

Conference Report: 16th Research Students' Education Conference (RSEC): "Messy Research"

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Introduction

The conference provided a unique opportunity for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) and Masters students to showcase their research as well as engage with peers and senior academics from the School of Education in a supportive and inclusive forum. Designed to encourage submissions from students at all stages of their research, the conference welcomed presentations and posters from those who were new to the postgraduate journey as well as work-in-progress, completed and co-authored work.

The conference theme, Messy Research, encouraged presenters to share the innovative and non-traditional research methods they used to engage participants in creative and dynamic ways. Presentations were categorised into two sub-themes.

1. Getting started – discovering innovative and ethical methods of recruiting participants, promoting inclusivity, and reaching underrepresented groups.
2. Fostering positive relationships – creative use of the self as a researcher and engaging positively with participants during the study.

Fifteen presentations from postgraduate researchers in the School of Education at the University of Leeds comprised the conference programme: nine oral presentations and six posters. The presentations explored various aspects of students' interactions with their participants, encompassing topics such as recruitment, researcher positionality, and collaboration.

Poster presentations

Poster presentations were available to view throughout the day in the St George's room with scheduled opportunities to talk to the presenters over lunch and coffee. The six posters reflected the wide and varied knowledge and professional experiences of the exhibitors.

Kubrah Alhawamdeh, University of Leeds

Exploring Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences with Funds of Knowledge
Approach: Innovative and Ethical Recruitment Strategies for
Underrepresented Groups

Mavis Brew and Damian McDonald, University of Leeds

How can collaborative pizza making open our appetite for diverse, critical, and creative curriculum and learning conversations?

Clare Copley, University of Leeds

Personal experience of a research topic – a help or a hindrance?

Helen Latka, University of Leeds

Parents as experts in their child's deafness

Daljit Sehmi, University of Leeds

What barriers to supporting their children do Punjabi and Urdu speaking parents perceive or experience in the English Secondary Education System and how can schools ameliorate these?

Siying Shen, University of Leeds

Exploring Mandarin Learners' motivation in/with their context: the researcher-participants relationship in a longitudinal study

Session 1: keynote

Moderated by Clare Copley, the keynote speech was given by former University of Leeds alumna and programme manager of the Born in Bradford: Age of Wonder research project, Dr Katy Shire. Dr Shire has been working with the Born in Bradford (BiB) research study for over ten years across a variety of projects as well as fulfilling a key role in the BiB's Centre for Applied Education Research (CAER), Bradford.

Since 2007, BiB, one of the largest and most exciting health research studies in the world, has tracked the health and wellbeing of over 13,000 Bradford children from birth. In doing so, the project aims to discover why some people are happy and healthy, yet others are not.

In 2022, Dr Shire took on the new role of Programme Manager for BiB's Age of Wonder research project. This exciting programme intends to capture data on 30,000 young adults over a seven-year period, as they experience the critical period of adolescence and transition to young adulthood. It is hoped that the data collected will enable researchers to answer crucial questions about how we can improve physical health, mental health, and life chances for young people. For the first time, all aspects of the research are being co-produced with young people and a commitment to ensuring data is put back in the hands of the participants and other stakeholders is also paramount.

Dr Shire's presentation reflected keenly on this hugely challenging and ambitious research project and highlighted some of the successes of the project so far. Difficulties and barriers faced by the team were also discussed alongside how these challenges have shaped the team's plans for the future of the project.

Session 2: getting started

Moderated by Siying Shen, Session 2 – Getting Started. This initial Post Graduate Researcher -led session focused on the early stages of the research process. Presenters reflected on how they had recruited participants, promoted inclusivity, and engaged with under-represented groups.

Samson Sofowora, PhD student and high school maths teacher, spoke in his on-line presentation about Problem Solving in Mathematics at the GCSE Level in England (Successes and Challenges). Samson briefly summarised the process involved in selecting, engaging with, and recruiting participants. Central to his presentation was the importance of ethics and the issues that may arise when working with vulnerable groups such as children under the age of 16.

Kubra Alhawamdeh, PhD student, presented on Exploring the Use of Cultural Sources (Funds of Knowledge Approach) in Early Childhood Education: Challenges and Innovations in Participant Recruitment and Inclusivity. Kubra's presentation was a heartfelt expose of the challenges faced when trying to recruit participants in a country that is not your country of birth. Despite her light-hearted and often amusing recount of the difficulties and barriers faced when trying to recruit participants, Kubra demonstrated the important role resilience and tenacity play to successfully recruit participants.

Hannah Wainwright, PGR student in the School of Education at the University of Leeds, spoke about Entangled Engagement: Getting Started with Lines, Knots, and Participatory Theatre. Hannah's presentation was a masterclass in the effective use of slides. Through a series of photographs, Hannah led the audience through the theoretical framework of her research and how participatory drama in informal educational settings might be used to shape and support belonging for those seeking sanctuary in the UK.

Dan Trowsdale, Associate Professor, and part-time PhD student in the School of Education at the University of Leeds, presented on Using Visual Methods for Deep Engagement with Participants. Dan afforded the attendees an insight into his engineering mind. With a focus on design thinking and visual approaches to study and design Dan was able to demonstrate how this approach can pinpoint the time and duration of deep engagement between researcher and participant in a time effective manner.

Session 3: fostering relationships

Moderated by Dan Trowsdale, Session 3 – Fostering Relationships. This session focused on ways in which PGRs maintain good research relationships throughout the duration of their projects. Presenters reflected on their own positionality and how they navigated the challenges and benefits of the research relationships upon which their work relies.

PhD student Deepa Ellepola's research interests lie in Second Language Teacher Training and Teacher Education. In her presentation, Researching from the Inside: Challenges and Benefits in Qualitative Inquiry, Deepa discussed how her professional experience as a Master Trainer in Sri Lanka allowed her to foster deep and meaningful relationships with the teachers involved in her research. Focusing specifically on researcher positionality, Deepa shared some of the possible risks and benefits experienced as an insider researcher.

Johanna Quina, first-year PGR student and former clinical psychologist, presented on Researcher or Research Instrument: A Twist in the Identity of the Researchers in Participatory Approaches. Johanna focused on how participatory research can best be used with young populations.

Specifically, Johanna reflected upon ethical considerations when co-producing knowledge whilst conducting participatory research and the importance of overcoming the researcher-participant division.

In her presentation, *Using a Play-arts Amalgam to Engage Year 6 Children with Democracy*, PhD student, playwright and performance-based poet, Miranda Duffy highlighted the extent to which a play-arts based approach can attract Year 6 children (ages 10-11) to engage with democracy. Utilising her creative experience as a playwright and performance-based poet, Miranda demonstrated how her professional knowledge allowed her to not only engage with her young participants but also the conference delegates.

Vicky Ringer, PhD student at the University of Leeds and co-founder of Levi's Star, shared a deeply personal and incredibly moving presentation, *Exploring Parent and School Collaboration and Communication when Supporting Children Living with the Effects of a Brain Tumour*. Vicky's presentation demonstrated the impact even a small-scale research study can have. Building upon her own experience, Vicky described how important collaboration and communication between parents and schools is when supporting children living with the effects of a brain tumour.

As a practicing specialist teacher for cognition and learning who supports mainstream primary and secondary schools, Joanne Callaghan, part-time PhD student at the University of Leeds, is perfectly placed to observe some of the challenges young people face when transitioning from primary to secondary school. Her presentation, "Be your own shepherd, don't be a sheep": 'Successful Reading' during Primary-Secondary School Transition, demonstrated the importance of identifying, meeting the needs of and developing inclusive practice at this important time in a young person's development.

Session 4 – panel discussion

Moderated by Helen Latka, the conference concluded with a panel discussion led by staff from the School of Education, at the University of Leeds: Professor Alice Deignan, Dr Peter Hart, and Dr Harry Kuchah Kuchah. In a wide-ranging and open conversation, the panellists shared personal insights into their own messy research experiences and discussed ways in which impact may be built into our research relationships alongside providing participants with meaningful feedback.

Acknowledgements

The conference planning committee were Clare Copley, Deepa Ellepola, Anna Harwood, Helen Latka, Louise Williams-Lewis, Siying Shen, Dan Trowsdale and Hannah Wainwright. The conference was opened by Professor Vanessa Kind, Head of the School of Education at the University of Leeds. Dr Paula Clarke, the School of Education's Director of Research and Innovation, provided the closing remarks. The panel discussion was led by School of Education Staff, namely Professor Alice Deignan, Dr Peter Hart, and Dr Harry Kuchah Kuchah.

The conference organisers would like to thank especially our keynote speaker, Dr Katy Shire. We would also like to thank the wonderful presenters as well as the nearly 50 people who attended.