

Introduction

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The research of out-of-school learning is problematized, its complexities explored, its challenges laid bare, and its highlights celebrated in this edited volume. This is an exciting and dynamic field to research, that encompasses a wide range of types of activity in a wide range of contexts. The activity can include physical, social, artistic, and intellectual skills to name a few. The contexts can include the family home, school premises, other sites specifically dedicated to learning – and sites where learning is not necessarily intended but where it happens. Playing organised sports, learning a musical instrument, developing an understanding of gardening or DIY alongside family members, going to museums, belonging to a chess club or computer club, doing homework, learning to get along with others, understanding how you can influence the world around you... these examples illustrate (with a far-from exhaustive list) the wide variety of formal and informal, organised and spontaneous activities that come under the banner of out-of-school learning. Our definition is wide. It is therefore not unproblematic since boundaries are not easy to define. Such a wide range of activities are united by what they are not, that they are “not school learning”. Researching in this field is not straightforward and raises many challenges. This certainly provides a reason for why it is such an exciting area to explore!

Out-of-school learning is an under-conceptualised area that is often seen as an adjunct, or secondary point of learning for children and young people, by comparison with formal education in schools. Yet it is clear that this area presents a vast canvas for learning. It encompasses learning not only before the onset of formal schooling, but all the learning which takes place outside of the classroom - progressing beyond the years of formal education too. We know that out-of-school learning can be enormously important for so many aspects of children's lives, for a vast range of skills, for many aspects of well-being, contributing to social and economic capital, and indeed supporting and facilitating formal school learning. It can vary on many dimensions including: structure (the extent to which learning follows pre-defined curricula or assessment, or whether it is unstructured); roles (the nature of the roles of people involved); agency (related to roles, and linked to how decisions are made about the learning and its context); outcomes (whether outcomes are tacit or explicit); time (when learning happens); place (where learning happens); and inter-personal dynamics (the nature and quality of the relationships in the learning situation).

That the contexts in which out-of-school learning takes place are wide-ranging and unpredictable, that the learning itself is not always easy to observe or even define, and that often the research reveals a lot more questions than it answers, contribute to the need for this book. In this book we aim to introduce tools to help people reflect on what it means to research such an intangible phenomenon in such varied and dynamic contexts. With so many unknowns in our field of research, we cannot make assumptions about the nature of the context, and what we are trying to research, and therefore we cannot make assumptions about the best way to research it. What we can be sure of, however, in researching out-of-school learning, is that we need the time, flexibility, and agility as researchers to think on our feet and respond to the contexts in which we are researching. This volume tries to make sense of ways in which we can

work with unknowns, and how we, as researchers, can step aside from our assumptions that so often guide our research practice.

Existing research into the varied contexts of out-of-school learning tends to span disparate areas that are usually separate from each other in silos, such as play, sports clubs, music lessons, reading for pleasure, caring responsibilities, and much more. Thus whilst this is a growing field of study the atomised nature of the research communities involved and its usual definition in terms of what it is not (not in school) mean is not easy to see it as such. Moreover, the complexity in terms of context, in terms of defining and understanding what is being learnt, how it is being learnt, and where, means that there is a need for a multiplicity of methodological approaches and disciplines to understand out-of-school learning.

In this volume we draw on the scope for the different disciplines to learn from each other in terms of possible approaches to and methods for research. Researchers come to specific areas within this diverse field from many different traditions, bringing with them their own histories, disciplines, and methodological customs. Authors bring with them the varied disciplines of education, sociology, geography, and psychology. Making sense of this diversity, and drawing from across these traditions to inform our understanding of researching the broad field of out-of-school learning, is challenging and exciting.

The methods and themes in this book are not just related to out-of-school learning, they also apply to learning in other domains such as professional learning, lifelong learning, even in-school learning. We indeed suggest that there is much that the research of in-school learning can learn from the research of out-of-school learning. Whilst the varied context of out-of-school learning is recognised and contributes to the complexities of methods required, in much school research the school context itself is assumed rather than problematised or even defined, even though we know that there are vast differences between the complex cultures of different schools and classrooms. We therefore suggest that the questioning in this book of methods and ideas can be of use to school learning research, in terms of looking anew at how learning is conceptualised and how the methods of research are approached.

The need to look anew at how we research learning whether in or out of school is particularly important giving the timing of this volume. Our book draws on research that took place in the second decade of the 21st century. As the book was coming together, in 2020, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. This, of course, changed the educational landscape, and our means of researching it, beyond recognition of what it was before. In many countries around the world, schools moved into the virtual world and learning delivered online or remotely while young people stayed at home. People were no longer able to mix safely within groups, and as educational researchers the overwhelming majority of our research could not be conducted in-person – we too had to learn to negotiate the online learning environment. Even after we move out of pandemic, the landscape of educational research will be different to how it was before – researching online and at a distance may take primacy. In-person research will no longer be the default. Nonetheless, the principles and ideas we discuss are still relevant in a post-COVID world, in the new (and as yet unknown) research landscape. Indeed, the fact that the research landscape is unknown means that our deliberations on the “unknowns” of out-of-school learning have even more potential to inform our thinking about educational research going forwards. An understanding of the issues arising from unpredictability, the need for agility and responsiveness in our thinking, the need to take time to understand our research contexts, and

to work with diversity, are all core characteristics that will be needed to conduct educational research in an uncertain future.

This volume does not provide a “how to” guide for conducting research in this field of out-of-school learning – instead it demonstrates the wide-ranging unpredictability of research in this field, and through that presents a series of overarching concepts for consideration when designing and undertaking such research. We demonstrate the wide variety of design, structures, processes, and skills that can be used when researching this field, and show that cannot be neatly packaged as just one single approach or even paradigm. We recognise that this research may not fit into well-established expectations of what research on learning looks like, but is nonetheless legitimate in its own right. As researchers in this field, we have tangled with, been challenged by, and ultimately grown in our understanding of research practice and of the field. We hope that the book will share our joy and enthusiasm for the diversity and unpredictability of research in out-of-school learning.

The first main section of the book presents a series of nine case studies where we present a range of different research projects. In these case study chapters, we focus on the questions that were asked, the methods that were used, the challenges that were faced, and the ways in which these challenges were overcome. We highlight specific aspects of the particular projects, according to what seemed unusual, or interesting, or specific to that project. The case studies will demonstrate the range and diversity of out-of-school learning, in a way that can help researchers reflect on approaches to systematically understanding the field, and that can help teachers to reflect on the experiences that pupils bring to the classroom from elsewhere and consider how classroom practice can make use of these.

These case study chapters are followed by seven thematic chapters. As authors, we all read the case study chapters and considered what important themes arose across these different research contexts. Through this inter-disciplinary conversation, we highlight the range of possibilities that are available for researching this complex topic. As a reader, you may want to read the book from cover to cover – but dipping into particular case studies of interest, and particular thematic chapters will, we hope, still stimulate your thinking. The chapters work best as part of the overall book but still do stand on their own.

The book, entitled *Repositioning Out-of-School Learning*, originally rejoiced in the title of ‘Learning the Wild’, and over the course of its development has been known by a variety of names. This lack of clear definition, even the difficulty the authors and editors had in settling on an overarching name for our work, is indicative of the project as a whole, and more importantly, of the subject of the work, which may be defined (loosely) as ‘learning outside of institutional (school) boundaries’. Even this definition, however, is problematic, as one could argue that Case Study 4 took *place* within an institution, as did elements of many of the other case studies. We suggest, then (as highlighted above), that this is an apophatic term (one that is defined by what-it-is-not, rather than what-it-is).

Attempting to define this work creates more challenges than it solves, however. What is an institution, and do all institutions have clear boundaries? If children are on a school trip, they are ‘outside’ of the physical institution but are clearly still in some senses bounded by it – they are attended by (and in the care of) teachers, they are with other students and perhaps are wearing an identifiable school mandated set of clothing^[1]. And, for that matter, what is ‘learning’ when it’s at home?

All of these questions are typical of the field we originally denoted as 'in the wild' – with all of the connotations that term has – lack of boundaries (but not lack of rigour), lack of imposed order (but not chaos) and a sense of danger or at the very least, of adventure. Research in this area is messy, eventful and asks new questions of us, as researchers as well as consumers of research. This is also, as highlighted particularly in the thematic chapters, an area of research which at times needs to fight for legitimacy within the academy; the very term, 'out-of-school' prioritises the institution in the lives of young people and the research around those lives, even when the data are collected, as in the title, away from the institution. These issues are firstly touched upon, however, in the case study chapters.

The first case study describes mixed methods research in the project "Out-of-school activities and the education gap". The project used secondary analysis of a large-scale quantitative dataset, and interviews with parents, teachers, pupils, and activity providers. This chapter discusses a perennial problem in research, that of combining data from different sources. However, rather than offering a solution (as one might expect in another sort of book), the authors of this chapter reflect on the importance of context – a recurring theme, highlighted by the title of this volume, and the need to appreciate the intersected nature of reality (and our interaction with it). Data do not stand alone as items of empirical truth, rather, they are enmeshed in complex webs of understandings.

The second case study focuses on research that sought to understand how a charity uses youth sports programmes with socio-economically disadvantaged young people, to shape their personhood. In this chapter, the complexity highlighted in the first case study continues to be foregrounded. The authors discuss their positionality in relation to both participants and those acting as gatekeepers to research locations and communities. This is considered in relation to decisions on what matters as data and what can be used as data, and analytic decisions - with thoughts on how the researcher can navigate their way through the complexity.

Case Study 3 describes a project that explores children's out-of school mathematical activity. Here, the authors recount their work with young participants to overcome the boundaries (again, a recurrent theme) constructed around the concept of 'maths'; barriers which are constructed largely within the confines of schooling. These barriers highlight the fact that 'out-of-school' is not simply about location but also about ways of knowing.

Case study 4 discusses an after-school Minecraft club, in which children engaged in both on-screen and off-screen play. This chapter moves away from an institutionally defined form of knowing (such as 'maths' was understood to be, or knowing as measured by achievement in Case Study 1) to examine interactions among children playing together. Yet this is the only case study which is located within a classroom setting^[2]. Again, the emphasis in this case study is not what was found in the research nor even how it was found, but rather on how the researcher made sense of their findings. In contrast to the hierarchical processes generally recommended for qualitative research, the researcher discusses the use of a dynamic and deliberately messy rhizome methodology, which evolved alongside the project itself.

The evolving, emergent nature of this type of research^[3] is clearly demonstrated in Case Study 5, which explores participatory research with young women to help develop out-of-school provision. In particular, it focuses on the researchers' experience of being invited by the young women on a residential trip. The authors, along with others in this volume, reflect on issues of positionality – when is a researcher not a researcher? They also discuss the very difficult

question of adherence to not only the letter of ethical governance (what one has been approved to do) but the arguably more important and demanding adherence to an emergent, and swiftly-changing, personal and professional ethic of care.

Case Study 6 discusses the situated nature of youth work, and how the geographical framing relates to the relationships that can be developed between researchers and young people. The authors of this chapter discuss the importance of play, not simply in terms of physical location (although this is not to be disregarded) but also in terms of ownership of place and sense of belongingness. This is relevant not only for the participants but also for the researchers, who needed to put in time and effort to be accepted in place. This chapter also foregrounds a theme which arises in all of the case studies: that of relationship building and of working with, not on, people and indeed, research problems themselves.

Case Study 7 outlines the Everyday Maths project, which included a series of workshops with parents. These workshops were designed to support parents to become more confident in discussing informal, family-based mathematical activity with their children. This chapter continues the theme of relationship building in research, discussing the process as relational agency: who has agency (and why) in the research process. This case study also begins an examination of relationships within school (particularly among adults) which can impact on out-of-school learning for children and young people.

The eighth case study explores the way in which a process designed to develop a democratic system of involving parents in school life needed to step aside from an emphasis on harmony and consensus, and instead permit dissensus. This chapter takes the discussion of relationships within school further, and into what might seem perilous territory, by beginning to unpick the problems which arise when seemingly emancipatory practices appear to have agency-limiting effects. Using the analogy of strengthening a rope, (fidding), the authors ask readers to not only accept but to embrace the dissensual as a research outcome.

The final case study discusses a collaborative theory of change approach that was used to evaluate projects working with young people as agents of change, to tackle the causes of alcohol abuse. This may seem more familiar to readers in that it describes a process of project evaluation - but probably not project evaluation as many have experienced it (or indeed, as participants were expecting it to be). The chapter, in contrast to the usual recommendations for 'hands off' and 'third party' evaluation, suggests a participatory mode, build around co-constructed theories of change.

Throughout the case studies, there are a number of themes which arise again and again; these themes provide the structure for the thematic chapters in the second half of the book.

In the first thematic chapter, the authors examine the role of the researcher in out-of-school learning. While still avoiding a clearly-bounded definition, the authors highlight a greater-than-usual need for flexibility and reflexivity for researchers in this field. These are, of course, elements of all good qualitative research, but the fluid, emergent and complex nature of research undertaken outside institutional boundaries makes extra demands on the researchers undertaking it (and, arguably, those funding and receiving that research).

In the second thematic chapter, the authors consider the liminal, 'inbetween' position of the out-of-school researcher, and the challenges this can present, for example, in specifying outcomes or even processes before encounters with participants. The authors again highlight the fluidity of

this type of research^[4], and the inherent complexity of research outside the usual boundary markers of 'school' or 'institution'.

The third thematic chapter continues to discuss demarcations, for example, insider/outsider and the primacy of relationships (which many research texts assume, if not state, a primacy of data). This chapter deals with a question which must be fundamental to all research, even if rarely examined explicitly, that of the relationship to 'reality (whatever that might be, or be thought to be) and the words we use about it.

In thematic chapters four and five, the authors return to the themes of flexibility and messiness which are characteristics of out-of-school learning and research on it. In thematic chapter four, the authors look at uses of power and place (and at what each of those concepts can mean in research). In chapter five, the authors encourage us as researchers to embrace the mess, rather than attempting to impose external order on research situations and data^[5] (a process problematised in the first case study chapter in this work).

The penultimate thematic chapter returns us to the ethical conundrums discussed throughout the rest of the book: how can one obtain ethical approval for a project with an emergent methodology? The authors suggest that ethics may be thought of more as a practice (or means of practicing) rather than a process.

The final thematic chapter enjoins researcher of out-of-school learning to 'slow down', and takes up the issue of how 'slow research' fits uneasily (to put it mildly) with the neoliberal agenda entrenched in the modern academy.

The conclusion chapter highlights the core messages that have arisen across the volume, around ambiguity, ethics, relationships, and boundaries.

The intention of this volume, then, is to make explicit the ways in which researching out-of-school learning is not straightforward. Following instructions from 'how to' volumes of methodology will not be nearly enough. Our discussion of the complexities of researching out-of-school learning, and of the resultant need for varied and sophisticated methodological approaches, can contribute to thinking around research methods not only in out-of-school learning, but also in more conventional school- and classroom-based educational research, in research on digital learning, on professional learning, and on learning through the life course. While this volume focuses on researching out-of-school learning, the ideas and principles we discuss relate to researching learning whenever and wherever it happens.

^[1] This equation of school with a physical entity, rather than a learning community, has been further challenged by the continuation of teaching and learning during the 'closure' of schools due to the recent Covid 19 pandemic.

^[2] From the point of view of the participants, however, we must agree that the research was located in *both* the physical classroom *and* the digital location of Banterbury

^[3] In saying, 'this type of research' we do not intend to discern – nor yet impose – any form of definition or boundary on the work presented here, or the work of countless colleagues across the disciplines)

^[4] We only need to consider this as 'fluidity' or 'flowing between two points' if we insist on *having* two points; qualitative/quantitative, insider/outsider. Leaving such dichotomous understandings behind may indeed be difficult but ultimately, freeing for both the researcher and the research,

[\[5\]](#) Which is, in itself, an imposition of power-over...