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PLACE-BASED METHODS FOR RESEARCHING SCHOOLS

PAT THOMSON
AND CHRISTINE HALL

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Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools

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Edited by
Melanie Nind, University of Southampton, UK

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The idea of the *Bloomsbury Research Methods for Education* series is to provide books that are useful to researchers wanting to think about research methods in the context of their research area, research problem or research aims. While researchers may use any methods textbook for ideas and inspiration, the onus falls on them to apply something from social science research methods to education in particular, or from education to a particular dimension of education (pedagogy, schools, the digital dimension, practitioner learning, to name some examples). This application of ideas is not beyond us and has led to some great research and also to methodological development. In this series, though, the books are more targeted, making them a good place to start for the student, researcher or person wanting to craft a research proposal. Each book brings together in one place the range of sometimes interconnected and often diverse methodological possibilities for researching one aspect or sector of education, one research problem or phenomenon. Thus, readers will quickly find a discussion of the methods they associate with that bit of education research they are interested in, but in addition they will find less obvious and more innovative methods and approaches. A quick look at the opening glossary will give you an idea of the methods you will find included within each book. You can expect a discussion of those methods that is critical, authoritative *and* situated. In each text the authors use powerful examples of the methods in use in the arena with which you are concerned.

There are other features that make this series distinctive. In each of the books the authors draw on their own research and on the research of others making alternative methodological choices. In

this way they address the affordances of the methods in terms of real studies; they illustrate the potential with real data. The authors also discuss the rationale behind the choice of methods and behind how researchers put them together in research designs. As readers, you will get behind the scenes of published research and into the kind of methodological decision-making that you are grappling with. In each of the books you will find yourself moving between methods, theory and data; you will find theoretical concepts to think with and with which you might be able to enhance your methods. You will find that the authors develop arguments about methods rather than just describing them.

In *Place-Based Methods for Researching Schools*, Pat Thomson and Christine Hall bring a particular methodological outlook to the challenge of researching schools. You will find fresh ways of positioning school-based research alongside plenty of solid good advice and detailed illustrations. Pat and Christine write in an open, accessible and straightforward style, which complements their highly engaging content. They seem to build a relationship with you, the reader, just as they advocate you build a relationship with the school(s) you are studying. Their approach almost disguises the academic weight of the ideas they discuss, as they ever so deftly ease you into complex territory. In common with other books in the series, these authors make powerful use of examples of studies from around the world in your sphere of interest. In this book in particular, these studies will become almost like old friends as you are helped to appreciate their qualities.

This book (nor any in the series) cannot be the only book you need to read to formulate, justify and implement your research methods. Other books will cover a greater range or methods and, others still, more operational detail. The aim of this series, though, is to provide books that take you to the heart of the methods thinking you will want and need to do. They are books by authors who are equally passionate about their substantive topic and about research methods and they are books that will be invaluable for inspiring deep and informed methods thinking.

Melanie Nind
Series Editor

GLOSSARY OF RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACHES

This glossary comprises only those methods and approaches covered in this book. These words/terms will appear in bold on their first occasion of use in the text.

Action research: A systematic approach, often used by practitioners to understand and improve their own practice through a focus on their own practical actions and their own reflections on data about the effects of those actions. Action research involves cycles of planning, implementing, recording and analysing a change in practice.

Assets mapping: A way of assessing the economic, cultural and social composition of a neighbourhood by systematically driving or walking around.

Case study: In-depth, intensive analysis of the single (or multiple) case within its naturalistic context, valuing its particularity, complexity and relationships with the context. This approach uses multiple methods and perspectives to look at the case holistically.

Critical incident analysis: A method to focus the researcher on a critical incident or turning point, exploring people's behaviour and experience before, during and after the incident to analyse its meaning for those involved. Incidents are usually explored via interview and are significant or revelatory in relation to what interrupts or enables everyday practices.

Dérive: A walk designed to explore a terrain, which simultaneously disrupts familiarity and emphasizes the psychogeographical, not simply the material.

Discourse analysis: A term given to various approaches to the analysis of texts (which can be spoken, verbal or written) but which communicate something of what is taken for granted in the social

situation. Discourse analysts, for example, examine texts for what they say about what is doable, sayable and thinkable in a classroom situation.

Documentary analysis: More often used by social science researchers as a supplementary rather than main method, this involves analysis of documents (pre-existing artefacts or written texts) for what they can tell us about the phenomenon under study.

Drawing: A visual method used particularly with children and young people to offer an alternative or supplement to verbal or written accounts. Participants may be asked to draw a picture to depict the phenomenon, e.g. classroom, lesson, learning support teacher. Drawings can be analysed alone or alongside recorded conversations to offer another perspective on what is under study.

Ethnographic case study: A type of case study using an ethnographic approach. This usually involves a shorter, less intensive degree of immersion in the context by the researcher than in an ethnography. The focus is on the case – the individual, event or phenomenon – rather than on the culture of the group.

Ethnography: A research approach aimed at understanding an insider perspective on a particular community, practice or setting by focusing on the meaning of social action from the point of view of the participants. Methods of progressively focused observation and interview are used by the researcher who is immersed in the situation, generating complex, detailed data to enable deep descriptions and theorization of the cultural context.

Field notes: Often thought of as simply jotting in a notebook, the term covers the range of ways in which researchers record their observations and experiences in the research site.

Focus group: A group interview method in which participants are invited to explore a given topic in group discussion. Participants respond to each other, to activities or stimuli rather than just to the researcher's questions. The researcher aims to facilitate discussion as much as direct it.

Historical/archival analysis: A systematic approach to the analysis of primary sources such as meeting minutes, first-person writings, newspapers and other media, registers and roll books. Historical analysis is often based in libraries but is now equally undertaken online, using digitized records.

Inclusive research: An umbrella term for research approaches that respond to the call for democratization of the research process. This includes, for example, participatory, emancipatory and partnership research. The emphasis is on ensuring the relevance of the research to the people concerned, so that it is important and beneficial to them,

so that they are involved in the process and decision-making, and so that their views and experiences are treated with respect.

Insider research: The term used to describe those who research in their own workplace. Familiarity is both a strength and limitation. The antonym, outsider research, has the corollary asset/weakness of distance and lack of knowledge.

Interview: The method of asking participants to respond to questions, usually by reflecting on their experiences or views. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured and conducted with individuals or groups.

Longitudinal research: Research conducted over an extended period of time, in which time is a unit of analysis. Examples include cohort studies, in which individuals experiencing the same event are observed at repeated intervals to examine changes; panel studies, involving a cross-section of a population surveyed at multiple points in time; and qualitative longitudinal research, involving returning to interviewees on multiple occasions over time.

Mapping: A visual method in which participants individually or in groups map out (write or draw) their experiences, often including a space/time dimension. The researcher may record and explore the production of these maps alongside the maps produced.

Mosaic approach: A combination of participatory and visual methods designed to bring together data generated by young children and adults, making sense of their everyday experiences. The resulting mosaic is co-constructed by the participants and the researcher.

Multi-modal analysis: An approach that takes into account multiple modes of communication (gesture, gaze, movement, speech, drawing, etc.) without taking for granted that any is the most important. The researcher reads different texts and embodied actions for what they say about the phenomenon under study.

Narrative research: The researcher focuses on the ways in which research participants 'story' their lives and work practices. The researcher might look for plot and character as well as critical events. Narrative researchers often look for ways in which narratives 'work' in an organization, how they assist in identity formation, or how narratives conform to archetypal structures.

Observation: A method for recording what can be seen in the research site. Observation can be naturalistic, conducted by participant or non-participant observers. It can also be systematic and structured, using time or event sampling and pre-prepared schedules.

Participatory/partnership research: A research process that involves those being researched or implicated in the research in the decision-making and conduct of the research.

Photo ethnography: The use of digital or mobile technology to visually record ethnographic data and experiences.

Practice-based inquiry: A research strategy for practitioners (individually or collectively) to systematically and rigorously study their own practice. Related to action research, this is a way to support the development of knowledge contextualized within specific contexts of practice, emphasizing the role of collaboration and reflection in the inquiry and learning process.

Semiotic analysis: An approach which focuses on meaning-making processes through reading cultural and social signs, usually using either discourse or narrative analysis.

Sensory research: A method which focuses on lived experience, recording data gained through multiple senses.

Shadowing: An approach in which the researcher follows the participant around to get a sense of their experience by 'walking in their shoes'. Shadowing can occur for various length of time depending on the purpose.

Spatial research methods: Methods employing physical, social, temporal, experiential and/or virtual aspects of space to understand the experiences of participants in a research site.

Survey: An approach used to discover broad, general or comparative information on a selected topic by surveying a (frequently large) number of participants. This may involve no personal contact between researcher and participant.

Transcription: A method of deciding what is described and how it is represented so that audio or video data are transformed for the purpose of analysis.

Video methods: Methods that allow researchers to produce and analyse audiovisual data including pre-existing video data, video diaries, researcher produced or elicited video films, etc. Analysis may treat the video as record or as an impression of events.

Video stimulated recall/reflection/dialogue: Video of participants in action is used to stimulate their recall of, or reflection and dialogue about, the recorded event or interaction. It is used to probe what participants were thinking or feeling at the time. Control of the selection of units of analysis can be shared or handed over to participants.

Introducing the book

We imagine you, the reader of this book, as someone who has already decided to research a school, or a set of schools. We are not therefore going to spend time arguing that researching a school is a good thing. Our task, as we see it, is to present some strategies for how such research can be conducted. In doing so, we suggest to you that thinking of the school as a 'place' and using 'place-based methods' can be very helpful.

This book is organized in the order in which a research project might be undertaken. However, the book is not a step-by-step guide or a blueprint. It is not a list of methods to use. We focus instead on the issues that researchers need to think about when organizing their school study. Each chapter begins with a key question and then offers strategies that can be used in order to address it. Some of these strategies involve discussion of particular research methods, but these are placed in the context of the practicalities of researching a school. Examples from research studies are also provided to illustrate what particular strategies can accomplish. These examples are not intended to be models to be followed, they are not 'best practice' or heuristics. They are stories to learn with, and should be read in this light. We therefore sometimes accompany a story with some questions that you might consider in relation to your own research.

We have avoided writing a how-to book, or a compendium of research tools. We wanted to write about research as we understand it and as we teach about it. Throughout the book we engage in some detail with the work of a few researchers. We are in conversation with their discussions of, and reflections on, their research. Our concern is to show the kinds of decisions that researchers make about their projects. You will quickly see these threads running across the book. At the end of Chapter 1, you will find a list of the texts we have used intensively. We also draw heavily, and we hope honestly, on our own work undertaken over the last twelve years. We have layered our research projects across

the chapters. We have included an Appendix at the end of the book, which lists our projects, relevant websites and publications.

This book is written by two researchers living in England. This is not an unimportant matter. In England, when we use the term school, we do not mean university or college, as is often the case in the USA, even though many of the approaches we suggest could be modified for further and higher education. We usually call those who lead schools headteachers, not principals, as they are referred to in Australia. We talk about primary not elementary schools. We also talk about high schools and academies and sixth form colleges. Our very English use of terminology points to one of the characteristics of 'place' – places are associated with particular ways of naming things, and thus with the ways in which we think about the world. We chose not to try to develop an unplaced and generic approach to our text – for instance writing headteacher/principal all the time – understanding that this decision might mean that readers from outside 'our place' might sometimes have to think about an equivalent term used in their home territory. We hope that translating the language from one place to another is not too arduous a task.

You may want to read the book from start to finish. We conceived of the text as a whole. We do think that the book can be read in a linear fashion, but it can also, of course, be read in any order, as and when the questions that are covered match the reader's interests and needs. The book proceeds in this way:

Chapter one: Studying a school

This chapter asks you to consider the ways in which you think about the school that you want to study. It makes the case that a school is not an island, cut off from other schools, a black box only marginally affected by its context. A school is, we suggest, a place which is both patterned and unique. We offer some key theoretical tools that will be used throughout the book to shape a study of a school and show an extended example of what this kind of approach can achieve.

Chapter two: Getting into school

In this chapter we argue that it can be problematic to think of the school as a 'site' and focus on gaining 'access' to it. We propose that you think of setting up a relationship with the school, and adopting an appreciative, albeit still critical, stance towards it. We address how you might think about strategically selecting your school or schools, the kinds of concerns schools have about letting researchers 'in', the potential for difficult issues to arise, and ethical questions of anonymity and confidentiality. We also briefly discuss questions of **insider research**.

Chapter three: Getting to know the neighbourhood

We show how explorations of local place can be helpful in approaching a school. We use methods drawn from urban planning, community development, geography and demography to show how existing data and local investigations (walking around and windscreen surveys, for example) can be used to understand local histories, challenges and assets.

Chapter four: Reading the school

We demonstrate how websites and prospectuses, visual surveys, official data, **mapping** and student guided tours can be used to get an initial picture of the material, symbolic and social landscape of the school. We also discuss how this can be enhanced by examination of other artefacts such as timetables, organizational charts, budgets, minutes of meetings and annual reports.

Chapter five: Living with the school

We examine the issue of short-term versus longer-term engagement with schools and what can be gained from each. We consider the

kinds of attitudes and orientations that are conducive to long-term relationships.

Chapter six: Multiple perspectives on the school

We discuss the importance of hanging about and chatting and consider the ways in which these can be recorded. We also consider some of the issues involved in using conventional research tools such as **interviews** and **focus groups**.

Chapter seven: Analysing complex data sets

We address the vexed issues involved in bringing diverse data together into one corpus, and consider the strategies that might be used to take first steps and to get a sense of the whole. We discuss the importance of arriving at the Big Idea about the school.

Chapter eight: Writing the school

We discuss questions of representation, audiences and the variety of texts that might be used to write about the school. We consider the range of dilemmas that can arise through the writing process. We argue that writing the school is integral to the kind of research relationship that is established and is an important part of the process of exit.

CHAPTER ONE

Studying a school

So you want to research a school. That sounds pretty straightforward. A school is a school is a school. Or is it?

In the spirit of 'making the familiar strange' we suggest that, before you plunge in, it is important to consciously reflect on what you think a school actually is. So we want to ask you, right at the start of our book and your project, to do a small mental exercise. We know it's not the way that books, especially research methods books, usually start. But humour us, just for a moment.

First of all we want you to think about the word 'school'. Who goes to school? What happens in a school? What images come to mind when you think of the word school?

The chances are that you have summoned up a general idea of children or young people, perhaps in uniform. They are likely to be in classrooms, perhaps sitting in rows. They are writing in exercise books or on paper, or reading from the board. Maybe the school building has long corridors which the students rush along in between lessons, banging into each other and their lockers as they go. Maybe there is a gym and a field outside; these are variously full and empty at specific times of the day. There are teachers too, standing at the front of the room, speaking – a lot. The teachers tell the students what to do and when to do it.

It hasn't been hard to summon up a generic image of a school. After all, we all know what a school is. We all went to one. Indeed. So now we want you to think about your school in particular. What comes to mind when you put the word 'my' in front of the words 'school'? What do you think of when you say the words 'my school' to yourself?

You will now be able to put specific details into the more general picture that you first thought of. The school you went to

had a particular design. It was built in a particular period. There are some things about it that are memorable. Perhaps you recall a particular part of the school – the remote reaches of the field, the rabble of the changing rooms, the quiet of the library, the shade of the tree in the playground – that has special meaning for you. There are bound to be some specific people in your remembered school too – your best friends, teachers that were kind or comical or deeply eccentric, other students who were ' the cool' kids or the frightening ones you didn't want to meet on the way home. You might also remember particular events that happened while you were at school. The time when the teacher …; the time that …; oh and that day when … Some of these moments might be very funny and still bring a smile to your face. Others will perhaps be sad, shaming, embarrassing. Not all of your school thoughts will be pleasant or pleasing. Some will bring back the feeling of being you, being at your school, as this memory does for the English food writer Nigel Slater:

> 'No, thank you,' I say to the tight-lipped prefect who is ladling great splodges of ivory-grey tapioca into shallow bowls and passing them round the table. 'I'm full.' Her eyes narrow and one corner of her mouth turns up. 'Sorry, you have to eat it, it's the rules.' The guy opposite me, who smells like digestive biscuits and I think lives on the council estate I am not allowed to go to, is wolfing down his down like it was warm treacle sponge or trifle, or maybe chocolate sponge pudding. But it's not. This is the most vile thing I have ever put in my mouth, like someone has stirred frog-spawn into wallpaper paste. Like porridge with bogeys in it. Like something an old man has hockled up into his hanky.
>
> When I get home I am going to tell Mum to write a note letting me off this stuff. The stew wasn't that bad, apart from the swedes which were bitter and something flabby that could have been fat but felt more like a big fat slug. I spread the spittle-coloured glue around my dish right up the side in the hope I will have to eat less of it. 'You must show me your bowls before you leave the table,' says Tight Lips. 'They must be clean, otherwise you'll be here all afternoon.'
>
> Considering we have an outdoor PE lesson this afternoon,

> staying in the warm, playing with a bowl of rice doesn't seem such a bad option. (Slater, 2003: 82–3)

Many of us have our equivalents of these moments: times when we feel out of place, times when we are bewildered. We have these moments as students, and as teachers too. These moments are pivotal and stay with us; they epitomize being there, in that school, in that place – and we know that they have helped make us who we are now. Whenever we think of such deeply charged events, they always occur somewhere, and where matters.

The point of this exercise is to show the differences between thinking about a school as a generic entity, and thinking in particular about your own experiences. These differences are not simply in the level of detail – when we think of 'my school' we are able to imagine a place that we know, and describe its actual physical features rather than produce something that is generalized. The differences are also in the life and meaning and emotions that are associated with our own experiences. When we think about our own school and our own schooling, we bring specificity, particularity and complexity to the near-universal experience of being in school, of being educated. Neither of these two imaginings is wrong. There *are* things about schools which are the same, just as there are things about all of them that are distinctive.

Schools and schooling

When you think about 'the school' at first, the chances are that you will think generally. This means that the students may be more regimented, the classrooms less or more disciplined, the buildings older, the lessons less varied and more text-based than many actually are. When we think less specifically about schools, we often produce a kind of archetype. This is not unusual. When Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell (1995) asked children to draw a teacher and a classroom, all of them produced pictures of rows of desks with teachers standing at the front, even though this was not their actual situation. Your imaginary teachers and students may be similarly 'typical', even stereotypical – teachers may be more

caustic, more domineering, more like Miss Trunchbull than Miss Honey (Dahl, 1989), more Dolores Umbridge than Dumbledore (Rowling, 2003).

Producing this kind of generalized picture is not necessarily a problem. In these archetypical/stereotypical imaginings there are significant truths – the institutional nature of schooling, the dominance of particular transmission patterns of teaching and learning, the ongoing monitoring of student behaviour, the division of the day into lessons and the necessary transitions between them. There is something very recognizable about schooling, regardless of what part of the world you are in. You can usually tell a school building: it is set apart from neighbouring housing and often fenced off; it is large and surrounded by both space for parking and (usually) green space. Students may or may not be uniformed, but they will arrive in the morning and leave in the afternoon en masse, and in between times will be largely confined to the school environs. Their day will be organized as 'chunks' of time and space. They will move between designated learning spaces, classrooms, specialist rooms and the outside areas at predetermined times. Learning largely involves cerebral work, encountering knowledge in spoken and written forms, with some time given to more active forms of knowing, such as making and moving.

We could go on, but you get the picture. After all, you imagined this when we suggested you think of 'the school'.

By contrast, when we asked you to think about 'my school', our hunch is that you focused on the particular ways in which your own experience sat within these overall institutional patterns. That is to be expected. When memories are put into words and communicated, it is both the similarities and singularities that are important. Nigel Slater's story of his experience of school dinner works for us as readers because we too have experienced less than appetizing institutional food, we have known a prefect-figure who was unreasonable and self-important, we have faced a lesson that we didn't want to do and where punishment seems a preferable alternative. Slater's account depends on our understanding of the general in order to appreciate its specific details.

This book addresses exactly this sense of individual difference loaded with meaning, of singularity existing within commonality. However, schools are very often talked about in general terms.

These days, policymakers nearly always address schools as generic institutions (Sahlberg, 2012). Their concern is to improve the ways in which schools, as a conglomerate, support students to learn the designated curriculum. The focus is on those schools that do worse than the average, and particularly on those at the bottom of the systemic bell curve. In some countries, targets for system improvement are set, and a range of incentives and punishments are meted out through the regular rhythm of inspections, tests and exams. Individual schools *are* singled out in this kind of policy regime – those that do very well are hailed as the epitome of the good (generic) school, and held up as examples of what all other schools should become. Schools at the bottom are named and shamed; they are too far from the universal norm and have done too little to make themselves like all of the rest. Their very difference is a problem; it is assumed that they should be more like other schools.

Educational research literatures also often address schools as generic entities in a system or as aggregates of shared characteristics. We might think here of research that discusses 'effective' schools in order to identify the common characteristics of schools where students' tested learning is deemed superior to others (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000); or school improvement, where the focus is on the strategies that effective schools use in order to better students' learning, teacher performance and leadership quality (Hopkins et al., 1994). We can easily think of, for example, meta-studies which discuss the relative benefits of various classroom strategies (e.g. Hattie, 2008), the 'right' approaches to teacher professional development (e.g. Cordingley, 2005) and large-scale studies which attribute success to particular types of leadership behaviours (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2006).

Ironically, some of these studies are based on research designs which position schools as islands, so that the ways in which individual schools are connected, even in highly devolved systems, are left out of the scope of the inquiry. Such studies may ignore the ways in which schools are linked together, say for example through enrolment policies which pit one school against another in reputational competitions which are both produced and reproduced through the workings of residential housing markets (Gorard et al., 2003). **Case studies** and **ethnographies** also often treat their study site as discrete entities. But, as Jan Nespor (2002) argues, seeing

the school as a separate thing unto itself reduces the capacity of researchers to understand the detailed lives that they seek to examine. He suggests that drawing the boundaries tightly around 'the school' as the object of study

> … allows social and economic problems to be re-territorialized as 'school problems,' deflects attention from the role of the state and the corporate sector in shaping educational possibilities, and generates an image of children as partial beings understandable in terms of their narrowly defined, school-inscribed attributes.

Nespor argues that the boundaries around individual schools create 'abstract pupils':

> that is the deletion of everything kids do outside school: their activities with friends, family life, engagements with entertainment media and popular culture, paid and unpaid work, religious participation, sports, activity in the arts, the neighborhood organizations they belong to; the public spaces they have access to or appropriate, their friendship networks and peer groups, and on and on. (p. 484)

This lacuna is ironic in ethnographic and case study research, Nespor notes, as this kind of abstraction is exactly the same as that accomplished by government policies that see students only in terms of narrow educational outcome, attendance and exclusion data.

However, other educational research, often smaller in scale, sees the school differently. It tells another story. Case studies and ethnographies of schools *can* show difference that is patterned in ways that connect the school and its teachers and students to a larger world. There are, for example, studies which document the variable take-up of policies in different schools and their different results (Ball et al., 2011a; Thomson, 2002; Tittle, 1995). This differential adoption and adaptation of policy is not because the staff or the leadership team at the school are underperforming or wilful, cut from an 'ineffective' cooker-cutter mould. Rather, variable school policy take-up and enactment result from the complex interactions and dynamics of different school populations – the 'school mix' (Thrupp, 1999), the different resources that the

schools have at their disposal, the stability or instability of staff, the demands and expectations of the local community, the state of the buildings and equipment, the serendipity of misfortune, even the history of the particular school system. All of these things affect the ways in which policies are able to be implemented and the ways in which schools are variously able to make a difference in student learning (Thomson, 2000).

Our interest in this book is in understanding how to find, understand and work with these differences, to make sense of the particularities of individual schools and to comprehend why they do what they do. To acknowledge and understand these kinds of differences is not to make excuses for schools, as some policy-makers and educational researchers suggest. Rather, it is to enter into the ways that the people in the school make sense of where they are, and to recognize the kinds of spatial, temporal, material and discursive processes that shape the school world.

Why? Why should educational researchers attempt to grasp a school at this level of detail? The first answer to this question goes to the ways in which the research knowledge that we generate might be used. It is only on the back of specific understandings, we suggest, that appropriate support and development can be provided. Generic support or interventions are not nearly as acceptable or effective as those which are bespoke to the actual school and people. The importance of local circumstances, context and detail is something that all good consultants and district advisers know is crucial to their work.

But there is another reason for wanting to understand a school in detail. We can only really understand what is common to all schools, no matter where they are and who is in them, if we also deliberately seek out what is special and unique to each of them. Rather than attempting to statistically remove difference, or to thematize it out of existence, we argue that it is important for researchers to find approaches that simultaneously allow them to see both the bigger picture and the small one.

Pauline Lipman's (1998) *Race, Class, and Power in School Restructuring*, a place-based study of two low achieving junior high schools in a southern city in the USA, illustrates the importance of understanding both **history** and local nuance. Lipman argues and shows through her book that what happens in her two study schools cannot be understood without a knowledge of

the history of US schooling, the push for desegregation and the history of mandatory desegregation within the broader locality. Each school in the district she studied had experienced the move to desegregation differently, and they served different populations who were differently and differentially affected.

One of Lipman's research schools, Gates, served a solidly middle-class and working-class population, had a good reputation in the district and did well in standardized achievement tests. The other school, Franklin, which served a low-income, predominantly African-American population, had a 'checkered past' and a somewhat tarnished reputation. Lipman followed both schools through a compulsory district restructuring programme: she carefully traced and analysed the dissimilar effects in each of the two schools. The end result of the restructuring programme was that both schools emerged with their reputations in the same relative position, and without achieving the desired improvements in the learning of the poorest, largely African-American, students. However, the district and parents saw these results in another light, as Lipman explains:

> At both schools, the concern was with formal and superficial signs of integration, not racism and inequality. At Franklin, educators directed their attention to visible signs of racial balance, while critiques of racism and talk about race were silenced. I witnessed Franklin being viewed with alarm in the district because it was becoming overwhelmingly African American (segregated) rather than because of the students' poor educational outcomes. On the other hand, at Gates, despite dramatic racial disparities in academic achievement and discipline, teachers voiced satisfaction with their school because excellence (as they saw it) was maintained for a sizeable proportion of those students who are at the centre of Gates. Physically, African Americans were in the building, though few were part of it. (pp. 289–90)

Lipman's book carefully unpacks why district policy and the difficult history of desegregation combined with local sites and their people and practices to replicate the existing status quo. Readers might well conclude that, had the school district not treated all of its schools as if they were the same, and instead offered tailored

support and interventions, something other than this depressing and inequitable result might have been possible.

Lipman's study has what we call an 'eagle's eye view'. She is able to keep one eye on the horizon and the other focused on the life between the blades of grass. She places the particularities of each of her two study schools in the context of their district and in larger social, economic, cultural and political frames. Her study is also firmly anchored in time: she provides an **historical analysis** which explains why the schools in the city were established to serve both particular neighbourhoods and local and national political concerns. This layered view of schooling is what we aim to do too, in our own research. And, in this book, we offer a range of research strategies that you can use to achieve a view of schools that has the same kind of global/local resolution.

The notion of 'place' captures the idea of a school that is one of a kind, simultaneously both patterned and distinctive. Place, we argue and will show in this book, is a very helpful lens through which to examine schools. Our first step is to begin to consider the theoretical resources we can use to conceptualize and theorize place. We then conclude the chapter by showing some more of what a place-based analysis can reveal.

What is 'place'?

We frequently use the notion of place. We have 'our favourite places', we feel 'out of place', we have a 'place' in the world. We can think of place as being as small as a chair in a room – this is my place to sit each night – or as large as a part of the world which is 'my place'. We have a 'sense of place'. Place can be intimate, public, manufactured or natural. However, when we attempt to pin down the meaning of the word 'place', it becomes elusive and somewhat obscure.

One thing that holds these various uses of place together is that place is something that we experience. It is something we make meaningful and particular (Tuan, 1977/2011). The meaning that people attribute to a particular place is often understood and expressed as an aspect of 'identity' – I am Australian, I am from Yorkshire, I'm an Icelander. Who we are is associated with where