



Research Methodology for Schools in Unsafe Contexts



Prevention in Public Schools Strengthening Safe Spaces

The research program, “Education in Risk and Conflict Situations” (ESRC), studies the transformations of relationships, interactions, and functions that teachers and schools daily confront in insecure contexts and gang presence in surrounding areas. Learnings on how to do academic research in insecure contexts are presented here.

A methodological approach is required to:

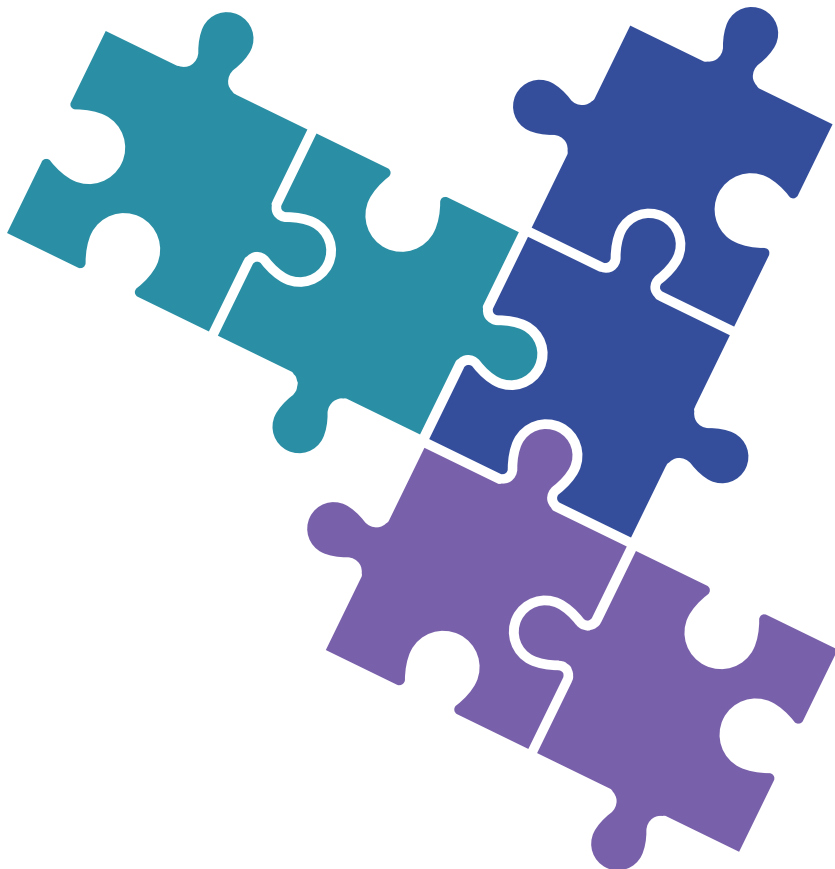


- access, know and comprehend a complex phenomenon that is difficult to explore;
- produce reliable and relevant data;
- keep informants and the research team safe.

In insecure contexts, the methodological challenges are:



- Surveys are often not very reliable.
- Statistical generalizations tend to have doubtful validity.
- Focus groups do not generate trust among participants.
- Interviews require trust in the interviewer.
- Guarantee the security and anonymity of informants.
- Maintain methodological flexibility in the face of changing situations.



In an insecure context, a qualitative method:



- allows for exploring social relations in different settings;
- accesses perspectives of diverse actors and their interactions;
- can produce thick descriptions of processes and social happenings.

Case studies can even offer:



- the possibility of deepening understanding of specific cases or individual schools;
- comparing different cases to find analytical patterns;
- arriving at analytical (not statistical) generalizations;
- developing ideas about how and why certain relations and processes emerge.



How are cases to study identified? Gatekeepers help to:



- select cases effectively and efficiently;
- enter places or situations where access is difficult;
- identify persons who know about sensitive topics;
- establish contacts (with teachers, families, community actors, etc.);
- build bonds of trust.

Gatekeepers can be previously acquainted teachers, Ministry of Education personnel, NGO or local organization staff, community members, etc.

Safe fieldwork requires:



- selecting safe and hospitable places for collecting the most important information;
- using venues outside of the school for greater privacy;
- generating trust through horizontal, transparent, respectful, and professional treatment;
- requesting oral permission, without requiring personal information or signatures;
- avoiding terms that are awkward, such as “investigation”, “gang”, etc.;
- working with experienced researchers.

Complying with ethical aspects is essential to:



- Protect the privacy and security of the informants, the schools, and the research team.
- Be transparent about the purpose and the scope of the study.
- Identify oneself as part of an independent academic institution.
- Clarify expectations in reference to monetary or other benefits.
- Preserve the anonymity of informants and schools.
- Safeguard the data.

- Emphasize the possibility of terminating their participation at any moment.
- Develop skills for managing strong emotions that may arise during the fieldwork.