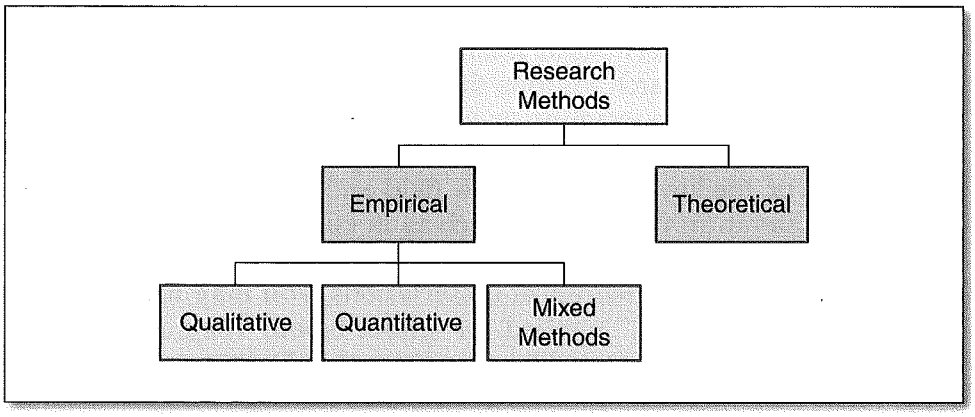
CHOOSING A RESEARCH METHOD

A research method is nothing more (or less) than a tool to help you answer your research question(s). The research question serves to constrain and contain what you will subsequently do, so you should be aware of the different modes and terminologies by which research is carried out. This overview, though, should not be used as the only basis for making decisions or carrying out your research, as there are a large number of resources that delve deeply into each aspect outlined below (see the methodology section in the Key Resources). The main distinctions to be aware of are those between empirical and theoretical research and, within empirical research, between qualitative and quantitative methodology (see Figure 4.3). It has also become quite common to use both methods either concurrently or in stages; this is known as mixed-methods research.

Figure 4.3 Overview of Research Methods



Most educational research is empirical; that is, it examines specific data, such as test-score results, teacher surveys, or parent interviews—and I will as such focus on empirical research methods. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the value of a theoretical dissertation. A theoretical dissertation also uses "data," though data here is understood as the specific body of literature that is examined, analyzed, critiqued, synthesized, etc. To put it visually, the doctoral student doing a theoretical dissertation finds his data in the library (or, more likely, online), while the student doing an empirical dissertation finds her data "in the field."

Let me provide two examples of theoretical dissertations. I am currently working with a doctoral student ("Michael") who is examining the potential relationship between zero-tolerance policies in schools and the expansion of the so-called school-to-prison pipeline over the last two

Butin, D. (2010). The education dissertation: A guide to practitioner scholars. Thousand Oaks: Corwin. ISBN 978-1-4129-6044-1

5. Engaging learning environment for students | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes