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Qualitative Research Comes of Age

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Educational research has changed in the last ten years from "a field that was dominated by measurement, operationalized definitions, variables, hypothesis testing, and statistics" to a research mode that emphasizes "description, induction, grounded theory, and the study of people's understanding. We refer to this approach as 'qualitative research'" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. ix). Qualitative research has come of age and is regularly incorporated into many general research courses. This research methodology is welcomed as one way to capture the essence of a school, a classroom, and the individuals that interact within these contexts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992)

Precise definition of terms used within this methodology is not easily accomplished, nor is the usage of terms consistent. Terms such as naturalistic and qualitative are used somewhat interchangeably and are generally used in the context of describing the setting and the resulting data. A broad definition of qualitative, or naturalistic, research is presented by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) in which it is defined as an "umbrella term to refer to several research strategies that share certain characteristics" (p. 2). These characteristics include "soft" data that is rich in description, of people, places, and conversations. Such data are not easily handled by statistical procedures. Also, research questions are not framed by operationalizing variables, but formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity, in the contexts in which they naturally occur. Understanding behavior from the subject's own frame of reference is of utmost importance, and data are collected through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time. Rist's (1975)

definition of qualitative research: "direct observation of human activity and interaction in an ongoing, naturalistic fashion" (p. 86) succinctly restates Bogdan and Biklen's discussion.

Best known techniques or strategies of qualitative research include observations and interviews. These data collection modes are utilized because they embody the noted characteristics of qualitative research. They provide a means for the researcher to enter the complex context of the subjects, and to document and analyze, in considerable detail, the thoughts and actions of people. The open-ended nature of the interview

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process allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference. According to Seidman (1991), phenomenological interviewing involves conducting a series of three interviews, over time, with each participant. As a result, people's behavior becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their own lives (Spradley, 1979).

Furthermore, without this context there is little hope for exploring the meaning of an experience. Observations and interviews are termed "naturalistic" because the interviews and observations take place where the events naturally occur. The data are gathered by the researcher engaging in natural behavior

such as talking, looking, and writing. Fieldnotes are written accounts of observations, of what the inquirer hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). As a result, rich fieldnotes are descriptive and reflective, capturing both a word-picture and a frame of mind. They are filled with pieces of evidence, with analytical clues that enable the researcher to put together a complex puzzle.

Sometimes materials that the subjects write themselves are used as data. This material presents rich descriptions of what the people who wrote the materials think about their experiences and contexts. These personal documents, first-person narratives, describe an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs. They reveal a person's view of experiences (Allport, 1942; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The researcher collects them to "obtain detailed evidence as to how social situations appear to actors in them and what meanings various factors have for participants" (Angell, 1945, p. 178). Personal documents such as "special-purpose logs" teachers might keep (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 134) or "reflective" journals have been requested by researchers and produced by subjects (Allport, 1942). Advantages noted in Bogdan and Biklen (1992) for soliciting reflective journals are that the researcher can have some hand in directing the author's focus and thereby get the participants in the study to write on similar topics from their own different, unique perspectives. As a result, subjects can provide reflective journal entries documenting what they are experiencing, thinking, and feeling. These may serve as important sources of data to guide the researcher in analysis and understanding.

People subjectively interpret things in

relation to their own perspectives. Because reality is interpreted by each individual, researchers must "get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand his actions" (Blumer, 1969, p. 16). Two people may be doing the same thing, but not attribute the same meaning to what they are doing. Therefore, it makes sense that the naturalistic inquirer must pay attention to how different individuals interpret their own experiences. Furthermore, naturalistic inquirers must employ various data collection modes to gather data from and about individuals within the given context. As Spradly (1979) says, researchers should not collect data about people, but should try "to learn from people, to be taught by them" (p. 4).

Phenomena do not converge into a single form, a single "truth," but diverge into many forms, multiple "truths."

According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), the naturalistic paradigm, with its multiple, divergent, inter-related view of reality as opposed to the scientific singular, convergent, fragmentable view of reality, is much more likely to yield a vision of "verstehen," or understanding. Phenomena do not converge into a single form, a single "truth," but diverge into many forms, multiple "truths." Qualitative studies of what really happens to people are vital, and the narrow empirical-analytic paradigm of most quantitative studies must be replaced or supplemented by the inclusion of authentic, qualitative data embedded in the daily interactions, gathered through naturalistic inquiry (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Fuller and Brown, 1975; Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research as defined by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) examines an aspect of educational life and contains the following five features: a) natural setting as the direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument, b) is descriptive, c) researchers concerned with process

rather than simply with outcomes or products, d) tend to analyze their data inductively, and e) "meaning" is of the essential concern to the qualitative approach (pp. 29-33).

Qualitative research is similarly defined by Burgess (1985, pp. 8-9) and Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 39-43).

Naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research is concerned with capturing perspectives accurately. The qualitative research has thrived during the eighties and nineties, and outlets for this type of research have increased. New journals such as *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education* have emerged, and publishing companies have developed book series with a similar focus (Falmer Press, Sage Publications, Transaction Press). From scholarly journals such as *American Educational Research Journal* to the high-circulation *Phi Delta Kappan*, editors solicit qualitative manuscripts (Carter, 1993; Cole and Knowles, 1992; Harrington and Garrison, 1992). Although diversity exists among qualitative researchers, this approach is maturing and serves a viable purpose with its descriptions of authentic transactions in all of their complexity (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). "Paradoxically," in the words of Yin (1989), "the 'softer' a research technique, the harder it is to do" (p. 26).

The Uses and Designs of Case Study Research

Observations and interviews are the best known techniques or strategies of qualitative research. These data collection modes are often utilized in case study research. The case study is usually the preferred research strategy chosen when "how" or "why" questions are posed, when the inquirer has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. The case study allows a study to retain the holistic and complex characteristics of real-life events that comprise social phenomena (Yin, 1989). A detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event, it provides the "thick description" important to naturalistic evaluation (Merriam, 1988).

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) describe the general design of case study research as a "funnel" with the start of the study being the wide end. Good questions that organize qualitative studies are not too specific, and researchers continually modify the design and choose procedures as they learn more about the topic of study. In time, specific decisions are made concerning aspects of the setting, subject, or data source they will study. Their work develops a focus. From the broad, exploratory beginning, they move to more directed data collection and analysis. A case study then is an empirical inquiry

Consequently, qualitative research in general, and the case study research strategy in particular, is holistic, lifelike, and can be said in propositional language.

that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1989, p. 23).

The case study is an attempt by the researcher to present a full view of the people, situations, actions, and attitudes researched. The case study is grounded; it provides an experiential perspective. It is holistic and lifelike, and it demands from the researcher a type of "dynamic objectivity" according to Evelyn Fox Keller (1985).

Case study research provides an opportunity for researchers to discuss not only "what we see but how we see, realizing that choices exist" (Bissex and Bullock, 1987, p. 17).

Consequently, qualitative research in general, and the case study research strategy in particular, is holistic, lifelike, and can communicate more than can be said in propositional language. This research methodology provides "the reader with the kind of information that permits him to bring to bear **all** his knowledge, not merely that which he can

state in spoken language" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981, p. 377). It allows the study to retain the holistic and complex characteristics of real-life events that comprise social phenomenon, and it transcends the narrow assumptions of the empirical-analytic paradigm.

These new and emerging studies present data that are embedded in daily interactions and can be gathered only through naturalistic inquiry (Carter, 1993). They permit the researcher to enter the complex contexts of schools, classrooms, and the individuals that interact within these contexts, and to analyze and document, in considerable detail, their thoughts and actions (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Guba and Lincoln, 1981). As a result, qualitative approaches to research (e.g. naturalistic inquiry, case study) should be employed more widely to provide descriptive, interpretive accounts of field-based experiences as they **naturally** occur (Brophy and Good, 1974; Carter, 1993). Researchers such as those cited agree that this approach is needed to present a more holistic, authentic picture of the complexity of "what is out there," and they profess, as Sagan (1979) stated, "belief systems that cannot survive scrutiny are probably not worth having" (p. 289).

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