1.8 Researching Education: Methods in Context

AQA 7192 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Unless the question asks for brief points, write your answers in full sentences. Allow about 60 minutes for this pack.

1 State one theoretical reason a positivist researcher would prefer using official exam result statistics rather than participant observation to study academic attainment in secondary schools.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 Compare two strengths of using video-recorded lessons and non-participant observation when analysing teacher pupil interaction in a classroom setting.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 Describe two ways a researcher could improve the reliability of classroom observations when comparing teaching methods across different schools.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Explain two ways in which gaining gatekeeper permission from a headteacher can shape the focus and outcomes of research into classroom assessment practices.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 Discuss how far sociologists would agree that participant observation is the best method for researching pupil teacher relationships in secondary school classrooms.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Define what sociologists mean by 'participant observation' when researching pupils and classrooms in a school setting.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Identify and explain two ethical issues a researcher must consider when conducting face to face interviews with 15 year old pupils about bullying in a UK secondary school.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Item A: A researcher gains permission from the headteacher to study classroom interaction in a mixed ability Year 10 maths class. The researcher wishes to use video recording during lessons for later detailed analysis. The school requires parental consent forms to be returned and insists the researcher will not interview pupils during lesson time. Using Item A and your own knowledge, identify two practical constraints the researcher faces and explain how each could affect the research.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 Identify one reason why a researcher might choose structured interviews rather than unstructured interviews when asking teachers about the effectiveness of homework policies in a large sample of schools.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

10 Explain two ways pupil vulnerability can affect choices of research methods when studying classroom mental health support in secondary schools.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

11 Describe one advantage of using a stratified random sample of schools when researching differences in teacher morale between urban and rural secondary schools in England.

(Total for Question 11 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.8 Researching Education: Methods in Context

Question 1

identifies a positivist reason, e.g. positivists favour quantitative, measurable data that can be analysed for patterns and general laws **B1**

brief development, e.g. official statistics provide reliable, comparable numerical measures across schools **B1**

Answer: A positivist would prefer official exam statistics because they provide quantitative, measurable data for analysing patterns and making general comparisons across schools, seen as more reliable and objective than observation.

Question 2

identifies a strength of video recording, e.g. allows detailed replay and micro analysis **B1**

identifies a strength of non-participant observation, e.g. researcher can observe without altering the interaction as much as participation might **B1**

explains comparison, e.g. video supports detailed, repeatable analysis while non-participant observation supports real time, broader context awareness **B1**

further development, e.g. video provides a permanent record improving reliability, non-participant observation may improve naturalism if the researcher is unobtrusive **B1**

Answer: Video recording allows detailed replay and micro analysis and provides a permanent record that improves reliability. Non-participant observation lets the researcher watch without joining in, which can keep interactions more natural. Video helps repeatable, detailed study while non-participant observation supports awareness of broader context and naturalism.

Question 3

identifies one way, e.g. use a standardised observation schedule or coding frame **B1**

development, e.g. this ensures observers record the same behaviours in the same way **B1**

identifies a second way, e.g. train multiple observers and check intercoder agreement **B1**

development, e.g. regular reliability checks reduce observer bias and improve consistency **B1**

Answer: Use a standardised observation schedule or coding frame so observers record the same behaviours consistently, and train multiple observers with intercoder checks so observer bias is reduced and consistency improved.

Question 4

identifies one way, e.g. headteacher can limit access to certain classes or teachers **B1**

explains effect, e.g. this may bias the sample towards more cooperative teachers or particular year groups, affecting representativeness **B1**

identifies a second way, e.g. headteacher may impose conditions such as times, data allowed, or removal of sensitive material **B1**

explains effect, e.g. conditions can limit methods used, reduce depth of data or shape findings to be less critical **B1**

Answer: A headteacher may limit access to certain classes or teachers, biasing the sample toward cooperative staff or particular year groups and reducing representativeness. They may also impose conditions on times, data allowed or removal of sensitive material, which can limit methods and depth of data and make findings less critical.

Question 5

Level 1 Simple statements about participant observation and one other method with little or no application to classroom examples, and no sustained evaluation. **1-3**

Level 2 Some knowledge of participant observation and at least one alternative method, with limited application to classroom contexts and some evaluation, but analysis may be descriptive rather than balanced. **4-6**

Level 3 Clear explanation of strengths and limitations of participant observation applied to classroom examples, balanced against alternative methods such as interviews or official statistics, with reasoned evaluation and acknowledgement of practical and ethical constraints. **7-9**

Level 4 Detailed, well developed analysis showing understanding that views differ. Compares participant observation with other methods in context, discusses validity, reliability, access, ethics and theoretical perspectives, and reaches a supported conclusion on how far sociologists would agree. **10-12**

Indicative content:

- AO1 content: Participant observation involves the researcher participating in classroom life to gain insider understanding; can be overt or covert, full or peripheral participation.
- AO1 content: Alternative methods include non-participant observation, structured questionnaires, structured and unstructured interviews, video recording, and analysis of official documents.
- AO2 application: Participant observation can reveal detailed, contextualised pupil teacher interactions, informal power dynamics and taken for granted practices that questionnaires or statistics miss, for example seeing how teachers give praise or reprimands in real time.
- AO2 application: Access issues in schools, gatekeeper permission and safeguarding may limit the use of participant observation; pupil vulnerability and consent make covert participation unethical in many school settings.
- AO3 analysis: Strengths include high validity, rich qualitative data, ability to observe non verbal interaction and routines, and discovering unexpected findings about relationships and classroom culture.
- AO3 analysis: Limitations include low reliability and replicability, risk of observer bias, time consuming nature, ethical problems with minors, and problems generalising from one class or school.
- AO3 analysis: Comparison with interviews and questionnaires, which can gather wider samples and more reliable or comparable data but may lack depth, and with official statistics which are useful for patterns but miss interactional detail.
- AO3 theoretical points: Interpretivist sociologists favour participant observation for understanding meanings and perspectives, while positivists prefer quantitative methods for generalisable patterns and objectivity.
- AO3 evaluation: Consider mixed methods as a compromise, triangulation to improve both validity and reliability, and context dependent judgements that participant observation may be best for some research questions but not for all.
- Conclusion: A balanced judgement about the extent of agreement, acknowledging participant observation is highly valued for depth and validity in studying relationships, but many sociologists would point to its practical and ethical limits and recommend combining methods.

Question 6

identifies participant observation as the researcher joining the group being studied, taking part in activities **B1**

development, e.g. in a school this could mean the researcher acting as a teaching assistant or joining lessons while observing **B1**

Answer: Participant observation is when the researcher joins and takes part in the group being studied; in a school this could include acting as a teaching assistant or joining classroom activities while observing.

Question 7

identifies one ethical issue, e.g. obtaining informed consent from pupils and parents **B1**

explains why, e.g. pupils under 16 are minors so parental consent or safeguarding procedures may be required **B1**

identifies a second ethical issue, e.g. protecting pupils from harm or distress when discussing bullying **B1**

explains why, e.g. interviews about bullying may trigger distress so the researcher must have support and referral procedures **B1**

Answer: One ethical issue is obtaining informed consent from pupils and parents, because 15 year olds are minors and parental permission or school safeguarding procedures may be required. A second issue is protection from harm, since discussing bullying can cause distress so the researcher must provide support and referral routes.

Question 8

identifies a practical constraint, e.g. requirement for parental consent forms **B1**

explains effect, e.g. low return rates could reduce sample size or make the observed group unrepresentative **B1**

identifies a second practical constraint, e.g. restriction on interviewing pupils during lesson time **B1**

explains effect, e.g. inability to interview during lessons limits opportunities for immediate pupil perspectives and may reduce the depth of insight into observed interactions **B1**

Answer: One constraint is the requirement for parental consent forms; low return rates could reduce the number of pupils who can be recorded and make the observed sample unrepresentative. A second constraint is the school rule forbidding interviews during lessons; this prevents immediate follow up with pupils about events on the recording and limits the depth of pupil perspective available to the researcher.

Question 9

identifies a reason, e.g. structured interviews allow standardised questions and easier comparison across a large sample **B1**

brief development, e.g. this improves reliability and simplifies quantitative analysis **B1**

Answer: Structured interviews allow standardised questions and easier comparison across many teachers, improving reliability and simplifying quantitative analysis.

Question 10

identifies one way, e.g. need for extra safeguarding may rule out some intrusive methods	**B1**
explains why, e.g. vulnerable pupils may need support, so methods that could distress them like in depth interviews or covert observation may be inappropriate	**B1**
identifies a second way, e.g. consent processes may be more complex	**B1**
explains why, e.g. parental consent, assent from pupils and liaison with school counsellors take time and can limit the number of participants	**B1**

Answer: Vulnerability means extra safeguarding may rule out intrusive methods, since in depth interviews or covert observation could distress pupils. Also, consent processes are more complex, requiring parental consent and pupil assent plus liaison with counsellors, which takes time and limits participant numbers.

Question 11

identifies an advantage, e.g. ensures both urban and rural schools are represented proportionally	**B1**
development, e.g. improves representativeness and allows valid comparisons between types	**B1**
further development, e.g. reduces sampling bias by ensuring smaller subgroups are included	**B1**
brief example or link to the educational context	**B1**

Answer: Stratified random sampling ensures urban and rural schools are represented proportionally, improving representativeness and allowing valid comparisons between school types. It also reduces sampling bias by including smaller subgroups that might be missed by simple random sampling.