

## **Pilot Projects as Effective Graduate Student Practice**

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### **Rationale**

I write this article as a fulltime graduate student, beginning my fourth year in a PhD in Educational Studies. Integrated in this PhD student experience, I conducted a pilot project. My experience piloting a research project prior to undertaking the dissertation research was rich and rewarding in personal, professional, and academic terms. This paper aims to encourage students and their supervisors to consider and pursue experiential learning (Kolb, 2014; Malinen, 2000; Russell, Hancock & McCullough, 2007) by having graduate students conduct or be involved in small research projects prior to the formal PhD dissertation research. Herein I focus on the pilot research benefits and my personal experience with completing a pilot project. I was fortunate prior to my first term of study in 2012 to have my supervisor suggest applying for an in-house grant for a collaborative graduate student-teacher-supervisor research project, the conditions for which required it to be conducted in a local school. My dissertation research interest was to examine the beliefs, involvement, and experience of non-francophone (NF) parents who have children in francophone schools. The collaborative research project grant allowed me to work with an educator in a francophone school and to conduct research with the NF parents at that school. This opportunity became the pilot project where I put my anticipated dissertation research design to the test.

Conducting a research project during the first semester of courses in the PhD program was demanding on my time and energy, and this continued over the following year. However, the extra workload permitted me to learn a great deal from the practice and I benefitted immensely from the pilot project experience. It was also helpful to have some paid research hours! The academic learning was personally and professionally advantageous and started with learning how to write the proposal and the application for funding, and continued with the development of a literature review, several consent forms, a survey and interview protocol, a pre-test of the instruments, and a formal application for ethics. With the University ethics board approval, I began the data collection for the pilot project.

## **The Study**

My in-school collaborator was a principal and teacher in a French minority language school who informed and recruited the participants. I conducted mixed-method research (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007), which included a survey, focus groups, and individual interview components. The focus of this study (MacPhee, Turnbull, Gauthier, Cormier, & Miller, 2013) was to investigate the experience and involvement of non-francophone parents in helping their children in French school education, and the research questions explored their beliefs, experiences, involvement, and barriers to their involvement. I sought information from a variety of stakeholders including parents, teaching staff, and school principals and vice principals.

Parents unanimously agreed on the importance of parental involvement and they had diverse motivations for choosing a French school, which included valuing French for

bilingualism, for Acadian family heritage, and for an additional language to be useful for future travel and employment. Parents also felt welcomed at the school, but felt less competent to help with French schoolwork at home. The NF parents indicated that navigating French education was a challenge and required extra effort on their part to be involved in their children's education. The biggest difficulty was the language barrier for the NF parents, especially when trying to understand messages in French sent from school to home.

School leaders and teachers acknowledged an increasing number of NF students and NF parents in their French minority language schools. All agreed on the need for francisation<sup>1</sup> support for students with little or no French and that francisation had to be supported by the family and community as well as by the school. Teaching professionals and parents observed that literacy development in any language contributes to transfer of skills to another language.

### **Advantages of the Project**

It may seem counter-intuitive to discuss the advantages of the pilot project by beginning with limitations; nevertheless one of the many advantages of this project was to identify short-comings and make improvement before the dissertation research. Weaknesses exist in all types of research and managing this pilot project allowed me to recognize limitations in the research design.

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<sup>1</sup> Francisation is supplementary linguistic or cultural support for students who arrive at French minority language schools with no or limited French proficiency (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2002)

As a result, I improved aspects of sampling, operationalizing definitions, and interviewing. Key enhancements were ways to recruit and group the participants for focus groups, to clarify terms in the research, and to slightly modify the questions and interviewing methodology. I learned that I needed a more rigorous recruitment of participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Fowler, 2007) and different focus groups based on the types of NF parents (Krueger & Casey, 2000). I required precise definitions for categorizing francophone and non-francophone parents to screen eligible participants. I also adjusted the survey to decrease frequency of negatively worded questions, added several new questions reflecting content in recent literature, and included more information about the sample group to enhance the analysis of the data. These modifications improved the quality of the dissertation survey and its implementation in research. In addition, stage two individual interviews would be conducted after focus group interviews only if necessary, and dependent on resources of time and money. Some strong and insightful comments had been shared during individual parent interviews for the pilot project; however the majority of the individual interview information was analogous to what was shared during the parent focus group session.

Despite the limitations, this project was an overall success that required hard work but delivered immeasurable value for me as a graduate student. In order to conduct this study, I integrated what I was learning in my qualitative and quantitative research methods courses, making that content immediately more meaningful and applicable. I drew on theory and previous studies in the research literature to identify, and then to address a gap in knowledge, about a topic that is timely and significant, as increasing numbers of linguistically diverse parents and students

are choosing francophone schools (Gérin-Lajoie, 2001; Landry, 2010; Vincent, 2010 ). The pilot study allowed me to try out the research design which I otherwise would only have been reading about (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007), and to identify limitations so that future research, and in particular, my dissertation research, could be enhanced. Having conducted an entire research project permitted me to experience every aspect of the research process. I had a deeper appreciation for the importance of the research literature, the choice of theoretical framework, the work and skills required to conduct focus groups, interviews and surveys, as well as the analysis of the data. My experience permitted me to work in an ethically responsible and sensitive manner to represent the participants' voices as fairly and accurately as possible (Kamberelis & Dimitrialis, 2011). I completed analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data and compiled a final report. The report, including recommendations (MacPhee et al., 2013) has been shared with stakeholders who have an interest in the topic such as the Commission Scolaire de Langue Francaise, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the school, and the parents.

### **Academic, Professional, and Personal Advantages**

One part of the education in a PhD program is to develop professional competencies (Roberts, 2010). Having completed a pilot project, I was in the position to write and then share the study and the findings. In response to calls for conference presentations, I sent abstracts in order to present the project. As a result, I learned about effective knowledge mobilization and presenting with impact when I was accepted to present the findings of this pilot project at two national association meetings in English and in French during the Canadian Society for the

Study of Education conference in 2013. Since this conference took place in Victoria BC, on Vancouver Island, where they were in the process of making decisions about whether or not to accept NF parent applications to Vancouver Island French schools, my topic was of local interest. I was interviewed about my research by Radio Canada in Victoria, for radio and television coverage. I also was able to present my findings locally at the PEI Teachers' conference and at graduate student research presentations. These opportunities stimulated the development of valuable and essential professional presentation skills and local and national knowledge mobilization skills.

The writing process and development of the final report from this project was another positive addition to my skill set. Preparing and creating the written document required me to reflect on and describe the research process and the decision-making throughout the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as well as to report the findings. This report was an important foundational piece for me to include in my comprehensive portfolio, and the pilot experience guided me in my portfolio preparation with the choice of artefacts I would include. Many aspects of the study, including the knowledge mobilization activities, enhanced my Curriculum Vitae, which now includes the authored report as well as several presentations at national and regional conferences, and interviews with Radio Canada. I also relied on the pilot project experience as a reference which boosted my confidence when I met with my committee to discuss my dissertation research proposal, and likewise I felt strongly positioned as I applied for university ethics approval to begin my dissertation research.

Conducting a pilot project early in my dissertation journey

afforded useful and important skill development that will support me as I go forward, and will be useful in informing future research. The refined research design, in addition to allowing me to hone my skills, contributed to effective data collection and to filling a gap in the research literature about the experience, beliefs, and involvement of NF parents whose children are attending French minority language schools. These findings will likely be useful in our increasingly multilingual and multicultural contexts where parents do not speak the dominant language of the school.

Finally, I appreciate the personal growth as well as the academic and professional growth that I experienced as a result of undertaking this pilot project. The involvement in research early in the doctoral program fostered my enthusiasm and skills as a graduate student, and my experience is consistent with the findings of the advantages and benefits of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014; Malinen, 2000 ) and benefits of undergraduate research experiences (Russell, Hancock, McCullough, 2007). I also had the opportunity to face my fear of presenting and being interviewed in French, my second language but the language of the research context, and that helped foster my confidence in my work in two languages.

Based on this positive experience and the literature, I suggest that graduate students be offered the opportunity and choose to become involved in pilot research projects, especially when related to their topic of interest. Support and guidance in this respect from graduate supervisors is of utmost importance, and I sincerely thank my supervisor, Miles Turnbull, for encouragement and guidance and I acknowledge funding from the JERG, joint educational research group at UPEI. I trust I

have shown with this narrative, many of the benefits of experiential learning when students conduct or become involved in small research projects prior to the dissertation research.

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