Concluding thoughts

By Janet Goodall.

Having read the case studies and the thematic chapters, what do we know now, that we didn't know before? The answer(s), of course, will be different for every reader. If you are used to researching learning in out-of-school contexts, you may feel vindicated: the struggles you've faced are shared with other researchers; you are not alone in asking the questions you have asked. If this isn't your area of research, you may have experienced a range of reactions, from envy (why is your research not this interesting?) to being very worried about the ethical dilemmas faced by colleagues (and ethics boards). You may also have recognised similar issues when researching in your own area. In this concluding chapter, I will highlight some of the important themes which run throughout the previous chapters. The purpose of this chapter, however, is no more to be definitive than any other part of this book – it is, rather, to stimulate reflection, thinking, and debate. This leads to the first theme: being comfortable with ambiguity.

Being comfortable with ambiguity

As stated in the introduction, and reiterated in the case studies and thematic chapters, the field in which we are engaged lacks a clear definition – we are in the land of ambiguity from the very outset. It is notable, however, that all case studies had *some* relationship to a school/schooling or other institutionalised form of support for young people – perhaps that is the distinguishing feature of this sort of research? According to the usual understandings, educational research may be said to have three main purposes: exploring issues and finding answers to questions, sharing policy, and improving practice (López-Alvarado 2016). Another source likewise tells us that research involves systematic enquiries, including the collection of data, which is carefully documented, analysed and interpreted, 'in accordance with suitable methodologies set by professional fields and academic disciplines' (Hampshire College ndg).

Attentive readers will have already noted a number of concerns here. As we've seen in the case studies and examined in the thematic chapters, research into learning that takes place outside of school often raises more questions than it answers (as does all research, to be fair). Importantly, it also sometimes doesn't even have a set question to be going on with. Instead, it may set out to understand experience, and the questions may *arise from* the research, rather than be *dictated by* the research (as seen in Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential and Case Study 9 – Theory of Change).

Further, Tymms (2016) holds that the purpose of educational research is to improve education, which seems, on the face of it, to be a reasonable statement. But… is out-of-school learning the same as what we think of as "education"? Does all learning come under the heading of education? This is clearly an untenable argument – an infant learning to grasp something within reach is *learning* but one would be hard pressed to say she was involved in *education*. While one might argue that all education is encompassed within learning (and all schooling encompassed within education, at least ideally) (Goodall 2017), surely not all learning can be called 'education'. Education is a specific, intended act, which is oriented toward learning. Schooling is (ideally) an instance of education, an historical manifestation thereof (Sidorkin, 2011), and describes the processes which take place between designated teachers and students in (generally) state-supported institutions of learning (schools). The articles in this volume are concerned with *learning* and quite possibly even education (though that varies from one instance to another), but not with *schooling.* The actions and interactions described here therefore fall outside of the realm in which most educational research (which more properly would be known as 'schooling research' or 'research on schooling') is situated, but not outside of the realm of education itself.

Is this, however, a distinction without distinctiveness? I argue it is not, for the simple reason that children and young people exist outside of school. There are 365 days a year, and children in the UK, for example, are only required to be in schools on 190 of those days. Unless we assume that young people do no learning on the 175 days when schools are not in session, or in the hours before and after school, we as researchers surely have a responsibility to try to understand the learning that takes place out of school. We are familiar with the concept of the systems around the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and acknowledge the importance of learning that happens outside of the confines of the classroom (Boonk et al., 2018; Jeynes, 2012). Yet the area is under-researched (as shown by the work here) and poorly understood – hence the need for this research.

But just as this research is situated in new places (kitchens, sports fields, cafes, even school rooms out of hours), it is also situated within new and different relationships, which are new research spaces. The researchers in this volume for the most part were not teachers (or, even if they were, were not acting as such during these experiences). There was a need for them to negotiate new understandings not only of their relationships with their participants, but also with ethics committees, funders, and colleagues. They also utilised new methodologies, or revamped previously-used methodologies to suit new situations (and these new relationships). The relationships and methodologies are not separate but are, instead, intimately entwined.

So, what is the purpose of research on out-of-school learning, if it is not to improve education? We would argue that it is to improve, not learning, but rather *our understanding of learning* – how it takes place, where it takes place, for whom, and why. It could be argued that this is a particularly fruitful landscape for research: after all, the ultimate purpose of research is surely to increase knowledge. What seems to be important in this type of research is the openness to not only the knowledge one set out to find (if one did, indeed, set out with a specific knowledge quest in mind, which as Case Study 5 shows us, is not always a requirement of good research), but to all forms of new knowledge that are related to one's study. Throughout this book, authors have highlighted their own processes of learning – and the subsequent impacts of their new knowledge on their research. This isn't because the researchers were ill-prepared for their work. Rather, it was because they were possessed of attributes which seems to be essential to this sort of research in particular: humility, and a willingness to relinquish control. The first is an acknowledged virtue; the second, conversely enough, is built upon a foundation of self-confidence - in this case, confidence in one's current state of knowledge, and also of one's ability to learn. But the relinquishing of control brings its own issues.

Implications – for policy and practice

It is probably not surprising to readers who have come this far, to find that it is nearly impossible to separate out implications for policy from those for practice (within which I include the practice of further research). There are, however, themes within these implications, the first of which is that of ethics. How can one conduct – or perhaps more importantly (for ethics committees at least) guarantee to conduct - research ethically, if one does not retain control of the process?

Ethics

Throughout this work, authors have raised issues of ethics. This is not just in what might be called the traditional sense of 'avoiding harm' (generally focused on doing no harm to the participants of the study), but rather, ethics in terms of an unfolding process, which cannot be bounded (as can so little within this field) by institutional codes of practice or sets of governance. Philosophers of education have been grappling with these issues for some time (Griffiths 1998; Bridges 2001; McNamee 2001; Wiles, Charles et al. 2006, for example), and in general would seem to agree with the authors of the penultimate thematic chapter, that 'being ethical' - the process of acting ethically - is the goal for researchers, rather than (mere) adherence to an institutionally approved statement.

In spite of what so many of us have been taught, there is a growing consensus that although institutional codes of ethics may be a necessary part of the process of educational research (Head 2020), these codes and practices are more of a starting point than a finishing line for researchers. There is an acknowledgement that educational research (and indeed most research in the social sciences), takes place in a terrain which is constantly in flux, wherein participants are as likely to do the unexpected as the expected. The researcher, therefore, needs to not only know what is in their institutionally approved ethics statement, but much more importantly *understand the principals on which that statement is founded.* This then requires constant, moment-to-moment ethical responsibility and responsiveness on the part of the researchers. Does it, then, also require continued relationships with the mechanisms of ethical governance? Should institutional ethical approval itself be an ongoing process, to which researchers return at set – or appropriate – points in their research?

Further, in Case Study 8 - Democratic Engagement, we have seen that ethics in research needs to be conceived of broadly enough to incorporate a lack of agreement among participants; the goal of ethical research is not to achieve (or evoke nor yet to impose) harmony. There is knowledge to be gained in dissonance, as well as in ambiguity.

Emergent research in fixed confines

Another of the recurrent themes throughout this book has been that research on out-of-school learning often does not fit within the usual parameters of research. It is challenging not only to the researchers (in terms of ethics, as above, and in terms of establishing relationships, see below), but also to the institutions within which those researchers are housed.

The last of the thematic chapters on slow research sums up these challenges well. In the first instance, the discussion of ethics makes clear that it is very difficult for researchers to cover all possible situations and aspects of their projects in the usual institutional ethics processes, in any but the most general

terms. Even saying that consent will be sought from participants can be difficult, as seen in Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes, and in emergent projects (Case Studies 5 and 8), it may not be clear at the outset what participants are consenting to.

There are, however, two more profound challenges which precede the challenges of ethical approval (at least chronologically). One relates to obtaining institutional approval for research on out-of-school learning, and obtaining funding to support the work. The research chronicled in this volume (and thousands of other projects not listed here) presents a direct challenge to the neoliberal systems within which the academy functions (Wilkins, 2018). This type of research rarely fits neatly into categorical understandings, as we have seen throughout, in the discussions of researcher status (insider/outsider) and perceptions of status (is the researcher a researcher? A coach? A friend? An advocate? All or any combination of these?). It may not even be possible to state at the outset what the research questions will be, which is generally a fundamental part of obtaining funding. Research within this field, then, calls for creativity and trust from the researchers and participants, but also from research committees, supervisors, and funders.

A more fundamental challenge, however, is again threaded throughout the case studies and the thematic chapters: who benefits from this type of research? Or, to put it differently, why should we bother doing this sort of research? This research challenges the current, standards-based neoliberal ideas of what learning is (or at least, how it can be assessed), as Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work points out. It returns us to older conceptions of learning as being about living well, rather than being seen as a preparation (for life, or, more commonly, for the workplace) (Dewey 1897, Dewey 1916).

These are not easy issues to address. We can, of course, point to the benefits for the participants. In some of the case studies, the benefits are clear (parents were more able to support their children's mathematical learning, for example; children in a classroom had an enjoyable bonding experience through building an online community; parents were enabled to question and disrupt narratives of power around their children's schooling). However, it may be more difficult to explain the wider benefits of this type of research. This relates again to a theme which is highlighted in various case studies and thematic chapters: whose knowledge is valid and valued? What do we, as a society, and what does a funder, gain from knowledge accrued by 'hanging around' with young people, from cleaning a kitchen with young people, having coffee with parents, or helping put away chairs after an event?

This is not a question that can be answered as a blanket statement or generalised; it must be discerned, probably as a matter of process (rather than one time for all) by each project team, including the participants.

The primacy of relationships: taking and making time

Every chapter in this work has, in one way or another, highlighted the importance of relationships, of the value of participatory research methods, and of what the authors of Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths call the relational agency of everyone involved (including the researchers).

These relationships are not a by-product of the research. In many senses, they *are* the research – from them emerge the questions to be asked, the understandings to be shared. These relationships are built

on trust, which is built up over time, over tens or hundreds of small conversations and seemingly unimportant acts, as well as the more usual research processes of interviews and note taking, consent forms and information sessions. Relationships such as these cannot be built quickly; they emerge from personal interaction. As many of the case studies have highlighted, this form of research cannot be rushed. This means that it is unlikely to be short term, or 'quick turnaround', and this leads to more difficulties in acquiring funding. Although the research may be small-scale, it is likely to be long-term. This may be the reason that some of the case studies recount only small elements of what were much larger studies. One of the challenges faced by research on out-of-school learning, then, may be finding legitimacy in itself, rather than as an adjunct to other research (so that it becomes a field defined by its own parameters, rather than that-which-it-is-not).

Deny the dichotomies and burst the boundaries

The research recounted in this volume is wide ranging – in terms of geographical location, the age of participants (young children to adults), and subject matter (harm prevention, parental engagement, community building…). It does not fit neatly into any one category, and we are thus returned to the discussion in the introduction: this is a field without the expected fences to keep the research corralled into neat packages (or herds, to continue the analogy).

Rather than seeing this as problematic, however, we would suggest that this is the particular strength of this type of research, particularly now, in a post-Covid world. Research into out-of-school learning breaks away from the entrenched, and arguably outmoded, positivistic conceptualisation of educational research. The function of the studies in this volume, and the others like them, is not to count instances or people or scores (indeed, Case Study 1 – Out-of-School Activities and Attainment discussed the difficulty of incorporating statistical data into this area of research). Rather, as shown throughout the chapters of this book, the function of this research is to bring into being new knowledge, new voices – not the voices of the researchers alone, but the voices of all involved in the process.

This research challenges the staple dichotomies of research training – insider/outsider research, qualitative/quantitative, even researcher/participant. It moves across and between boundaries – of types of research and of positionality, as well as subject (how do teenager's conversations on street corners relate to education?).

We would again argue that this is a necessary, and necessarily unsettling evolution in educational research. We face unprecedented challenges to our research, to our schools, and to our understandings of learning and, indeed, our understandings of each other. Previous forms of research will not suffice: clearly they have not done, as after decades of 'educational research' we are left with a system which is demonstrably iniquitous.

Moving forward in a Post-Covid World

This book was conceived and begun before any of us had ever heard of COVID 19; much of it was written during the lockdowns that resulted from the virus, and is being finalised as we move into a new, if perhaps not brave, post-pandemic world. The world-wide response to the pandemic was the closure of school buildings (Home, 2020; UNESCO, 2020), although not of schools, as many continued to function, providing online or other forms of learning throughout the lockdown (Crick et al., 2020; Doucet et al.,

2020; Eivers et al., 2020). However, even with these online provisions, the number of hours young people spent engaged in school-based education (as opposed to learning, more generally) seems to have been reduced, sometimes significantly (Andrew et al., 2020). This has led, of course, to much hand wringing and media stories about 'lost learning', the need to 'catch up' what children and young people have missed over the last year.

The discourse of 'lost learning' is predicated on hours children spend in contact with teachers – but as this volume so clearly shows, 'learning' (and research on learning) is not of necessity related to either the school building or indeed school structures[1]. It seems unlikely that we will ever 'return to normal' or 'get back to the way we were'; too much has changed (and indeed, too many have died). It would seem that schooling, and indeed education, will be at least somewhat if not profoundly different going forward (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Daniels, Ellis et al., 2020).

We might, indeed, say that the time has come for research on 'out-of-school learning' to take centre stage - because that's what the vast majority of young people have experienced over the past year. This is relevant in terms of location (eg the physical closure or very restricted access of/to schools), and in terms of who the learning is directed by. The delineation above, about the difference between learning and schooling, has come into its own: young people have certainly been learning throughout the pandemic; the question is, how does society value that learning?

So COVID 19 has reframed the way we think about learning, but it has also reframed the way we think about research, and research methods and methodologies. With the backdrop of a pandemic, much research has necessarily had to shift to an online arena. Many of the case studies discussed relied on in-person contact, 'hanging around' with participants and co-researchers, to develop the necessary relationships, to allow for ethical reflexivity, to understand context. But while 'hanging around' was an important part of many of the case studies, the themes that arose from those case studies are still relevant in a new post-pandemic context. The core themes of reflexivity, relationships, forms of knowledge, emplacement, messiness, ethics, and slow research, are still helpful for reflecting on research processes that involve remote interaction, or take place in school settings, or in other formal contexts. These themes are not limited to research on out-of-school learning, but apply beyond that broad categorization.

This, then, raises the question of the extent to which research on out-of-school learning is different or special. We have argued that out-of-school learning differs from schooling in terms of intent, location, and structure. Yet research on out-of-school learning, and research on schooling, both fall to a large extent, within the definition of educational research. Do we need different, or special methodologies for this? This volume has shown that the structures used in much research on schooling are not often appropriate for research on out-of-school learning. But the methodologies and themes that have been discussed in this volume on researching out-of-school learning, can, of course inform research on schooling.

The principles of research discussed in this work: the need to take time, the emergent nature of not only findings but research questions and aims, the importance of interpersonal relationships, have perhaps

[1] The school-as-building, rather than school-as-community, is an essential part of the 'school closure' narrative; this shows a conception of school-as-place, rather than school-as-learning-space.

never been more pertinent or applicable to the wider field of educational research. Therefore, we commend the contents of this volume not only to those who are undertaking research (at whatever stage) but also to those who are supporting research – to supervisors and teachers of research methods, of course. But also to administrators, members of ethics and IRB boards, and perhaps particularly to members of funding agencies. Supporting research in out-of-school learning is a risky undertaking, requiring funders to trust professionals as they build trust among a much wider group of people. As the social mobility agenda intensifies, it is inevitable that there will be more scrutiny on out of school learning. This volume has seized an opportunity to present the strengths of research which isn't just narrowly focused on attainment-related outcomes. It is challenging research, time consuming and difficult to define. But it is also vastly important.