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EDRS 810: Problems and Methods in Educational Research

Fall 2021

Assignment 2: Current Practices in Research

Introduction

For this assignment, the participant was recruited through George Mason University's College of Education and Human Development "Find and Expert" webpage. The participant was chosen as they met multiple criteria, namely research interests in educational psychology, school mental health in K12 settings, and trauma. After selection for participation, the participant was emailed regarding interest and consent to engaging in an interview. When they confirmed consent, a meeting was set up to take place in the participant's personal Zoom room. The interview took place over the course of 40 minutes and was not recorded, though thorough notes were taken. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participant was clearly informed that the interview was related to this author's classwork, their participation was entirely voluntary and they could choose to not answer questions or end the interview without repercussions, that their identity would be protected and no identification would be provided in the report, and that they would receive no compensation for participation. A summary of the interview is provided below.

Question 1: How Did You Get Interested in this Area of Research

When asked about how they came into their area of research, this professor recounted that since childhood, they felt an innate connection with children in the K12 age range, as well as the values of teaching and giving to others. When they entered their undergraduate program, they therefore chose to double major in education and psychology to allow them to examine the overlap between the two fields. This led them to work in marginalized schools as an educator, where they observed their own implicit biases surfacing, mainly around privilege and power structures. Based upon the frustration on behalf of their students they felt as their own circumstances leading to disadvantages were not their or even necessarily their family's doing

(namely situations causing trauma), this triggered this professor's interest in school mental health.

After trying the clinical psychology field, they recalled that graduate programs would not admit them due to no experience in clinical contexts. This was surprising to the professor at the time due to the amount of support they provided to their students. That being said, this prompted them to enter the educational psychology field as they realized if they left the classroom, they may have the chance to reach more students through reaching teachers with their research. This drive to reach more students is rooted in their observation that a school mental health network, connecting interactions in the classroom, the home, and the school overall, is really what is needed to give students the best support system possible. Through their academic advisor who was engaged in frontline school crisis work, they were able to begin to explore how policies, procedures, and practices in schools could be utilized to better support students, especially as even now education has taboos around mental health.

Question 2: What is the Most Pressing Issue in Your Field of Study?

This professor indicated that right now, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency department intakes are demonstrating increased levels of mental health concerns in children in the k12 age range, especially when compared to physical ailments. This is likely due to escalated levels of need with respect to homelessness, food insecurity, trauma, violence, etc., that many individuals are experiencing; this also comes in addition to increased awareness around sociohistorical concepts we are discussing, such as systemic racism. With respect to these issues, teachers fill a role as a gatekeeper when students need to access care; this is because they see and build relationships with their students in ways that others may not. Despite this,

educators may not be fully ready for this role due to lack of training, their own trauma, or not personally feeling it is an element of their job.

The reality is that teachers are the ones being primed for this responsibility. This means that as a field education is at a crossroads that may be escalating for a long time around student mental health needs. As schools transition back to face-to-face instruction, teachers are just beginning to experience the social-emotional impacts of COVID-19, and this will continue to build for maybe five to seven years, according to this professor. In addition, we are not aware of the long-term physiological implications of this virus, so even more is unknown. Therefore, this professor emphasises the need for frontline educators to be trained to pick up on related student needs. In addition, since there seems to be a taboo around the term “mental health” in schools--preferring instead to utilize “wellbeing”--educator awareness of these taboos is also vital to student care.

Question 3: What is the Overarching Research Question that You Hope to Answer through Your Research?

When this question was posed, this professor indicated that they did not feel they had one singular driving research question. Instead, they explained their research interests as more of an elevator speech. They explained that their foundation is their interest in psychosocial and developmental influences on K12 student learning. Their unit of analysis is teacher-student interactions, where they use this data to inform and understand the influences of predictor variables on student success. When they engage in this work, they focus on diverse, marginalized communities.

Question 4: What Types of Methods Do the Questions You Ask Lend Themselves to?

When discussing methods used, this professor noted feeling the need for mixed methodologies for a robust understanding of the contexts they were examining. Quantitative data provides the landscape being examined, and qualitative data provides depth. Therefore, using mixed method research allows for the depth to unpack what we know, and you cannot really have just one or the other. That being said, this professor said they tended to have more expertise with respect to qualitative methods, and so to perform mixed method research they made sure to work with colleagues and friends with quantitative expertise.

Question 5: What are Your Current Projects?

This professor indicated having a large number of concurrent projects. First, they discussed wrapping up a project around preschool teacher emotional wellbeing, and how this informs the educator's interactions with their students. They also discussed currently collecting data on student and teacher wellness during COVID-19. This is being done through the use of surveys (both quantitative and qualitative items). The goal is to create presentations and manuscripts addressing the equity of how student mental health was supported based on teacher perceptions of these ideas during COVID-19.

They also discussed a project working on teacher emotional labor. This project focuses on the social networks of educators and the alliance between residential schools and special educator co-teaching relationships, as well as how educators navigate their own trauma and how their emotions inform how they work in the classroom. Finally, this professor explained a challenging project they were working on, addressing the development and design of school mental health satellite sites to develop resources in rural communities. They explained the importance of the issue as typically access to mental health resources in rural communities is the most difficult obstacle they have to overcome.

Question 6: What Journals Do You Regularly Read? Who are the Most Prominent Scholars in this Area of Research?

The professor only briefly discussed this. They initially provided a list of authors, including:

1. Mark Wiest
2. Elizabeth Mellon
3. Sharon Hoover
4. Karen Westin
5. Susan Rodgers
6. Steve Evans
7. Mike Kelly

However, despite spending only a moment on this, this professor shared a document after the interview containing an extended list of authors who have written seminal literature in this area of research, as well as journals to explore.

Additional Feedback that Emerged from the Interview

Overall, this professor emphasized the need for collaboration in this interdisciplinary area of work. Being able to work with colleagues with different specialties and knowledge of different methodologies enables you to reach more people with your research. This includes collaboration with other universities; even though you may find your academic home, you still have a large network. The other idea this professor emphasized was that wellbeing, wellness, and mental health tend to be used interchangeably in this area due to the interdisciplinary nature of this work, but that in education the term “mental health” brings a taboo with it. This taboo

mainly centers on educators not being clinicians. However, this professor emphasized that comfort with this term is important to make the work in this area of research effective.

Lessons Learned about Being a Researcher

From this interview, three main ideas core to being a researcher emerged. First, the idea of having a large network of peers and colleagues was emphasized. Research does not take place in a vacuum, but instead relies on the collaboration and problem-solving between peers. Especially when dealing with the mental health and wellbeing of individuals, this idea of networking seems all the more important. Collaborating with others who have diverse areas of expertise across a wide range of universities, background, and cultures can be advantageous when developing projects to do the most good and reach the most students with your work.

Going hand-in-hand with this idea of collaboration and diversity is the idea of having a wide number of projects going on at once. Especially in a growing interdisciplinary area of research that has taboos that come along with its vocabulary, and one that is becoming ever more important due to current events, there are a wide range of research questions to explore. Furthermore, when collaborating with a large number of people, a sizable network provides the opportunity to explore a number of these questions at once. In addition, with the expectations behind academic positions, keeping up a strong pace with respect to publications and presentations is expected, and being able to do so while contributing to the greater good of students is core to the mission of individuals in this vein of research,

Finally, regardless of personal expertise, it is vital to let your research questions dictate your methodology. Each research question will have unique needs with respect to the best way it can be systematically explored. This may or may not line up with one's expertise as a researcher, even if the question is in line with one's ultimate research goals. This is yet another reason

having a wide network is so important. It allows for collaboration at the benefit of the best methods when approaching the research questions, as well as the individual growth in experiences for the researcher themselves.