Imagining methodology: doing educational leadership research differently
Liz Todd
Newcastle University

What is notable about the six articles in this special issue is the range of different methods used, their complexity, the manner in which theory and method are combined, and the explicit description of both data collection and analysis. Together these articles should encourage further experimentation in research in educational leadership. In common with other areas in education, the methods used to carry out educational leadership research are dominated by interviews, questionnaires and non-complex statistics. This is not to say alternative methods are not in evidence as demonstrated by a number of examples (see Bawazeer and Gunter 2016, Rayner et al. 2015, Thorpe and Garside 2017). Furthermore, traditional methods can be the most appropriate and robust, can reveal fascinating findings, and are often what is most practical. However, well-documented drawbacks in each (Bannister et al. 1994, May 1997, Silverman 1997) might be expected to have generated a greater diversity in research methods.

This special issue is a starting point for or a reminder about the consideration of alternative methodologies and methods. For one thing there is an opportunity to reflect differently on interviews and on the ways interviews are embedded in a range of other methods. Hidson’s research uses video as a tool in interviews to elicit responses. Pulis’s article discusses the combining of interviews of head teachers and policy makers with questionnaires of a relatively large number of pupils in a mixed methods design. Moriah’s article justifies and gives an example of using IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) with interviews of 16 head teachers of secondary schools across the Caribbean.

It is worth noting a few of the ways that these articles exemplify methods that are both robust and go beyond the ‘traditional’. Outhwaite’s article is a transparent example of how the research process often has to change over time, what she refers to as a flow-line, something that is not often made explicit in published journals. The unforeseen external impacts that change the course of a piece of research are often hidden but are usually more or less present in all research. In this case, the changes in funding of the International Baccalaureate’s Diploma Programme in England led to its gradual withdrawal from schools, which necessarily impacted on the possibilities for investigating its expansion.

Pulis’s article is about the importance of pupil voice in looking at the quality in education but it is also about the ways we might combine mixed methods within management research. Whilst there are other illustrations of mixed methods in leadership research (see for example, Hazzan and Zelig 2016), there is a need for a greater range of ways of thinking about what counts as mixed methods, and at what point in the research process methods are combined (Greene 2007), which method then feeds into another and in what manner. Returning to Pulis main focus, the views of pupils do indeed represent an important perspective in leadership research. There is a need to rethink many of the assumptions often made in research about children’s voice, in particular assumptions about what methods can and should be used and issues of consent (Todd 2012).
Reid and Koglbauer’s article is an interesting example of visual method. Reid and Koglbauer could have, and doubtless already do, asked NPQ (National Professional Qualifications) participants their views of the programme as experienced. But what is interesting is how much more is revealed by this method. It has been argued that visual methodologies have the potential to be experienced by participants as more inclusive (Clark et al. 2013). An example of this in Reid and Koglbauer’s article is that participants approached the task in various ways, and the spontaneous addition to the data of writing on Post-it® notes to annotate the placements of text extracts. This was a welcome surprise to the authors and was included in the analysis. Visual methods covers a multitude of approaches and theoretical assumptions, so the detailed description in this article is useful. The use of the visual, in the form of video, is also investigated in Hidson’s article.

Using video as stimulus for interviews is not new (Sewall 2007) although it is less common than photo elicitation (Harper 2002, Nguyen and Tangen 2016), but it is underused in educational leadership research. The use of video in schools has grown in recent years mostly with the intention of supporting teacher development (Lofthouse and Birmingham 2010, Masats and Dooly 2011) and sometimes overused performatively (Harford and MacRauric 2008). Hidson’s article shows that themes about school leadership can result from the analysis of stimulated responses from various situations from which video material was extracted. The video extracts came from a range of ways of supporting teaching and learning across the school or with a particular group (such as trainee teachers). I was interested in the use of these diverse contexts from which the video leading to findings of four areas of likely interest for school managers: policy enacted in practice, classroom climate, school context and school culture. Visual research methods are well developed in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, Pink 2013, Rose 2016) and the examples in this special issue suggests to me the potential for educational research of interdisciplinary research with other disciplines.

Reid and Koglbauer’s goes further in exemplifying the interaction of method and theory. They examine current leadership curriculum, the structure of the NPQ in England, by taking extracts of text from the marketing of this programme and asking delegates at an international educational leadership conference to sort them under Bernstein’s (1971) concepts of ‘classification’, ‘framing’ and then under each either ‘strong’ or ‘weak’. Classification in this situation refers to the programme structures, such as modules, and framing refers to the social relationships such as the levels of formality when the programme is delivered. Theory is necessarily implicated by method whether it is explicitly stated, as here, or implicit and it deserves more attention in methodology research (Palmér and Roos 2016).

Poultny’s use of a scale (the consciousness quotient inventory, CQI) to support a conversation between a head teacher and the author, a university academic is an interesting way to explore their leadership relationship in the context of a school-university partnership. The CQI was completed by both the author/academic and the head teacher. The scale looks at the personal and professional, asking about such things as consciousness of one’s own feelings, capacity for personal development, and consciousness of self as part of a wider world. The manner of using the scale as the basis of a conversation was also fascinating, developing both self-awareness and their working relationship. This process seemed to widen
how each understood leadership within their own relative contexts and gave them a better understanding of each other. I suggest the CQI used as part of a reflective conversation helped develop common knowledge, or knowing what matters (Edwards 2017) for the head teacher and the university academic as a basis for their working together. This research might inspire others to look at a wider range of instruments and methodologies for use in educational leadership research.

One aspect of methodology notable in this special issue was the diverse range of methods of analysis, often neglected in research accounts, demonstrated through the articles. Hidson codes the interviews to provide leadership themes and analyses the lesson extracts and lesson planning on which the interviews were based in order to illustrate the themes. Moriah’s uses IPA to provide an understanding of the lived experience of school leadership of an under-represented group, head teachers in the Caribbean.

The articles in this special issue have given me much to reflect upon in terms of thinking again methodologically about my own research. However, most of the articles implicitly assumed leadership from a positional point of view. Leadership is more than the exercise of a role. There is a need for research using a range of methods that look at leadership from perspectives other than positional power, such as the ways that people in non-leadership positions take leadership on bringing about change in gender, sexuality, disability or other forms of inequality in schools. Hidson’s article takes a broadly non-positional approach by looking at and finding themes of leadership throughout the school, enacted in numerous interactions, in this case those of lesson observations and planning sessions (even though the people doing the observing of the videos all have some form of positional leadership). There is a need for articles that examine a non-positional understanding of leadership using a range of methods.

This special issue explores many other methodological issues too numerous for the purpose of this piece to do more than mention. I have been fascinated by and reminded of such issues in methodology as the relationship between theory and method, the variations on using interviews, the use of video, data analysis, the interaction of the personal and professional, the embedding of one method within another such as auto-ethnography with focus groups and interviews - and all these are worthy of further investigation and development. So too do other issues present in these articles that I did not have space to discuss such as issues of ethics (discussed in the special issue editorial), the inclusivity of methods and the use of digital approaches to research. I realised this volume had done its job when at the end of reading it I was inspired to think again about my own use of traditional approaches and to consider more critically how I go about exploring today’s social reality.


