



FOREWORD

Engaging with children and young people with learning difficulties tends to push one into the role of researcher. We find ourselves continually adducing, testing and revising hypotheses about why the child or young person is behaving in a particular way. To be a researcher is to seek systematic evidence, to reflect upon that evidence and as a result to move inductively or deductively to a deeper understanding of the world. The process can be summarised in the mathematician George Polya's problem-solving approach: understand the problem, try to use experience from related problems to plan an attack, carry out the attack and finally ask yourself whether you really believe the answer you've got (Polya, 1957).

Jill Porter and Penny Lacey bring to that process a rich depth of knowledge and experience of (in total) over 50 years of working with, and researching the lives of, children, young people and adults with learning difficulties. Both now, as well as conducting research in the field, train professionals in research methods and supervise research students investigating research questions relating to learning difficulties. They are thus uniquely well placed to open the issues to a wider audience and there is a striking synergy in this book between knowledge of learning difficulties and understanding of the research process.

In writing about the research process Jill Porter and Penny Lacey highlight issues emerging with increasing prominence over the last few years. This includes a strong emphasis on the ethical aspects of research about, and with, children and young people with learning difficulties. A decade ago it would have been rare to find a doctoral thesis or research report in which substantial material addressed ethical issues, but it would now be unusual not to find a section devoted to this, at the very least within an account of methods and methodologies. The salience of these issues is illustrated by the increasing reference to ethical codes developed by professional bodies such as (in the UK) the British Educational Research Association, the British Psychological Society and the British Sociological Association. Similar bodies internationally also provide ethical guidelines. The possible tensions surrounding ethical decisions in research are highlighted when this involves bringing together professional groups who have traditionally worked in separate spheres. One person's gatekeeper is another's co-researcher; one researcher's commitment to sustaining confidentiality is another's abdication of social responsibility.



Researching Learning Difficulties

There is a pressing need for good research evidence as a basis for decisions about policy and provision. The political culture of initiative after initiative (Sure Start, Children's Fund, Children's Trusts, Valuing People, SEN Action Programme, P scales, etc.) can leave users bewildered and focusing on surviving the latest initiative; lacking time, energy and motivation for systematically evaluating those policies. The role of universities is surely to keep addressing the hard (and perhaps unpopular) questions and one mechanism for bringing clarity to the kaleidoscope of new policies is sound research. Research will lack credibility and impact if it is conducted in a token way. Sadly, public money is being wasted on poor quality and bland 'evaluations' which act only as a sop to funders and a brief 'stroking' to those whose work has been 'evaluated'. This timely book, written in a highly accessible way, with a transparent and evident understanding of the context implicitly reflects Polya's guidance and so provides a coherent basis for users as well as practitioners, of research involving children and young people with learning difficulties.

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Polya, G. (1957) *How to Solve It* (2nd edn). Harmondsworth: Penguin.