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Researching Social Justice in Education in Theory and Practice

Prof Sally Elton-Chalcraft
LED Research Centre
Director

York SJ 7th July 2025



University of
Cumbria 

LED Research Centre
Learning, Education and Development



A) **Why** research social justice issues in education?

B) **How** can we research social justice in education?

C) **What** are you researching? How can we support each other?

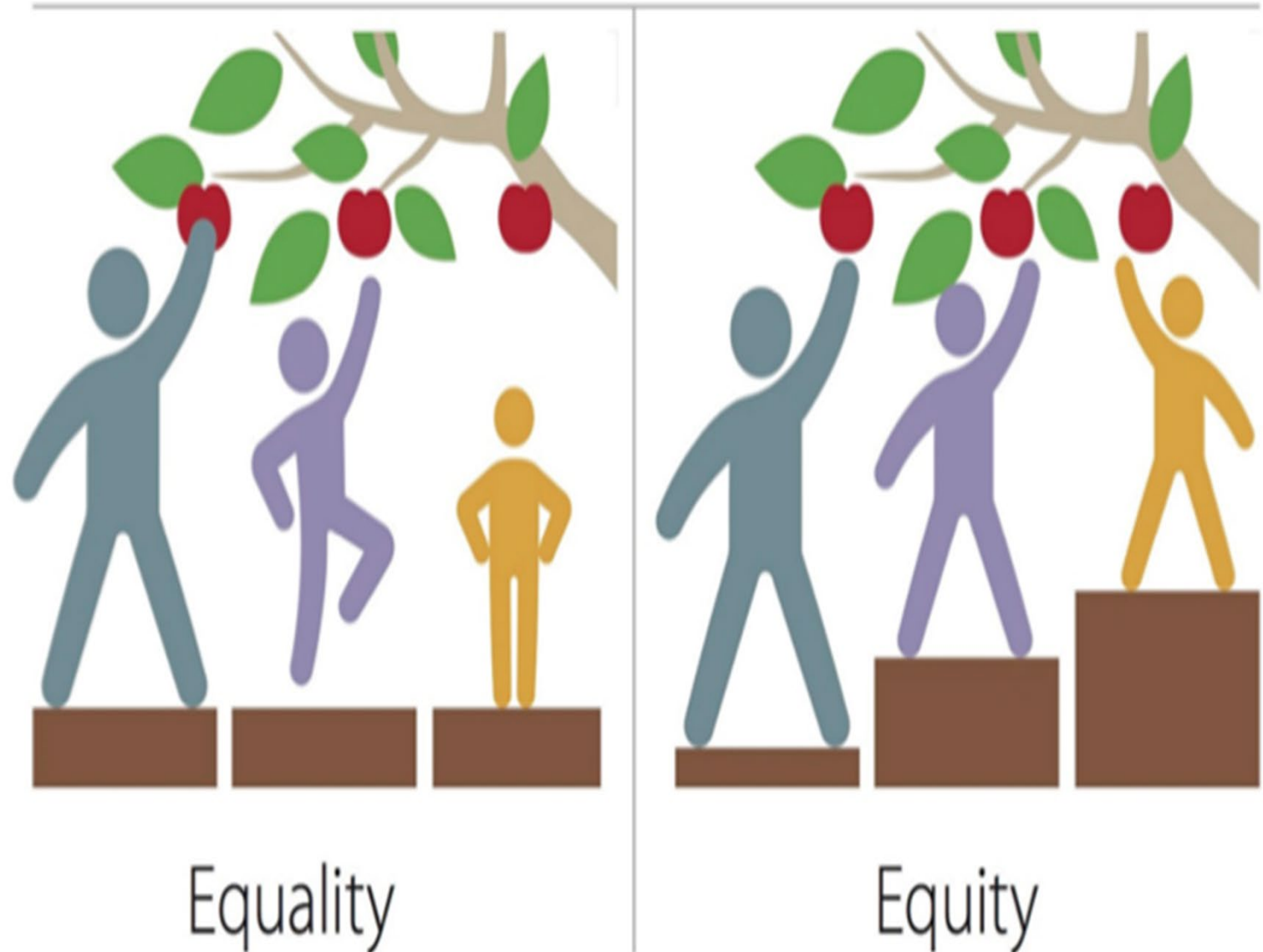
A) **Why** research social justice in education (theory and practice)?



- What is the purpose of education?
- What does successful school education look like?
- What barriers do some children encounter and why?
- Is English Education white, patriarchal and middle class?
- How can we research Social Justice?

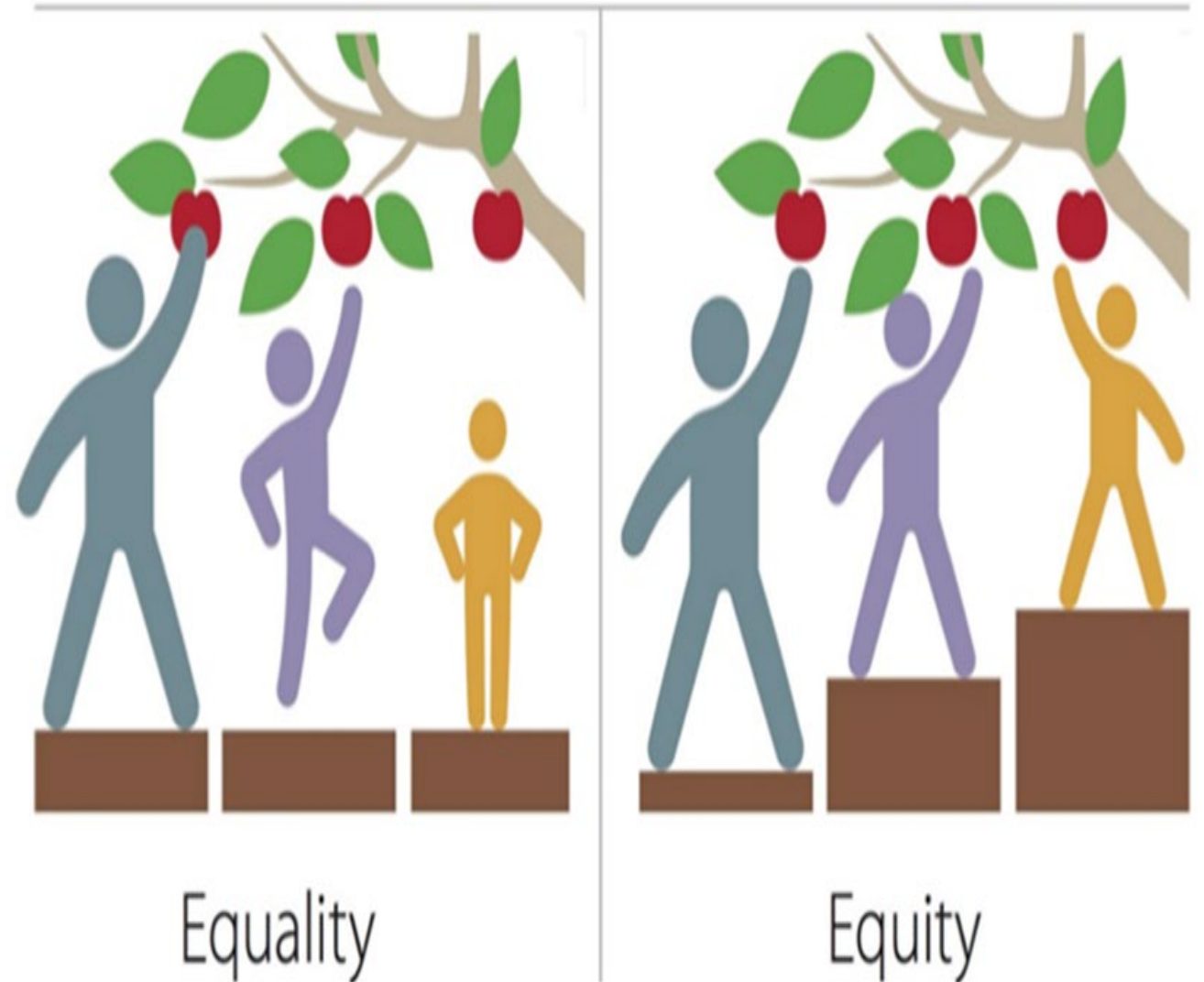
What are some Social Justice issues :

- What are the brown platforms?
- Why are the people different sizes?
- What are the apples?
- Why reach for the apple?



What factors impact on education and success?

- Class
- Socio economic background-wealth/poverty
- Special educational need and disability SEND
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Place of birth
- Intelligence
- Social/ cultural expectations
- Worldview (religion/belief)
- etc



Educational solutions: research informing practice

- What do platforms add/ equalise?

Lack of intelligence/ effort

Being the 'wrong' gender/ class/ ethnicity?

- Why are the people different sizes?

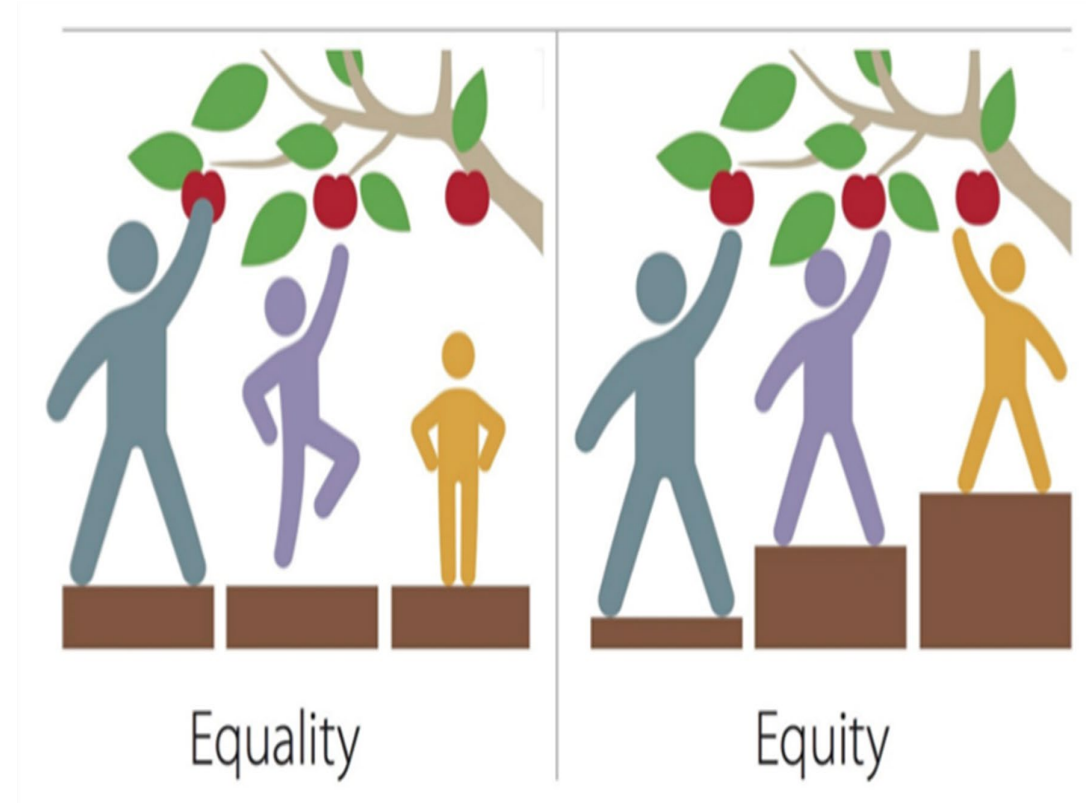
Interests/ aptitudes/ expectations?

- What are the apples?

Achievement in school/ university?

- Why reach for the apple?

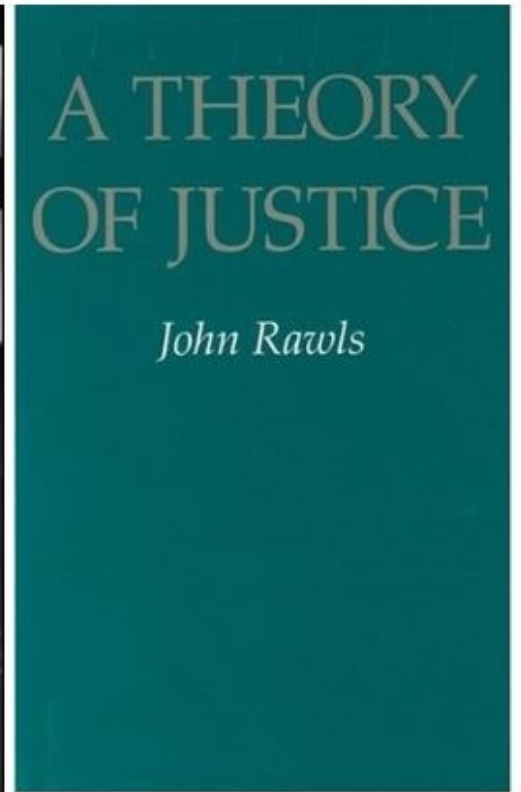
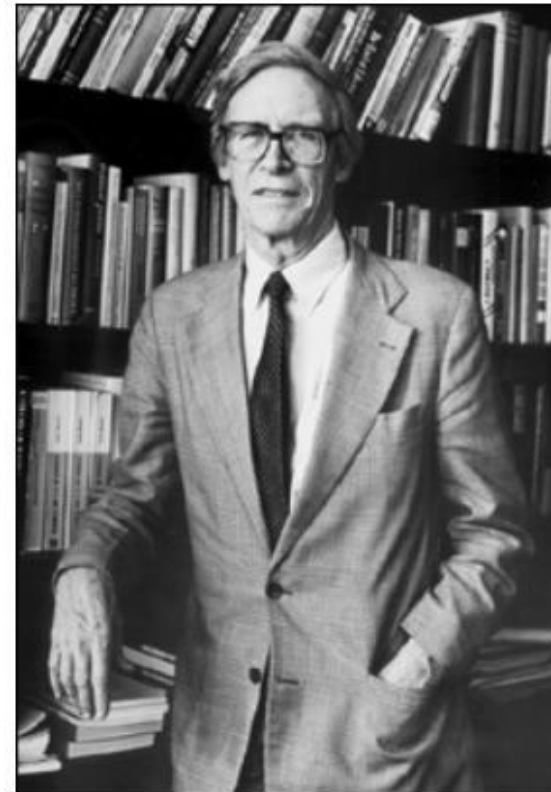
Good job/ wealth/ happiness?





Social Justice in Education

- Evaluate the justice of any society through the perspective of the least advantaged
- John Rawl's 1971



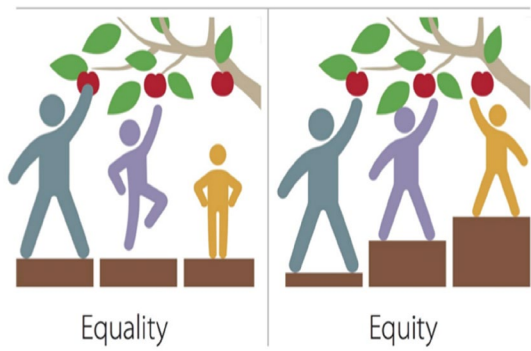


Investigating social injustice in education and dismantling discrimination

If hard work brings monetary success- then black women should be the richest- They are not. Why not?

- Can we **level** the playing field?
- Is **Meritocracy** unfair to those with less talent?
- Does the **Outcome** have to be the same for everyone?
- Are some people's talents **rewarded/ valued** in differently?

- Michael's Sandel's Justice talks
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04kmj63>



Should expertise/ talent be rewarded equitably?

- Are Footballers' talents valued/ rewarded more than hockey players?
- Most societies, nowadays, value football rather than hockey players
- Are Brain surgeons valued/ rewarded more than journalists.
- Some people are 'lucky' others aren't – moral arbitrariness of talent.
- If everyone had a truly equal start – does the winner deserve the reward?



• <https://www.bing.com/discover/free-images?first=1&cw=1663&ch=939>



Case study

School leadership and Social Justice

- Aspirant head teachers and Middle leadership
- Is English Education white, western and patriarchal
- Pockets of discrimination
- Women are leaders in the home as well as at work
- (Elton-Chalcraft, Kendrick, Chapman 2018)

Because I wear a veil I feel people are judging me – but perhaps it's something I need to deal with – it may be that they are not judging me at all but I feel that they are; I am in a Church of England school – prayer is fine but faith-led assemblies are a restriction because I am of a different faith (BAME, female, aspirant middle leader)

My partner is as useful as a chocolate tea pot responsibility wise (white, aspirant head, female)

Social class (INTERSECTIONALITY) Gender

- Diane Reay (2017) *Miseducation*
- Intelligent 'working class children' should have opportunities to succeed
- Examples from her own life as a working class female



Gender

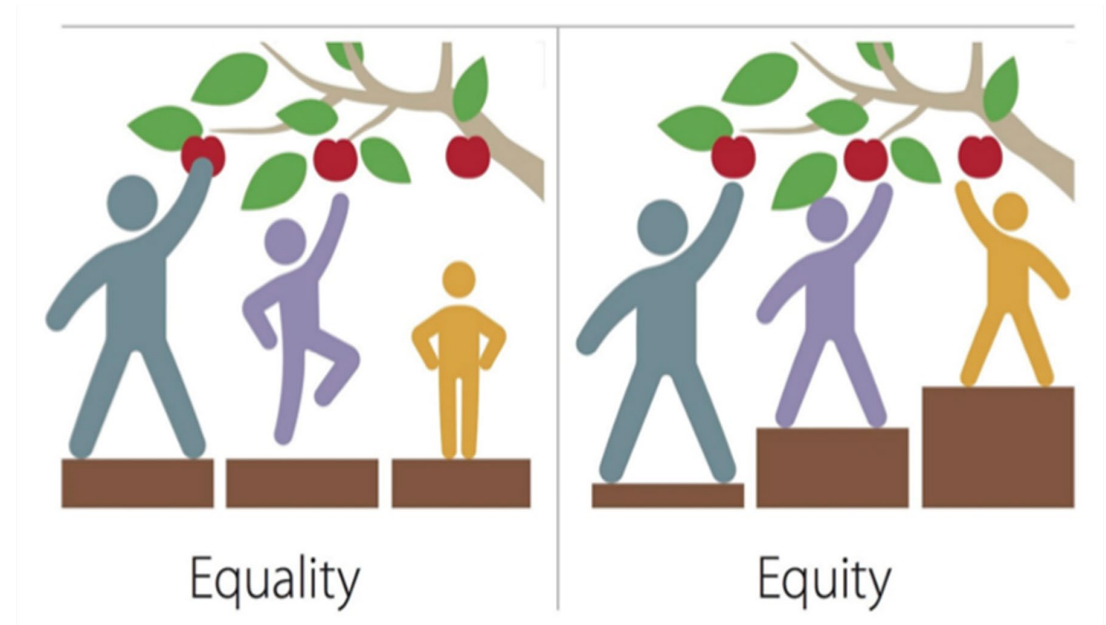
- Inequality of Gender and class in education

Are women seen as

- Reproductive (mothers)

OR

- Productive (contributing to society through careers)



Educational solutions: Research informing practice

- What do platforms add/ equalise?

Lack of intelligence/ effort

Being the 'wrong' gender/ class/ ethnicity?

- Why are the people different sizes?

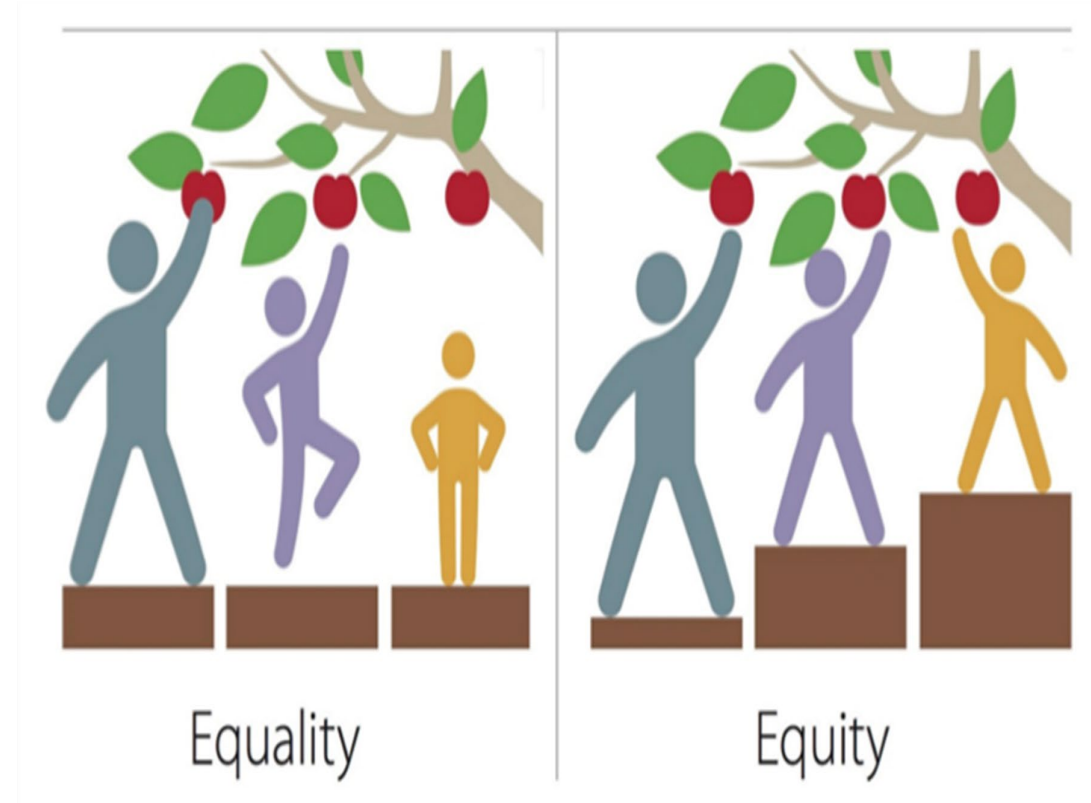
Interests/ aptitudes/ expectations?

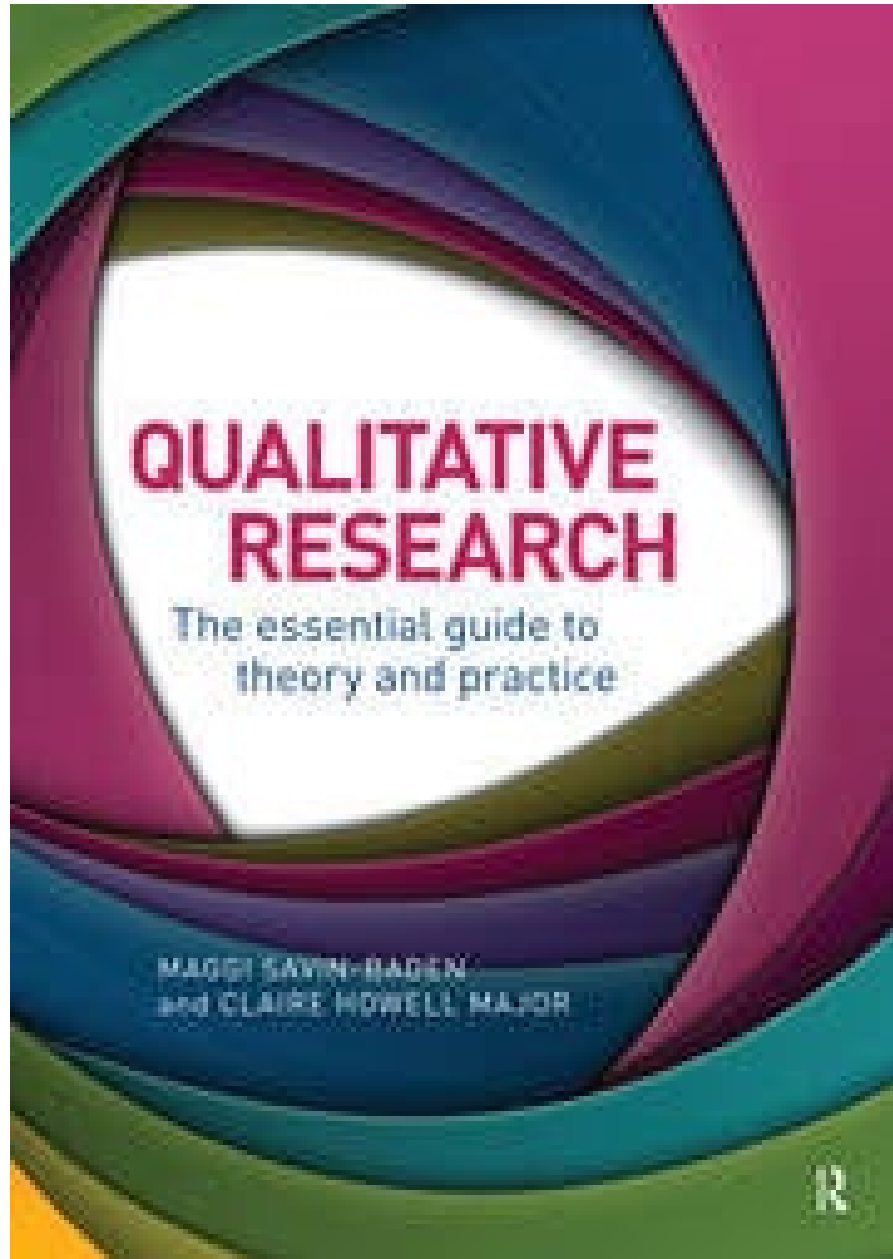
- What are the apples?

Achievement in school/ university?

- Why reach for the apple?

Good job/ wealth/ happiness?





- Savin-Baden, M., & Howell Major, C. (2013). Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003377986>



B) **How** can we research social justice in education in theory and practice?

Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013

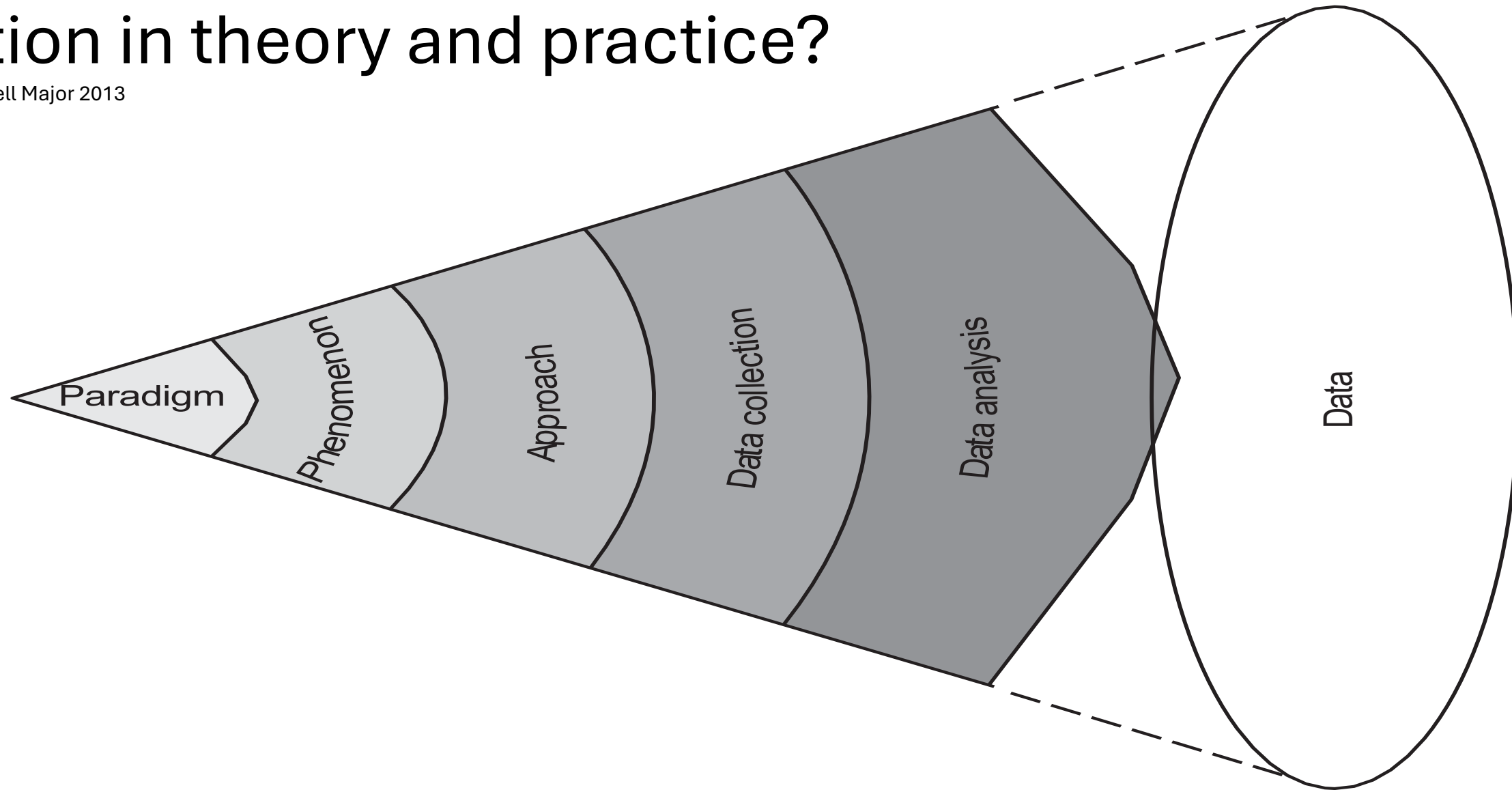


Figure 3.2 Set of lenses

Table 4.2 Comparison of perspectives in different paradigms

Research approaches	<i>Objective</i>		<i>Intersubjective</i>			<i>Subjective</i>
	<i>Critical social theory</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>	<i>Phenomenology</i>	<i>Post-critical and post-structuralism</i>	<i>Social constructionism</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>
	<i>Realism</i>					<i>Idealism</i>
Ontological assumptions (reality)	Reality is socially constructed through power relationships	Reality is that which is practical	Reality is an individual's interpretation of experience	Reality is what is passed on through symbolic discourse	Reality is socially constructed	Reality is an individual's mental construction
	<i>Positivism</i>					<i>Anti-positivism</i>
Epistemological assumptions (how to gain knowledge)	Knowledge is gained by co-construction of critical consciousness	Knowledge is derived from observation of interaction among a group of individuals and artefacts in their environment	Knowledge is derived from the interpretation of individual experiences	Knowledge may be gained through the deconstruction of social products, including language, media, institutions, etc.	Knowledge is constructed through dialogue and negotiation	Knowledge is constructed by the researcher and not discovered in the world
	<i>Universal</i>					<i>Local</i>
Purpose (of the research)	To study systems, process and change for the purpose of transformation	To test theories in practice	To develop phenomenological insight	To understand patterns of symbolic discourse	To aid in the unpacking and creation of social reality	To understand individuals
	<i>Nomothetic</i>					<i>Ideographic</i>
Methods (how to gain knowledge)	Structural/historical insights	Observation of subject in context	Close examination and interpretation of individual experience	Deconstruction of text/meaning/structures	Individual and collective reconstructions	Individual reconstructions
	<i>Removed</i>					<i>Involved</i>
Researcher perspective	Transformative intellectual	Interested observer	Self-aware translator	Decoder	Passionate participant	Meaning maker

Table 7.3 Sample research questions from different research approaches

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Sample question</i>
Pragmatic qualitative research	What do online teachers see as the incentives and barriers of teaching online?
Grounded theory	What explains (how can we theorize) instructor online teaching behaviour?
Phenomenology	What is the essence of online teaching?
Ethnography	How might distance learning teachers' online personas be described and understood?
Narrative inquiry	How would an individual teaching online convey his or her online life story?
Action research	How can the interests and needs of distance learning teachers inform and change teaching practice?
Collaborative inquiry	How do teachers learn with and through others in distance learning programmes?
Evaluative inquiry	How effective is the online programme at helping students develop content knowledge?
Arts-based inquiry	How do instructors use student developed graphic art as an evaluation method?

Table 13.2 Designing ethnography

<i>Design</i>	<i>Specifcs</i>	<i>Chapter</i>
Philosophical stance	Critical theory, pragmatism, critical realism, post-modernism	4
Personal stance	High degrees of disclosure of positionality in fnal report	5
Who or what of study	Groups	6
Research questions	Focus on understanding the group	7
Literature review	Comprehensive and all inclusive	8
Theoretical/conceptual framework	Can be applied to guide research design but not typically imposed upon interpretation of data	9
Time/place/participants	Long duration in the feld Done in natural environment Purposeful sampling, frequently maximum variation	20
Ethics	Ethical design, treatment of individuals, processes, and presentation of products important; particular emphasis on respect of individuals	21
Fieldwork	Ethnographic feldwork, feld notes, journals	22
Data collection	Unstructured observations in context Unstructured and informal interviewing Review of documents or other pertinent materials	23–26
Coding	Modifiable coding systems that correspond to the data collected	27
Analysis	Ethnographic analysis; ethnographic content analysis	28
Interpretation	High level of inference in interpretation	29
Quality	View of quality, quality criterion and strategies to ensure quality important; particular emphasis on view and criterion	30
Researcher voice	External observer and reporter	31
Report	Description of the data organized to tell a story of the participants	32

Issues in researching Positionality – SEC

White
Middle class
woman
white ally
AVOID white saviourism





Case Study - Consequences of not Decolonising Religions and Worldviews, and beyond

- AULRE webinar - Prof Sally Elton-Chalcraft, Dr Yonah Matemba and Alexandra Brown (2024) considered why it is important to decolonise RWE before engaging in anti racist strategies.
- We addressed the following questions
 - 1. Why is it important to decolonise before engaging in anti-racist strategies in RWE?
 - 2. What do we mean by decolonising knowledge within RE/RWE?
 - 3. What are the consequences of not decolonising within RE/RWE?
 - 4. How can the teacher educator and teacher decolonise RE/RWE ?

Decolonise before Engaging in Anti-Racism

(Makhubela, 2028; Grue, 2021; Matemba, 2024a)

- **Engaging**
 - educators to reflect on their structural location
 - educators in a process of critical self-reflection in addressing positionalities.
- **Ending**
 - epistemic trauma by uprooting colonial embeddedness of prejudice and supremacy.
- **Challenging**
 - structures of hegemonic control in knowledge production.
- **Abandoning**
 - Attitudes and approaches that peripherise other ways of knowing.



Anti-Racist Action in RE/RWE

(Dormandy, 2018; Bigger, 1999; Fry, 1986; Revell and Elton-Chalcraft, 2016; Matemba 2024b)

- **Challenging**
 - religion's complicity in racialised prejudice.
- **Acknowledging**
 - religions' efforts in ending slavery and combating racism.
- **Utilising**
 - inclusive approaches when diversifying religious and non-religious ways of knowing
- **Engaging**
 - in the process of epistemic humility (e.g., avoiding normalised and stereotypical characterisation of the non-normative 'others')



Decolonising Knowledge within RE/RWE

(Jackson and Everington; Bigger, 1999; Siciliani, 2022; (McKegg, 2019)

- Critical reflections
 - on sources of knowledge and its production.
- Ensuring
 - equity in knowledge usage and appropriation.
- Actively
 - seeking, legitimatising and utilising different knowledges.
- Critiquing
 - hegemonic impositions of normative religions (e.g., Christonormativity).
- Opening dialogue
 - with all relevant ways of knowing, whether religious or not.
- Recognition
 - of epistemic limitations to allow further dialogue with new ways knowing.



It is not the obvious things that prevent inclusion

- **Unintended consequences of materials, references and examples used**
- **Indirect discrimination** is subtle and usually unintended but may present a learner from engaging fully with a subject (hidden curriculum/ ethos of the school) eg
- maps,
- dating systems BC/ AD or BCE /CE

https://www.mapsinternational.co.uk/large-upside-down-world-wall-map-political-paper.html?gclid=EA1aIQobChMI19-7-OH75wIVR7DtCh060wrkEAQYASABEglaHvD_BwE



1. Thoroughly understand the issues/ problems/ complexities.

- 1. Why is it important to decolonise before engaging in anti-racist strategies in RWE?
- 2. What do we mean by decolonising knowledge within RE/RWE?
- 3. What are the consequences of not decolonising within RE/RWE?
- 4. How can the teacher educator and teacher decolonise RE/RWE ?

2. Openly engage in professional development alongside others

- 1. Why is it important to decolonise before engaging in anti-racist strategies in RWE?
- 2. What do we mean by decolonising knowledge within RE/RWE?
- 3. What are the consequences of not decolonising within RE/RWE?
- 4. How can the teacher educator and teacher decolonise RE/RWE ?

3. Bravely advocate equitable learning and teaching

- 1. Why is it important to decolonise before engaging in anti-racist strategies in RWE?
- 2. What do we mean by decolonising knowledge within RE/RWE?
- 3. What are the consequences of not decolonising within RE/RWE?
- 4. How can the teacher educator and teacher decolonise RE/RWE ?



Case Study

Fundamental British Values Research -

- Five researchers from three HEIs collaborated
 - questionnaires to schools, academies, colleges in the North and South of England.
 - 727 participants in Years 10, 11, 12 and 13
 - participants were introduced to FBVs in 2012, they had been 'taught' FBVs in primary and secondary schools for between six and ten years at the time of the empirical research.
 - Most data were collected before the riots and unrest of August 2024 (Southport).
 - We gained ethical approval from our respective HEIs.
 - adopted a phenomenological approach (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).
- *RQ1 Ten years on, in what ways do participants engage with the values articulated as FBVs?*
 - *RQ2 How do participants position themselves in relation to national conversations?*
 - *RQ3 How do participants engage with FBVs as a cultural product of national identity?*



Case Study -Discrimination against Muslims UK

1. Problem of viewing Muslims as a homogenous community
2. Concept of 'suspect community' and its ascription to Muslims
3. Blaming the 'Muslim Community' for terrorist acts
4. Implications of being a 'suspect community'
5. Typology of Muslims as a suspect community
 - a) Shamima Begum perceived as a terrorist 'bad Muslim'
 - b) Hamida perceived as a 'bad Muslim'
 - c) Nadiya British Bake off champion 'good' Muslim
- 6. 'Least Muslim role' v perceived Muslim violent extremist
- 7. Implications for the RE educationalist

Muslims described as a 'suspect community'

- Peer reviewed article
- 2024

The screenshot shows the article page for 'Muslims as a suspect community: a typology to support classroom discussions' in the Journal of Beliefs & Values. The page includes a navigation bar at the top with links to Home, All Journals, Journal of Beliefs & Values, List of Issues, Latest Articles, and the current article. A search bar is located on the right. The article title is prominently displayed, along with the authors Sally Elton-Chalcraft and Hazel Bryan. The publication date is 26 Nov 2024. The article is marked as 'Open access'. On the left, there are statistics: 203 Views, 0 CrossRef citations to date, and 1 Altmetric. A 'Listen' button is also present. At the bottom, there are links for 'Full Article', 'Figures & data', 'References', 'Citations', 'Metrics', 'Licensing', and 'Reprints & Permissions'.

Home ► All Journals ► Journal of Beliefs & Values ► List of Issues ► Latest Articles ► Muslims as a suspect community: a typolo ...

Journal of Beliefs & Values >
Studies in Religion & Education
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Research Article

Muslims as a suspect community: a typology to support classroom discussions

Sally Elton-Chalcraft & Hazel Bryan

Received 24 Jan 2024, Accepted 29 Oct 2024, Published online: 26 Nov 2024

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2024.2428116>

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Related research

Case Study - RQ : Values & National Identity

UK

India

How can we understand how different groups 'view' Muslims? (UK governmental security forces ; local people; teachers)



How can we understand '**Muslimness**' and its inherent complexities in UK?

- How can we understand how different groups 'view' Christians?
- How can we understand '**Christianness**' and its inherent complexities in different Indian states?

Women's worship



VALUES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY



What are the challenges for marginalised religious communities in education:



Muslims in the UK



Christians in India

Values and National Identity – Indian Context PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Teachers, lecturers, students in 4 capital cities in different Indian states, Bengaluru (Karnataka), Hyderabad (Telangana), Kolkata (West Bengal) and Shillong (Meghalaya).

- Majority of women + some men cited **discriminatory practice towards women** being more prescient than religious discrimination-

Family life; career opportunities; state/denomination differences between Christian communities



Doing Research that matters : Vision and Aims of our Education Research Centre

- *To help to dismantle disadvantage and promote social justice by utilizing our time and expertise to engage in purposeful educational research grounded in practice.*





A) **Why** research social justice issues in education?

B) **How** can we research social justice in education?

C) **What** are you researching? How can we support each other?



C) **What** are you researching? How can we support each other? (theory and practice)

How can we research Social Justice ethically? Advantages / issues –

- alone/ collaborations
- Positionality
- Impact case study template (REF 2021/ 2029)
- Influencing policy/ practice (support eg Alex Waddington, Mark Reed, Belle Reichard, Robin)
- Appropriately framing your study is crucial

Provisional impact case study draft – 2025

purpose of template- **start drafting a narrative** for potential impact case study.

which aspects are well-developed where there are gaps, prioritise your efforts .

Please note that **this is NOT the REF2029 template**, (not yet available); modified version of REF2021 template

Summary of the impact (ca. 100 words)

- The headlines – after reading this, an assessor might have an initial rating in mind. To help them see the overarching impact story, include:
- What problem are you addressing (very briefly, just half a sentence)?
- What is the benefit that can be felt, and who feels it? At what scale?
- Try to state the impact type(s):
- How is this linked to your research?

DRAGON, THREAT, HERO, HAPPY ENDING (Bayley)

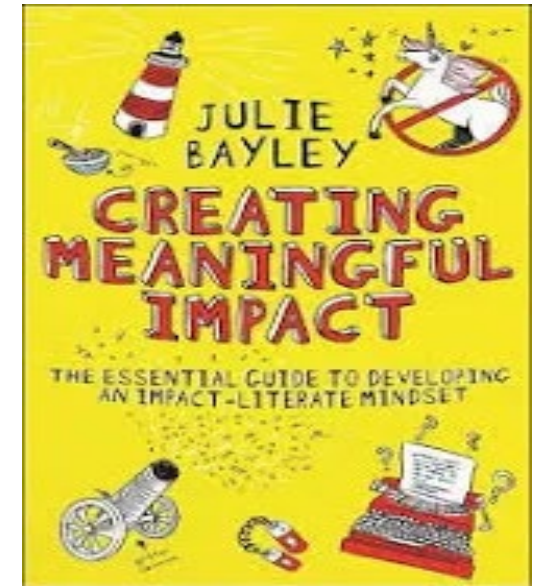
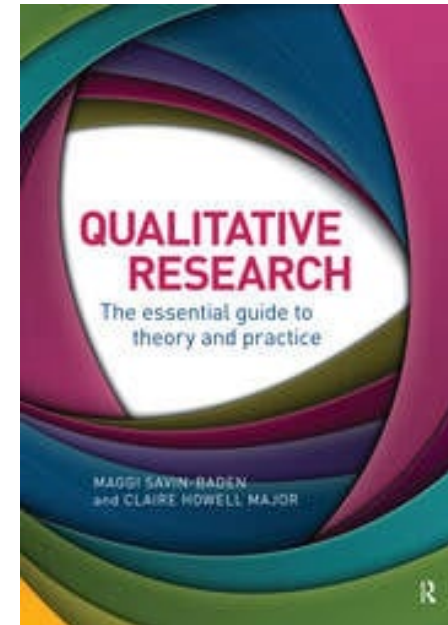
Interactive session – workshop tasks :

Draw on documents to help frame your study and discuss with others :

- Impact case study framework – DRAGON, THREAT, HERO, HAPPY ENDING
- Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) :
 - A. Set of Lenses
 - B. Comparison of perspectives
 - C. Designing ethnography
- Your own plan

Plenary

Share progress!

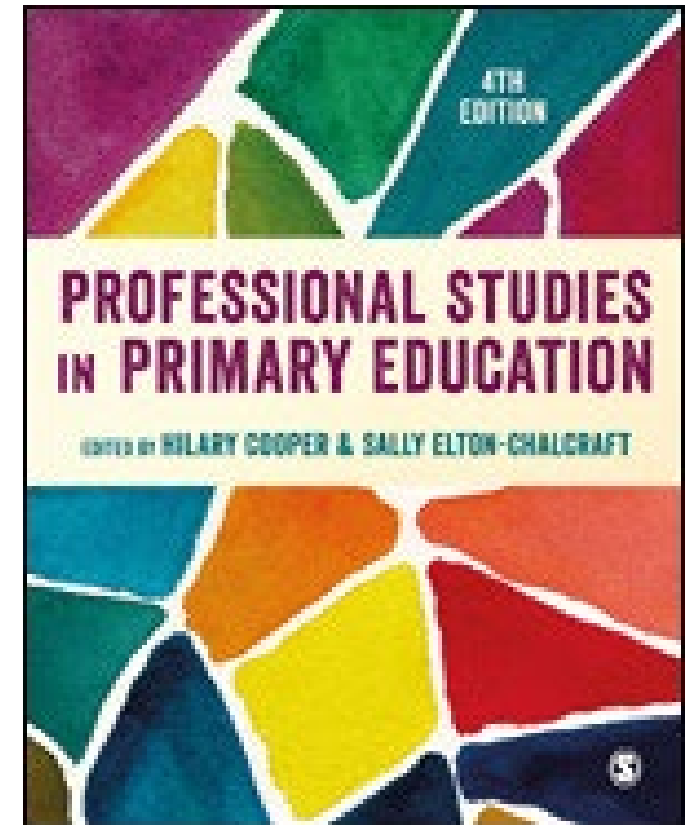
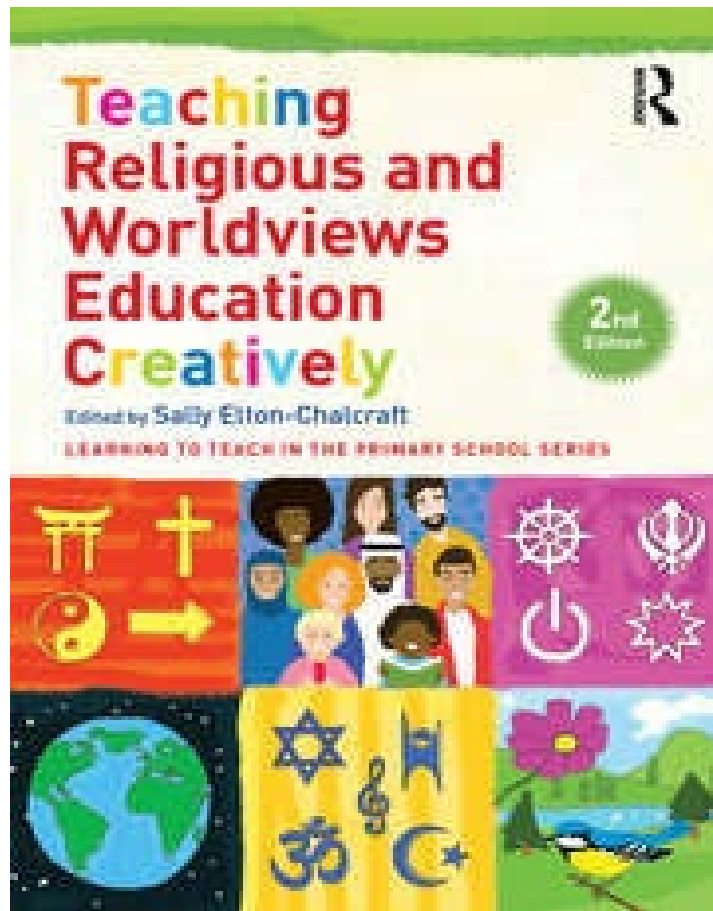


Professional practice books



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