



This note explains why the research team did what they did and how they ensured robust results in this unique study.

# How was the research study done?

Methodology note for the Resi/Dance research study 2019-2023

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# Resi/Dance Research Study: how was the research done?

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## Introduction

From the beginning of the Resi/Dance project in 2019, there was determination to develop a significant evaluation/research element. What could be learned, by whom, from this pioneering community-based initiative?

The lead researcher, Dr Louise McDowall, working with the University of Leeds, supported Dance United Yorkshire's original application for funds to Paul Hamlyn Foundation, shaping the role of evaluation/research within the project. She is an independent researcher, dance artist, and fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, whose work explores the intersections of movement, well-being, and community engagement and the resulting impact on individuals and communities. The outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 led to the withdrawal of the University from the project. Dr McDowall continued the research for the project independently from 2020. In 2021, PublicServiceWorks (PSW)<sup>i</sup> was engaged to support Dr McDowall in carrying out the research. PSW is a collaboration of experienced professionals qualified in research, evaluation, policy development and communication in the not-for-profit sector. The PSW colleagues involved, Dr Sheila Marsh and Marsaili Cameron, have long experience in research, evaluation, analysis for policy and extensive writing/communication skills.

A team approach was developed that enabled support and mentoring for Dr McDowall as an embedded researcher in 2021 and, in 2022-23, gave rise to valuable team discussion and reflection on emerging findings and analysis in this complex and long term project.

The research questions that drove the project were:

- ***What knowledge can we add for ourselves and others that will enable us to deepen and widen the impact of our work with individuals, families, and communities?***
- ***What is it about Resi/Dance that might produce change of the kind we want?***

How did we approach the research?

The nature of Resi/Dance means there is no real 'baseline' because the whole process has been unique. Nonetheless we resolved to find ways in which the research could be conducted with rigour to provide soundly based and valuable insights. We took a mixed methods approach, drawing on activity statistics from DUY records and their evaluation material, but principally taking a qualitative approach to inquiry. We drew on traditions of **action research**<sup>ii</sup> and **realistic evaluation**<sup>iii</sup> to frame the study, since these offer a direct link, crucial for innovative projects, from cycles of action to research and back to new/more/changed action by those involved. We needed a framework such as this to respond effectively to what was an emergent area of work and to adapt to changing circumstances and timelines. The ground-breaking project which was the focus of the research necessarily displayed a stop-start-change pattern during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions on activity in 2020 and the first half of 2021.

We used a framework for **rigour in qualitative research** that proposes the principles shown in Box 1. We were acutely aware of issues of power in engaging participants in the research from young children to older adults, young people and parents, as well as the dance artists and other staff in the small DUY team. Whose voices came across immediately and clearly? Whose voices – and views – were more fugitive? Issues of class, gender and location imbued the research with complex issues, as the learning notes and overview report point out in relation to Holme Wood.

*“Navigating insider and outsider status - the space I operate in, and consideration necessary when coming into estate given my accent, clothing, power etc non-judgemental ...” [Researcher reflection]*

- ◇ a thorough, realistic and open consideration of power and other ethical issues
- ◇ a surfacing of assumptions throughout by the researcher: ‘*consciousness in the midst of action*’ (Argyris and Schon cited in Eden and Huxham 1996);
- ◇ a recognition of and drawing out different perspectives including noticing who is silent and who is making a din (Harlow et al 1995, Marsh and Macalpine 2003).
- ◇ a clear tracking of cycles of action and processes of sense-making (Coghlan and Brannick 2001) the drawing of credible insights, such that others see the inquiry as trustworthy. As Eden and Huxham suggest, rigorous action research also results in insights that : ‘*...are meaningful to others ...promote excitement in others about how to understand situations*’ (Eden and Huxham 1996:79)

*Box 1: A framework for rigour in action research from Macalpine and Marsh 2009<sup>iv</sup>*

The research team discussions and meetings with DUY staff helped us to surface and challenge assumptions. For example, what did professionalism and quality mean to residents of Holme Wood? And what expectations did participants bring to the Resi/Dance programme? We were able to draw out the differing perspectives of the dance artists and local stakeholders, and we highlighted gender disparity within and between groups of participants. We framed our work as cycles of action and research and achieved a high degree of trust from participants in seeing our insights as ‘meaningful’ and even to ‘promote excitement in others’.

In assuring the quality of our study, we also drew on criteria for **methodological integrity** based on the work of a range of qualitative researchers.<sup>v</sup> Criteria included:

- fidelity to the subject matter, addressed through the collecting of data from participants in their natural setting
- transparency, whereby the researcher practised a conscious reflexivity, utilising a reflexive journal and critical support from research colleagues – some of her reflections are included as audio files in the final reporting
- exploiting exceptional data, that is contradictory and outlier data from the analysis was embraced and integrated into the central themes of the study. For example, some differing approaches to intensive projects within the programme and this helped us with knowledge of DUY methodology to probe further into biases/assumptions/preferences.
- ‘rich rigour’ through understanding the impact of the project by collecting data from multiple informants/perspectives
- coherence, that is the researcher looked at how data collected from different participants converged, diverged and created more complex and nuanced understandings.

Our drawing on realistic evaluation also offered the concept of a **‘theory of change’**<sup>vi</sup>. This idea has gained traction in not-for-profit settings especially, drawing on the work of Pawson and Tilley (begun in complex scenarios within the criminal justice system)<sup>vii</sup>, and was envisaged as the key approach to evaluate the Resi/Dance project in the original grant application to Paul Hamlyn Foundation by DUY. This means the research asks not only the question ‘what has the impact of a project been? But also asks ‘why has this impact resulted?’. Pawson and Tilley put it thus:

***‘What are the mechanisms for change triggered by a programme and how do they counteract the existing social processes?’***<sup>viii</sup>

In Holme Wood the community is highly stigmatised and marginalised both geographically and in terms of access to resources. Generational disadvantage through the interaction of poverty, crime and unemployment face all residents in some measure, and violence is commonplace. Answering the question above requires a full recognition of the complex environment for Resi/Dance. This environment is made up both of broad external landscapes and situations and also, importantly, *internal contexts* such as what the people involved are thinking and doing, and why. This is summed up in the diagram developed by PSW early in the study (Figure 1). We have explored the Holme Wood context in both Learning Notes and in our final reporting materials. Dr McDowall’s own experience is also striking:

*“the level of need is so apparent, it’s just staggering ... On so many levels, like I think I’ve been on projects where there’s been need, but ... I’ve never had one where it’s encompassed it on all levels, the need on like a health, a mental health, an environment, a poverty, a resourcing... just even not*

knowing an opportunity exists because you don't even see that - you don't even know what to kind of aspire to, because you haven't seen, ... so how do you even know it exists..." [Researcher reflection]

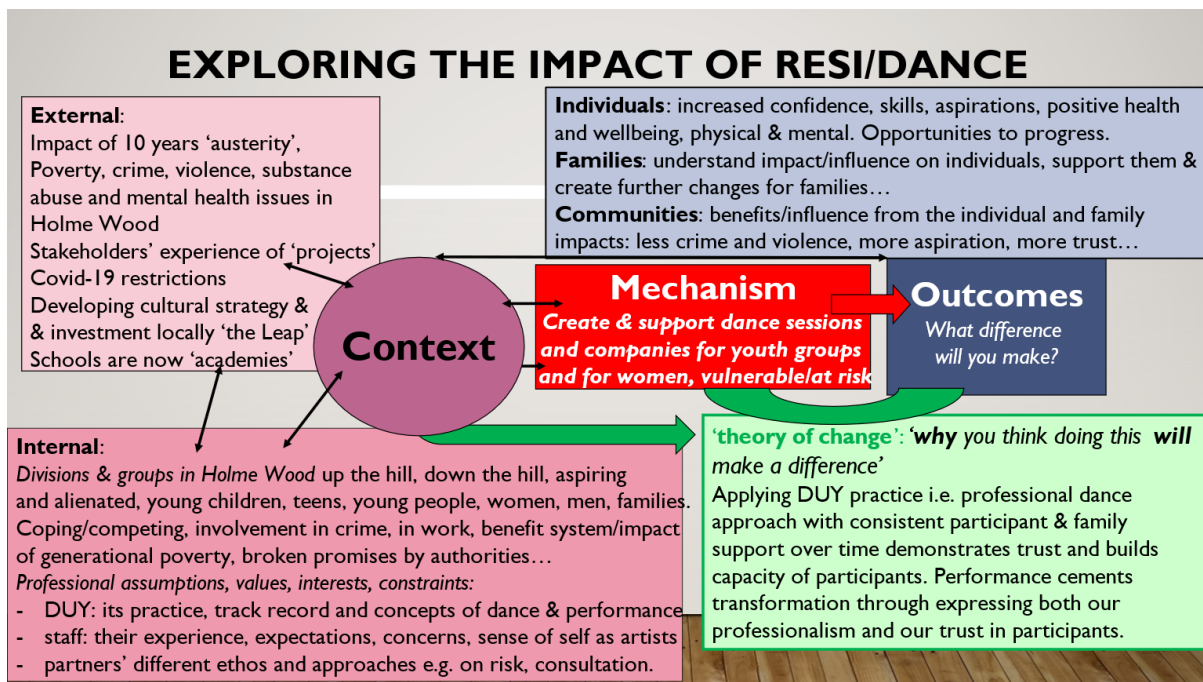


Figure 1 First theory of change diagram June 2021

During the later phases of the study, a further question increasingly made itself felt:  
**How can the programme identify and draw on positive elements of existing social processes?**

Thus over the course of the study our initial framing changed significantly to the re-worked 'theory of change' in Figure 2.

## Exploring the impact of Resi/dance

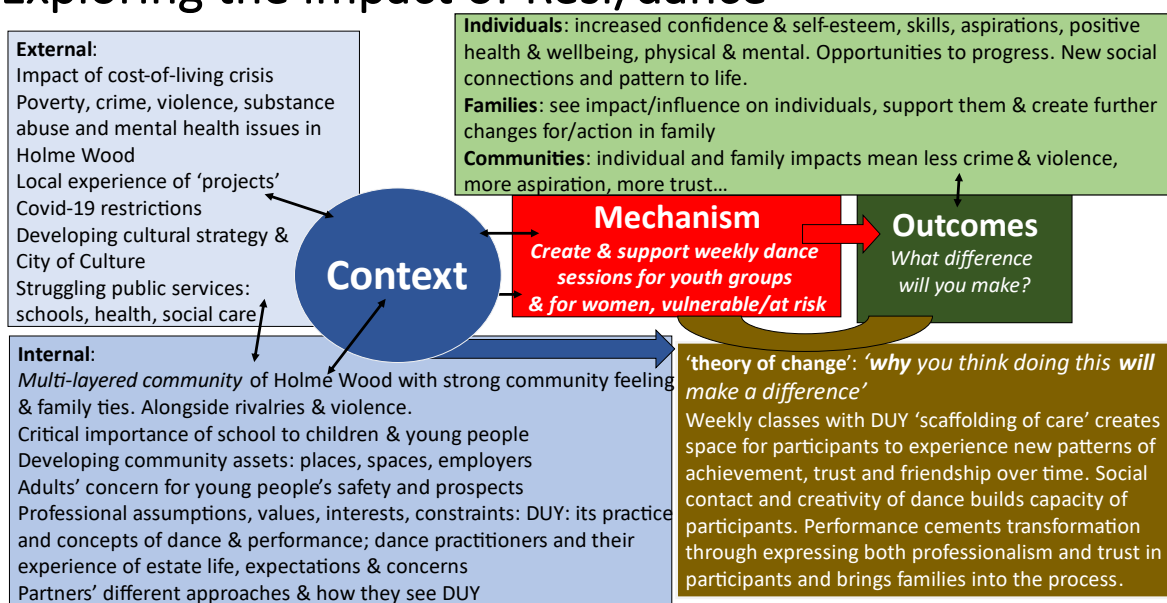


Figure 2 Second theory of change diagram April 2023

We presented this more simply in the final overview report as 'Making a real difference to people's lives' (Figure 3).

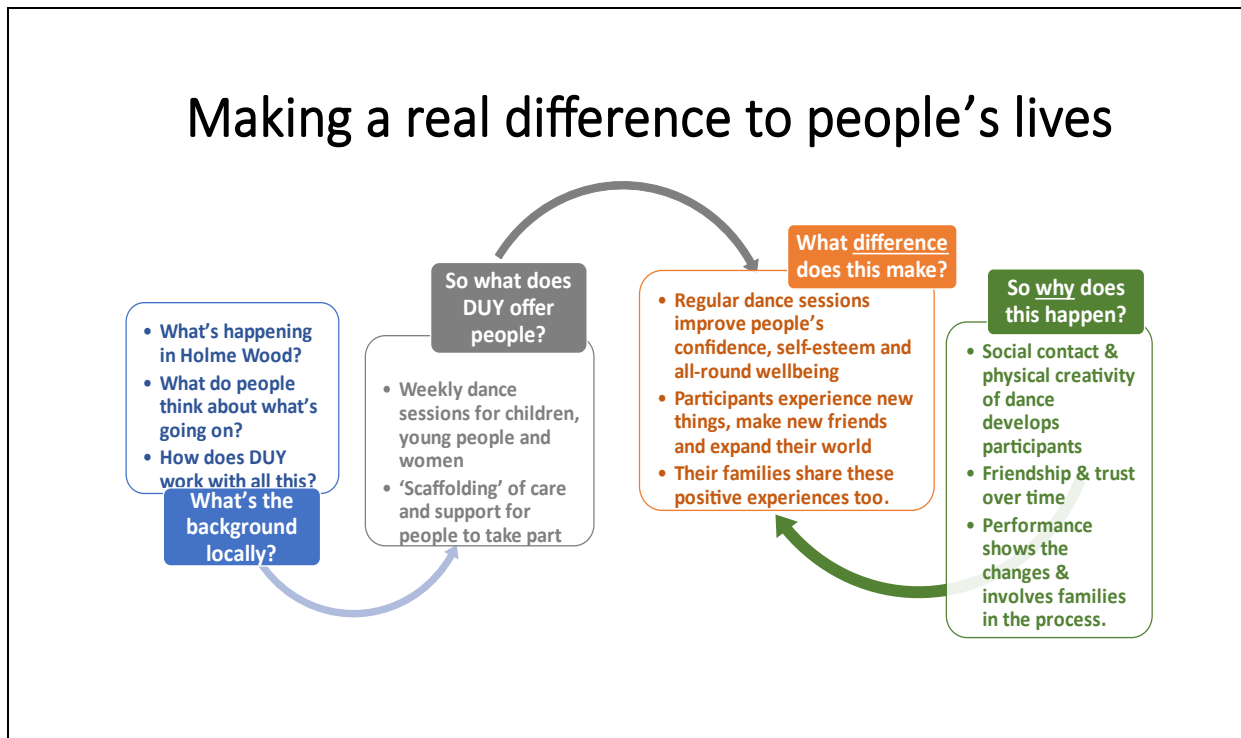


Figure 3 Final diagram on the change process Autumn 2023

What methods did we use in our research?

We have used the term '**embedded researcher**' to describe the role undertaken by Dr Louise McDowall throughout the 4 year project<sup>ix</sup>. This describes the way she worked consistently over four years with DUY and its staff in order to link the research and the researcher directly to practice, practitioners and participants. It draws also on the ethnographic tradition of a researcher being part of the studied community, especially in anthropological work, which is core to Dr McDowall's skills and experience. She was able to achieve a degree of immersion in the area, meeting local residents, families, workers, walking the streets and leafleting as a place-making and sense-making exercise as to the geography of the area, and through natural encounters with residents and workers. Immersion in the environment of a population developed a sense of place and enhanced the embedded role, alongside understanding the practices and approach of DUY's pedagogy, both within its community and intensive offers.

The standard ethnographic methods of **participant observation, field-note writing, and ethnographic interviewing** have been the core methods used by the embedded researcher<sup>x</sup>. Interviews with participants of all ages, project staff, local workers/ stakeholders and other key people were carried out, sometimes in a group of 2-4 people, numbering 50 in all, some interviewed twice over time. See box below.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with all identifying details removed from transcripts and field notes. Ritchie and Spencer's (1994)<sup>xi</sup> framework analysis facilitated

the systematic approach of coding, charting, and sorting of data into key issues and themes. The process involved: familiarisation with the data; identifying a thematic framework; indexing and charting the data; followed by mapping and interpreting.

Further methodological challenges remained when it came to analysis of the material. Three people needed to share in a meaningful way material that comprised many notes and lengthy interview transcripts. To assist in analysis, as the project proceeded, the team used **the dedoose<sup>xii</sup> online research platform** to ensure the mass of qualitative material could be robustly analysed. We uploaded interview/meeting transcripts and tagged excerpts from these with the themes and subthemes they contained. These were then aggregated, analysed and presented as charts and 'wordclouds' in the material we produced. In 2022-23, 34 transcripts were analysed through 1080 excerpts using 109 themes/ subthemes yielding 2322 tags. This enabled us accurately to track issues arising and to **use directly the voices of research participants** in our reporting. Aggregating the dedoose material in this way also enabled us to use a **grounded theory<sup>xiii</sup>** approach to generating insights. Figure 4 shows a wordcloud of the themes and subthemes on *dedoose*.

In addition, two research colleagues supported the embedded researcher through **regular reflective discussion and analytic conversations** as the study progressed. These regular meetings of the team mined the on-the-ground experience of the project's embedded researcher and provided her with vital reflective space. Our notes of these sessions provided additional important research material that supported the analytic phase.

## Box 2: Data sources

DUY staff and artists interviews  
n=11 [11 interviews conducted with  
6 staff members over iterative cycles  
of project]

External stakeholders n= 9

Participants/family = n=18 [18  
interviews 30 people interviewed](

= 50 participants in total

Secondary sources drawn upon:

Community consultation film

3 x audios collected across HW  
youth, 8-11's

the healthy holidays project  
questionnaires material.

Attendance & participant  
background data



*Figure 4 Word cloud of themes logged on dedoose platform*

### Tracking the research findings

We framed the research in two cycles each to produce a 'learning note' modelled on the **learning history**<sup>xiv</sup> approach that would form the basis for reflection and action by DUY. Two 'learning notes' summarised these cycles:

- **Learning Note 1** in June 2021 charted early evidence of impacts and set out action points for DUY to take forward with partners.
- **Learning Note 2** in April 2023 described core areas of impact and especially considered how the project impacted DUY itself and its dance artists. It was further developed in Autumn 2023.

As mentioned in the MIT approach cited below, these notes summarise and analyse key issues rather than offering long descriptions of activity and material gathered. We used images to show the learning being tracked, both to help people involved in the project and for wider audiences in the field of arts and community development. For example, Figure 5 illustrates the 'scaffolding of care' that is DUY's distinct pastoral methodology;



and a [presentation with narration](#) was developed outlining key findings from the study as a whole.

“A "learning history" is a *document*, or a series of documents, possibly in audiovisual form, *that is disseminated* in a deliberately structured manner. The document, and the dissemination, are both designed to help organizations become better aware of their own learning and change efforts.

[It] *presents the experiences and understandings* of participants, people who initiated, implemented and participated in organizational transformation efforts, or some collaborative learning experience, as well as non-participants who were affected by these efforts.

[It] tells the story *in participants' own words*, in a way that helps the rest of the organization move forward, without having to "re-invent" what a small group of learners have already discovered.

A learning history thus represents the organization talking to itself, in a safe and carefully structured way, about the things it needs to hear but hasn't yet listened to.”

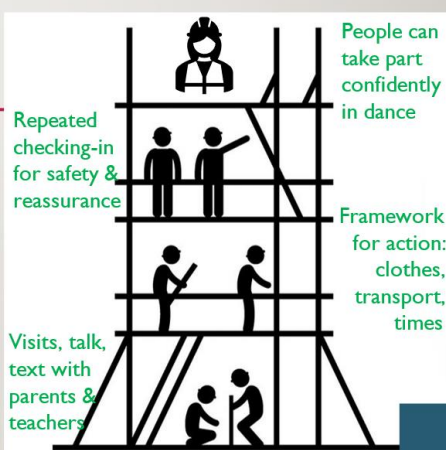
From Field Manual for the Learning Historian, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

At regular stages, the research team checked their view of the findings with DUY; lively discussion often ensued, all of which provided grist to the mill. This process added rigour to the study, and helped DUY develop their learning and action at each stage and for the future. The learning notes captured this commitment to action. The overview report aimed to present the essence of the findings of the study as a whole but supported by the range of materials developed - that each may be of interest to a range of stakeholders.

## THE 'SCAFFOLDING OF CARE' MATTERS

DUY programmes ensure people can (safely) take part through:

- ✓ Keeping in close touch with participants and key others so that they always know what's going to happen
- ✓ Visibly caring that participants show up and take part
- ✓ teaching methods that encourage and don't judge – helping people achieve more than they thought they could
- ✓ Not charging plus providing the extras: food, fun, new friends



The diagram illustrates a four-level scaffolding structure. At the top level, a person is shown dancing, with the text 'People can take part confidently in dance'. The second level shows two people talking, with the text 'Repeated checking-in for safety & reassurance'. The third level shows a person sitting on the ground being helped by another person, with the text 'Visits, talk, text with parents & teachers'. The fourth level shows a person standing, with the text 'Framework for action: clothes, transport, times'. The scaffolding is supported by a wooden floor.

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Figure 5 'Scaffolding of care'

## Conclusions

We see our work on this study as demonstrating the value of action research in a messy area of work, where qualitative material is generated in an emergent inquiry over time. The quantitative data we included add context but could not convey the complexity of the findings. This required a need for openness to the researcher by DUY and by the researchers to the unfolding process.

Key questions generated now include:

- How practically to build on the findings in the next phase of the work in Holme Wood – raised in the overview report
- How best to utilise the research and ensure its dissemination into the community arts and health sector when this dissemination was not part of the allocated funding.
- How to hold the value of qualitative research that people instinctively want in a world seeking simple numbers as answers.

*“And then it’s been interesting for me to kind of interview like the councillors, to be like, “So what in a report are you looking for? What persuades you? ...” And by and large, no-one has said numbers, and it’s hilarious because it’s the way, it’s the way that we’ve all been taught now... And everyone’s saying “A narrative, a case study” even if it’s like one person’s journey. And it’s so interesting because it’s not what we’re being told on another level, you know, the arts have got this fear, we must move towards quantifying, you know numbers, and it tells you nothing about the people, it tells you 20 people came, great, what did they do? What was their experience?” [Researcher reflection]*

We also heartily thank the research participants: Holme Wood dancers and their families, the staff of DUY, and a range of external stakeholders for their generous and willing support of the inquiry throughout.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.publicserviceworks.com](http://www.publicserviceworks.com)

<sup>ii</sup> See Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. *Handbook of Action Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. 2015, London: Sage.

<sup>iii</sup> See Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. *Realistic Evaluation*. 1997 London: Sage.

<sup>iv</sup> Macalpine, M. and Marsh S. Research supervision as hologram: a space for critical influence on organisational practice? Chapter 10 in *Critical Management Studies at Work: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Negotiating Tensions between Theory and Practice*. 2009. T. LeTrent-Jones. M. Vonorov, D. Weir and J. Wolfram-Cox (ed) London: Edward Elgar.

<sup>v</sup> See for example: Flick, U. *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. 2018 London/Thousand Oaks, CA/Delhi: Sage. ; Phoenix, C., & Orr, N. 2017. Analysing exceptions within qualitative data: promoting analytical diversity to advance knowledge of ageing and physical activity. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 9(3), 271-284. ; Smith, B., & McGannon, K. 2018. Developing Rigor in Qualitative Research: Problems and Opportunities within Sport and Exercise Psychology. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 11(1), 101-121; Tracy, S.J. 2010. Qualitative

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quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.

<sup>vi</sup> See helpful publication from United Nations accessed 12 Dec 2023 at [Microsoft Word - UNDG-UNDAF-Companion-Pieces-7-Theory-of-Change.docx](#)

<sup>vii</sup> See note iii above.

<sup>viii</sup> Pawson & Tilley 1997 p75

<sup>ix</sup> See [embeddedresearch.org.uk](http://embeddedresearch.org.uk)

<sup>x</sup> Chapter 12 Ethnography, Harrison A.K. in *Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 2020, Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online.

<sup>xi</sup> Richie, J., & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In Bryman, A., and Burgess, B. (Eds.) *Analysing Qualitative Data* (pp.173-194) London: Routledge.

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.dedoose.com/>

<sup>xiii</sup> See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6318722/> especially the helpful flow chart.

<sup>xiv</sup> [Chapter One: What is a learning history? \(mit.edu\)](#) accessed 17 Dec 2023