head teacher of the school through her, who I then met with, explained what I would be doing and took a sample of the books with me. Following this I made contact with the class teacher whose class I would be working with, so access was multi-layered. The class teacher had the final say about which children I would be working with, in which combination, and where and when the interviews could take place.

**How did you choose your sample and what principles guided your sampling?**

I chose an equal number of girls and boys, with a range of reading levels and abilities, and the children came from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, rather than just one. The children were all the same age because they were in the same year group at the school. As a single form entry school, there was only one class in that year group, so there were 12 children in the sample. The principle which guided this was for there to be a sense of parity and representativeness of the sample. It was deemed by me that the sample was large enough to form a case study, and due to the nature of the research, the intention was that I wouldn't look at generalizing from the sample, but instead explore the particular features of a group of children reading in the inner city mix of a London school.

**Did you encounter any complications in constructing your research instrument(s)?**

Not really. I did have some concerns about making materials child friendly, but some of the ones I brought into class to try out proved to be too distracting and exciting for the children, such as puppets and a children's tape recorder.

**Were there any problems when it came to administering your research instrument(s)?**

The initial research design had intended to work with six children all at once sitting on the floor, in a circle in the classroom. Due to the background noise, and various practical issues of hearing each other speak and seeing the books which we were reading, I revised this and took the children outside in pairs to read and interview instead. There were obviously some issues around power and ownership of the recording equipment, as the children wanted to pick this up, played with it, press stop. Rather than feeling frustrated by this, I decided to treat it as data. Upon analysis, I found this to be quite an interesting topic.

**What were your research questions?**

Things like to explore the representation of the child through children's identification of the characters in award-winning picture books; to consider the ways in which picture books are used in the formation of children's identity, and whether gender and ethnicity were salient features; to contribute to the field of the Sociology of Childhood by questioning the ways in which children's agency came to bear on their readings of the books; and, to explore the ways in which children 'read' both the pictures and words in picture books, and whether that was different to adults' interpretations and assessments of those books.

**Did you experience any ethical difficulties at any point in your research?**

There was one complicated issue with making research 'work' with small children, in the sense that I found I had to manage their behaviour in order for the interview to not simply dissolve into a game, or fits of giggling. I found it hard to do this without adopting the teacher role that I found easy to slip into, and I needed to find another way to approach the children, in the role of the researcher. I mostly approached this by being as reflexive about the situation as possible.

**Did you have any technical difficulties with the equipment or software at any point?**

Only that I think I did what I think everyone does at one point, and forgot to turn the recording equipment on at the start of the interview.

**Do you have any comments about your relationship with your research project supervisor? What role did they have in the process of doing a research process?**

It was actually really invaluable to have someone else look over what I had written, especially in a project so personal, and so long as it is possible to lose a sense of judgement about it, I found sending my supervisor pieces I had written, and then flagging up specific things to look for—such as clarity of argument—was really helpful. It was predominantly a critical, editing, and methodological helping role which she took in this project.

**What are the main lessons that you have learned from this process? Are there any aspects of the research that you would like to have done differently?**

I think I learnt that researching with children can be incredibly worthwhile, but, unlike working with adults, it can obviously be harder to get children to talk at length about concepts, and, as other researchers have found, task-based research is often better for eliciting responses to questions. I would like to have had longer in the field, as I think some of the children remained a bit reticent with me, and I think had I been more familiar with them, and spent more time working on the research relationship, this might have made for a more conducive research experience for both parties.

**If you had one bit of advice to give to students who are about to begin working on their research projects, what would that be?**

Make sure you have picked something you are fascinated in as your research question and topic, and that it is actually feasible to do in the time frame you've got allocated, because if you are anything less

than fascinated you will end up hating it by the end, and even if you are really interested in it, there will still be times in the long process where you feel that there is no point in it and that everything you have done is completely worthless! Everyone loses a sense of perspective about their research project at some point, so you've just got to keep pursuing it.

**How did you go about analyzing the data?**

I used a grounded theory-based approach, so I transcribed the data, made initial codes, coloured those codes, and then started to draw themes from this. Once I had several themes, I selected a few and built on the data, and then built theory up from the data after this.

**Did you encounter any difficulties at this stage? If so, how did you deal with them?**

It was quite difficult to decide which themes I should pursue, and what parts of the data to put together in order to make them a coherent theme. One which I ended up writing up became 'the materiality of the book' but this was framed in terms of the ways in which children read in the initial coding process.

**How did you go about writing up your research project?**

Having analyzed the data, I built the two analysis chapters around the published literature, and any new findings or indications for the published findings that this provided.

**What problems did you encounter at this stage, if any, and how did you succeed in overcoming them?**

Again the issue of selecting which data should be used was quite difficult, and I decided this with the help of my supervisor. There was an issue here, too, that in places I had overanalyzed the data—that is to say I mapped too much of my own ideas or the published theory onto the children's words. This was managed by checking back to what the children had actually said, and by having my work proofread by my supervisor.