

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Research and Education

### What does social research tell us about education in contemporary Britain?

Research is a compulsory part of A level Sociology and is part of every topic in the specification. Research should **not** be seen as a separate area – whatever topic you are studying, research and studies will provide evidence to support facts and theories. It is important to be able to link research to different areas of the specification.

The information in this Factsheet will be useful for Research questions where you can use examples from different areas of the specification to show that you have a wide and detailed knowledge of a particular research method and how it has been used. It will also be useful to develop your knowledge of research within the field of Education.

There are various methods available when studying Education and the method used depends on what the sociologists is trying to find out.

#### Activity

Make a list of research methods that you are aware of or have used yourself when conducting research.

In order to build or test theories sociologists need to collect data. They can do this in two ways – collecting and analysing data that already exists (**secondary data**) or by collecting data themselves (**primary data**).

#### Sources of Secondary Data

| Source  | Education Examples   |
|---|--|
| <b>Official statistics</b> produced by government bodies e.g. league tables   | <a href="http://www.statistics.gov.uk">www.statistics.gov.uk</a>   |
| <b>Unofficial statistics</b> produced by charities etc.   | Joseph Rowntree Foundation ( <a href="http://www.jrf.org.uk">www.jrf.org.uk</a> )  |
| <b>Mass media</b> news stories  | <a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk">www.bbc.co.uk</a>   |
| <b>Life documents</b> - personal records of thoughts and feelings such as diaries, letters etc. Life documents tend to be qualitative documents as they tend to be about what people think and often how they feel. | Hey (1997) examined girls' personal diaries to explore girls' friendships in two London schools. She also used participant observation (primary data). |

**Activity** Add some more examples to the table above

### Why are secondary sources useful in researching education?

#### Advantages

- Gives useful background information for further research. e.g. What do current statistics tell us about male and female achievement?
- Can be used as a source of data to support the findings of a piece of research
- Cheap and readily available - e.g. League tables and qualifications are published every year and are publically available
- Wide range of data available
- Provides a historical dimension – figures show how achievements etc have changed over time
- Allows easy comparison to be made between different societies/ areas – e.g. League tables tell us the current achievement of all schools throughout the country.
- It can take into account education on a national scale which may not be possible if we were conducting a piece of primary research
- Personal documents give meanings and feelings
- Can be rich in detail

#### Disadvantages

- Many documents may have been destroyed
- Access to documents may be restricted
- Time consuming to research for relevant documents
- If you don't know how the data was collected, it is very difficult to know how valid and reliable the data is.
- You may not know how biased the researcher might have been.
- You will not know if personal documents e.g. diaries are true
- You may not know who funded the research and how this might have influenced its creation
- Data created from government sources might be potentially bias.
- There may be a problem with trying to understand the writer's meaning



**Research – Secondary data**

Look through local and national newspapers or search the internet for recent educational news items. Briefly summarise the contents of the article. Compare your findings with others in your class.

**Exam Hint:-** Exam questions may ask you to 'examine the reasons why some sociologists use secondary data in their research'. As well as just stating the advantages of secondary data, use evidence to show why this is an advantage. e.g. Secondary data is useful because it allows easy comparison to be made between different societies/areas – e.g. League tables tell us the current achievement of all schools throughout the country.

**Examiner's Comment:-** Responses to this question offered a rehearsed answer listing the advantages and disadvantages of secondary data in more or less equal proportions. Although reward was given for relevant material, this was more limited when the disadvantages were simply listed rather than linked in some evaluative way to the reasons why secondary data is useful to some sociologists. Use of examples showing how secondary data has been used in sociological research and why it is useful in these situations was necessary to achieve higher marks.

**Sources of Primary Data**

| Source   | Education Examples   |
|--|--|
| <b>Laboratory experiment</b><br>A highly controlled situation where the researchers try to isolate the influence of each variable.   | Davis (1989) explored gender roles within literature and the perceptions of these stories from young children. Different types of stories were read to children over a two year period to assess the children's response to the stories  |
| <b>Field experiment</b><br>An experiment conducted in the participants natural environment e.g. school   | Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1967) gave students in a poor school intelligence tests. Teachers were told that the test was actually a predictor for very sudden increases in ability. Names were given at random to the teachers, who were told these particular children would show significant improvement in ability over a six month period. The children were then retested and it was claimed that the children whose names were given to the teachers as 'bloomers' or improvers showed improvement. This shows how the attitude of teachers to children could affect their success. |
| <b>Interview</b><br>There are 2 types of interviews: Structured/formal and unstructured/informal<br><br><b>Structured/formal</b> are similar to a questionnaire where the questions are asked by the interviewer<br><br><b>Unstructured/informal</b> where the interviewer has a topic and an outline of questions to be asked but may ask other questions depending on the answers given by the respondent. | Hope (2000) conducted interviews with students who were receiving EMA at a college in Truro to explore whether the receipt of EMA affected participation in further education. It was found that the majority of EMA students did not believe that the EMA affected their participation in Further Education (62%). Interview data suggested that many were unaware of the EMA before starting college, or that they would have gone to college regardless of any financial incentive.   |
| <b>Questionnaire/survey</b> A way of obtaining information in a standardised manner from a large group of people   | Lees (1986) conducted a survey and found that girls are more career oriented but still wanted to become wives and mothers. Davie 1972 conducted a survey of 17000 children and found a consistently lower educational performance by children from working class homes   |
| <b>Participant observation</b> Observer becomes part of the group they are observing   | Hey (1997) used participant observation to explore girls' friendships in two London schools. She also examined the girls' personal diaries (secondary data)  |
| <b>Non-participant observation</b> Observer observes the individual or group from a distance without interfering with the participant's behaviour  | David Gillborn (1990) used classroom observation to explore how ethnic differences influenced how teachers perceived their students Paul Willis carried out observations of 12 'lads' from a Midlands school over a period from their last year in school to their first months of paid employment. He found that the 'lads' adopted a 'preparation for future work culture'. The 'lads' rejected school and the rules that went with it which was in a way preparing them for their lives in the workplace.   |



**Why are primary sources useful in researching education?**

- Data is collected by the researcher and the researcher can research exactly what they want to
- The researcher is able to interpret the findings themselves without the results being distorted by other factors
- They can conduct research on a specific area/school which is of particular interest rather than gather general data from secondary data
- Specific pupils can be used depending on what is being researched to give a more accurate picture

There are advantages and disadvantages of using specific primary research:

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|---|---|
| <b>Questionnaire</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get to know exactly what you want – specific questions on education can be devised by the researcher</li> <li>• Provides quantitative data – easy to analyse</li> <li>• Larger samples can be studied</li> <li>• Replicable and reliable</li> </ul>                              | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People may not answer truthfully</li> <li>• Researcher bias in the framing of the questions</li> <li>• May not have them all returned</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Interviews</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get to know more detail than with questionnaires</li> <li>• Can provide both quantitative and qualitative data</li> <li>• Answers can be followed up with more questions to gain more information</li> <li>• Questions can be clarified if they are not fully understood</li> </ul> | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be time consuming</li> <li>• Researcher bias in the framing of the questions</li> <li>• Presence of interviewer may affect the responses</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Laboratory Experiments</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replicable and reliable</li> <li>• Control over independent variable</li> <li>• Controlled environment.</li> <li>• Can establish cause and effect relationships</li> </ul>  | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artificial environment</li> <li>• Ethical issues</li> <li>• Behaviour changes as a result of the researcher's presence or the knowledge of being the subject of an experiment – 'Hawthorne effect'</li> </ul> |
| <b>Field Experiments</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results generalisable to the real world</li> <li>• Real life situations in natural setting</li> <li>• Researcher can focus on specific aspects of social life</li> </ul>   | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results only applicable to the 'field' studied</li> <li>• Lack of control over variables</li> <li>• Difficult to repeat in the same conditions</li> <li>• Ethical issues</li> </ul>                           |
| <b>Participant Observation</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study of one or small number of groups</li> <li>• Possible to study deviant groups</li> <li>• Appropriate for non-literate societies</li> </ul>  | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting too involved</li> <li>• Ethical issues</li> <li>• Difficulty of recording data</li> <li>• Time consuming</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Non – Participant Observation</b><br><b>Advantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More accurate than asking people about their behaviour</li> <li>• Observe behaviour in natural environment</li> <li>• Small scale detailed research</li> </ul>   | <b>Disadvantages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only possible to study small samples</li> <li>• Ethical issues</li> <li>• Difficulty of recording data Time consuming</li> </ul>  |

**Research**

Design a piece of research to investigate an area of education e.g. what do students plan to do after their A levels, what subjects have males and females chosen for their A levels/GCSEs, qualifications obtained by different age groups over time etc Think carefully about the design of your research – how will you get the information you need? Who are you going to use in the research (think about age, gender, ethnicity)? Analyse your data – what does it tell you? Once you have obtained your data for your own research, investigate whether there is secondary data available. Compare your findings with secondary sources. Does this support your findings?

**Exam Hint** Questions may ask you to identify and explain two advantages and/or disadvantages of a particular research method e.g. field experiments Make sure you know the different research methods and in this example, how field experiments differ from laboratory experiments. As well as showing the advantages and/or disadvantages of the research method use examples to show why it is an advantage and /or disadvantage e.g. if you state that field experiment raise ethical issues because the participants may not know that they are taking part in research you could refer to Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1967 study where this was the case.



**Test your understanding**

1. Explain the difference between primary and secondary data

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2. Identify and explain two advantages and two disadvantages of using secondary data

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3. Identify one primary research method. Explain what it is, give an example of sociological research that has used this research method and explain two advantages and two disadvantages of using this primary research method.

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**Exam Hint** You may be asked to compare the usefulness of primary and secondary data in sociological research.

**Examiner's Comment** Most candidates distinguished between the two forms of data and then gave two or three advantages or disadvantages associated with using each type. Better answers came from those who used examples from different areas of the specification to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages they had identified.