

# The Process

The research methods KL used were essentially qualitative. She observed one student's (Jimmy) study habits and interactions with her and with his peers daily for over three months. She maintained a detailed set of field notes, logging her observations, interview results, feelings as the teacher and her evolving analyses of the data.

## Beginning purposes

KL's major purpose was to explore the possibilities of using qualitative methods to obtain rich feedback on her performance as a teacher and the needs of all her students. Related objectives of the study evolved during the study:

1. to better understand a student's attitudes and behavior, and
2. to discover ways to help a student improve his work, study, and social skills.

## Selecting a student

The school was an open school using a team teaching philosophy in which the students were grouped according to abilities and needs in reading and math. Jimmy was assigned to KL's classroom throughout the day. She chose him as a focus for her study because he had demonstrated signs of having difficulties in school and because of easy accessibility to him in her class.

Through her casual “pre-study” observations, KL judged Jimmy to be “bright.” But, she also found he had poor study skills (e.g., he rarely finished his daily assignments and spent inordinate amounts of time keeping to himself, staring at nothing in particular and playing with little bits of paper, erasers, etc.). More seriously, Jimmy was becoming more and more disruptive to the other children. She often noticed him bouncing in his chair, humming or making slurping and beeping noises with his mouth. In an interview with Jimmy, KL asked what he least liked about school. His response showed how easily distracted he was, “When people disturb me when I’m busy. When people just start talking out and I just can’t work.”

He also had poor social skills. He had few friends and even the children he played with were usually unkind to him. In response to KL’s questions about who he liked to play with, he gave two boys’ names but then said, “I sometimes play with them cause I don’t have anyone to play with. . . .I don’t like playing with them too much . . . cause they’re bothering me. They’re just teasing me . . . . Sometimes when I come by, they just run. I just don’t want them to run away from me if they are playing with me. . . .”

His problem had been diagnosed the previous year by the school guidance counselor as a slight attention deficit. But he had not been tested any further and no action had been taken to solve his problem. Given these preliminary observations, KL hoped to discover ways to help Jimmy improve his study and social skills by observing him closely, analyzing the descriptions obtained and then designing and implementing plans for improving his skills.

## Data collection

The first attempts at gathering data proved to be ineffective. KL tried to take field notes on Jimmy's activities while the students were doing seat work. However, the students demanded her time and attention then and she could not concentrate on taking field notes. She then discovered the school had a video camera that was rarely in use. So videotape became a major resource for gathering observations, on which she could take field notes after school hours. The video equipment disrupted the class at first, but within a few days the students seemed to forget it was there. Even though she had to spend several hours before and after school viewing the tapes, KL found this was an excellent method of observation. She could replay the tapes several times for more detailed and accurate field note expansion.

In addition to depending heavily on about ten hours of videotape to capture dialogue, facial expressions, student interactions, and so on, KL capitalized on the fact that she had been in the room too, while the tape was shot, by including her perceptions, feelings and thoughts in her field notes while she reviewed the videotapes. Likewise, she used the more traditional field note taking processes on the playground, in the cafeteria and in the music room, where the video equipment could not be used as unobtrusively.

In spite of the many advantages associated with the videotape process, KL began to suspect that her field notes were developing a detached quality because she was removed from the observed situations while viewing the tapes. She worried that her objective to discover and understand Jimmy's attitudes

and behavior could not be accomplished completely by observing him on a screen. So, she decided to triangulate with interviews.

On several different occasions, KL interviewed Jimmy regarding his feelings about school, school work, his own abilities in school, peers, parents, siblings, and his likes and dislikes outside of school. Some of his peers were interviewed, too, so Jimmy would not feel singled out. These interviews were conducted informally on the playground and in class, as well as formally (students were invited to KL's desk for brief conferences). She took notes during most of these interviews (or shortly after the interview ended) and tape-recorded some of them, as well.

In one instance, KL wanted to obtain the student's description of what happens to him on a typical day at school. However, because he spent his entire day in *her* classroom, she worried that she would guide or otherwise influence his responses. So the principal, who had taken a keen interest in this study being conducted by one of his junior faculty, willingly conducted the interview with Jimmy.

As the study progressed, KL began to wonder what additional insights the parents could provide from their perspective. She also worried that they might be upset that she was focusing so much attention on their son. After much deliberation regarding the best way to proceed, she decided to turn a scheduled parent/teacher conference into an interview. She invited the parents to interview her about their child, which made it natural for her to interview them about Jimmy at home and historically. The interview was taped with the parents'

permission for later reference. The parents responded so positively to this approach (they found it very professional and creative) that all the other parent/teacher conferences were conducted as interviews.

The school guidance counselor was interviewed, also. Though KL was not given direct access to Jimmy's files, the guidance counselor did review the testing done by herself the previous year and by another counselor three years earlier. This interview was also tape recorded for further reference.

Other teachers were informally interviewed and their experiences with and opinions of Jimmy were solicited. Several of these teachers later reported that through their exposure to the study done by KL, their understanding of Jimmy increased.

In addition to these qualitative procedures, KL further triangulated the data sources and findings by developing and administering two questionnaires, which she administered to the entire class. The first was used to construct two socio-grams. The questions were designed to reveal who would choose whom as friends. She wanted to see if any of the students would choose Jimmy as a friend. The results of the socio-grams amplified KL's concerns about his lack of friends and social skills. She found that many students thought Jimmy was nice, but still didn't choose him as a friend or someone they would play with.

The second questionnaire elicited background information from the children about their family and home life, feelings and attitudes. This questionnaire was also administered to the whole class to minimize noticeable special attention on Jimmy.

## Data analysis and reporting

Analysis began almost as soon as data collection. As she viewed the video-tapes and reflected on her experiences with Jimmy, KL discovered patterns in his behavior. These initial insights were written into her field notes and became part of her database. Likewise, as she wrote down Jimmy's responses to her interview questions, the parents' and counselor's ideas and her thoughts on observed interactions between Jimmy and his classmates, she began to develop a clearer understanding of this student's world, his feelings, his fears, and so on.

After watching each video taped session and taking field notes on them, KL then expanded her notes and wrote comments in the margins regarding additional insights and connections between parts of the growing data record. These notes helped her begin the analysis of the data while she was still collecting it and aided her in making decisions about how and when to access other data sources.

KL tried some of the more formal qualitative data analysis procedures such as pattern coding, memoing and context charting (these will be discussed in Chapter Eight of this book). Through a series of such analyses, extending throughout the three month study of Jimmy, KL reached several conclusions about his challenges and what she could do to help him. She included a summary of these insights, along with extensive descriptions of Jimmy's school experience in a final report for the course. She also provided an "audit trail" (See Chapter Five in this book for more on this topic) documenting the methodological decisions she made throughout the study.



Williams, D. D. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry>



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