

Teachers and Curriculum



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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

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- provide examples of informed curriculum practice
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SEARCH, SECURE, AND INTERVIEW: LESSONS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

PETER STANLEY

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO AT
TAURANGA

This paper describes the experience of locating eleven young people who had participated in a research project ten years before.

The principal lessons of this experience are that it is important to keep records of addresses, that respondents are likely to be found through engagements with friends and other family members, and that relational skills and persistence are required attributes for a successful quest.

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, some 20 Year 7 students were identified by schools in Porirua as being "at risk" and resilient. This identification process was a prelude to individual and family interviews, and other data gathering consequences, for 12 of the young people. The ultimate outcome was a report for the Ministry of Education with the short title *Guidelines for the Identification of Children At-risk* (Stanley, Rodeka, & Laurence, 2000). It was apparent from the outset of the Porirua study that, potentially, there was a longitudinal investigation here. In 2005 I tested the feasibility of this option by seeing how many of the original participants were still available. Tracking the eight males and four females down was a composite experience, and at the end of a tiring week I had made personal contact with 10 of the 12. As well, I had an address for another participant, and I knew that the last young person was now living in Australia. In June 2008 I again attempted to locate the members of the sample living in New Zealand and, on this occasion, to undertake a formal interview with them. What follows is a distillation of the lessons I have learned about finding and interviewing emerging adults (21- to 22-year-olds in this case), who are known for their frequent transitions and, specifically, for regularly changing where they live (Arnett, 2000).

PREPARATION

I have a conviction that many of our most important life changes are fortuitous, and evoked by circumstances, rather than being the product of conscious choices, as may be believed more commonly. Heading off to Wellington to find eleven young people forced me to buy, and become conversant with, a laptop computer and a cell phone. Up until this point, I had avoided these devices; in part, because I had no wish to increase my accessibility; in part, because I am sceptical of the conformity that they can represent, but mostly because they are something new and technical to learn to use. In fact, the laptop proved a great convenience and the cell phone was critical for communicating with the sample. The participants belong to a cell phone cohort, and while my texting was always ponderous (and never predictive) much was achieved via this semi-literate medium.

Some business cards, with the cell phone number printed on them, are also good to have, as you need to distribute these with the abandon of a real estate agent. However, the most important preparation was assembling every scrap of information that I had on the past whereabouts of the sample. For a decade I had kept lists of addresses and other data secreted away in separate places, and only simultaneous fires in three localities could have destroyed my information store. Now I was ready to go and, on the evening of my departure, my wife Lesley gave me a "survival kit" for my expedition, which included a magnifying glass (to examine the evidence), needle and thread (to make repairs after encounters with dogs), ear plugs to cope in the motel accommodation, and an umbrella (for the Wellington weather). Frankly I thought this was all a tad excessive and I subsequently had a discussion with my sister-in-law Jennifer about whether detailed trip planning was a familial or a gender-related thing. Jenny was unsure about this although, at the time of our chat, she had her hands folded over a voluminous folder for her next OE.

PROCEDURES

On this occasion I had the advantage of my previous experiences and I knew that 6.00-8.00 pm is the time of the day to catch people, if at all. The trick is to survey the likely addresses in the daylight, and then to return in the early evening, and to move quickly from place to place. Essentially I spent a fortnight roaming around Porirua, and a further week in Palmerston North doing the same, and much of it in darkness. When we are looking for people, telephone books and electoral rolls are really resources of last resort. We find people through personal contacts and, in my case, these were largely friends and other family members, but there were also neighbours, a court attendant, and a hospital porter.

Most interviews were conducted in kitchens and lounges but some were also recorded interviews in restaurants and cafés. In these settings it could be interesting watching the other patrons watching us surreptitiously. As we know, food can be good for creating conviviality and even fostering an atmosphere of intimacy (and hence its endorsement by lovers and others), but my participants were wary in these settings, at least initially. It was a first trip to Subway for one of the sample, and he was bewildered by the succession of decisions that he had to make. Another young man whom I took to McCafé could not eat in front of me, and I had to order a meal to keep him company. Under normal circumstances I would have been delighted to share a meal with him, but on this occasion I had enjoyed a delicious roast dinner with my mother half an hour before.

PERSISTENCE

Maintaining a longitudinal sample is dependent on energy and commitment. In this regard locating research participants is, perhaps, like being a salesperson, because the investigator is constantly looking over the shoulder of the respondent in front of him or her to the participant who (or "sale" that) may be in the distance. The parallel continues, as the researcher has to then "close the deal" and have the respondent agree to talk into a tape recorder about any manner of personal matters for an hour or more. However, it is actually more difficult than this analogy may suggest because young participants tend to be protected by parents and other family members, and these "gatekeepers" often have to be won over first.

Finding and engaging with respondents is mostly hard work. There is the endless door knocking and then there are some essential, additional, initiatives. For instance, I transported one member of the sample about 30 kilometres so that he could simply point out the house of another participant because he could not tell me the address. Nevertheless there are extraordinarily lucky events, like the occasion I was sitting in my car in a street in Porirua when a young woman walked past on the footpath. I took a colossal chance and called out "Brenda," and suddenly I had found another of the original sample.

PRESENTATION

Knocking on people's doors in the dark and the cold, clutching consent forms and a tape recorder, demands determination, but to get a result requires a particular attitude and demeanour. For this I am indebted to the writings of John Le Carre. In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, for instance, the author described secret service agent George Smiley as "acting himself, but more so" (1977, p. 218). A researcher can hardly be accused of lacking authenticity in this regard; rather, it is a means of bridging a social chasm and of establishing connection. I was also hopeful that it reduced any residual signs that I might possess of having been a police officer in a previous life. Interestingly, some of the sample practised much the same technique during the interviews. For example, Brenda (not her real name) dried and styled her hair while we were talking and she wanted my opinion on how it was progressing from time to time.



PLACES

I feel sorry for people who live in Wellington because I live in Tauranga. Yes, Wellington is lovely on a fine day (as the locals avow) but the lovely days are like my good golf shots, very difficult to predict. In its weather, and in other things, Wellington is a place of contrasts. I spent half an hour in Cuba Mall waiting for a participant and in that time I witnessed an array of street drama, including three sad-looking fellows being arrested. Next, I am having lunch in the café in the public library and experiencing a different social reality. As well, I am always struck by the sudden geographical contrast between Porirua East and Whitby or, for that matter, between Hartham Court in Porirua and North City Mall. To my mind, Palmerston North has Wellington's weather and Christchurch's ambience (flat, river, old houses, lots of students, and social diversity). Every time that I

returned to my accommodation in "Palmy" I encountered someone's felt pen work next to the stop/go button on a pedestrian crossing: "Push if your a pedofile." The ex-teacher in me repeatedly recoiled at this public display of poor spelling.

PEOPLE

I will briefly describe four encounters with people who were shielding members of the sample and then four engagements with the participants themselves. There was a neighbour who denied any knowledge of the person I was after. I dawdled around his doorway, largely because I did not know what to do next, and as I went down the driveway he called out, "Next door, dude." Then there was the mother who met me blankly, but who eventually responded to my desperate sales speech with: "It's okay. I thought you were the Courts and more trouble." I approached a grandmother with a distinctive dilemma: "No, you cannot have my granddaughter's address, but she is doing just so well." Finally there was Dad, who I remembered from ten years before:

No way with her address. I'll tell her you called next time that she rings. Anyway, how did you get this address? 'I had it from two years ago,' say I, beginning to feel unsure of myself. 'How did you get it two years ago?'

I had adventures, of sorts, with all of the sample that I located. I first encountered Danny as a shadowy and unidentified figure at his parents' place, where he saved me from the family dog. I next met him at his sister's place, hungry and alone, having waited all day to get access to the house. Michael is another participant and, like Danny, he has been a gang member and he was awaiting sentencing on a serious charge. Michael did not feel comfortable being interviewed in the place that he was living so together we did a night excursion of Palmerston North, cutting through schools and down alleys, until we emerged in the city. Tony was not a sample member. He was the partner of Michelle, who was a participant, but this was not known to me at the time that I was attempting to get her telephone number and address from him. Then there was Janine, whom I traced for over two weeks and whom I waited three days to interview. We had contact by text, when she had money on her phone, and I took flowers to her because I knew that she was unwell. The family welcomed me, and I was settled happily at the dining room table, when Janine announced that she had changed her mind and she did not wish to be interviewed. Some exits are difficult to make, as I said goodbye to the family, flowers, and all.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I located ten people from the original sample and I completed nine interviews. It was an elating, frustrating, enriching, and humbling experience that contrasted so markedly with my regular concerns as a university academic. Before the search period there had been the usual sustained reading and writing, and a particular preoccupation on my part with ethical and methodological matters. After the three weeks away it was as before, but with the focus on the analysis of a seemingly endless supply of data. However, for the brief period itself, the project leapt to life, and the participants became people.

Personally, I have found the transition from psychologist to researcher to be a difficult one to make. As a psychologist, speech and language therapist, behaviour support worker, or in any other role in special education, we are constantly trying to assist someone or some group of people. This is not the case as a researcher, as here the objective is knowledge and sample members are means to an end. Nevertheless, research of the sort that is described here is obviously an intensely human process. As Brenda, Danny, Michael, Michelle and I passed the tape recorder back and forth between us, the relationships were self-evidently *partnerships*. All of us probably do have a natural inclination to want to tell our own story but, I suspect, there is more to it than this. There is often an implicit awareness that our stories can contribute to a greater good.

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