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Qualitative Research Paradigm, a Key Research Design for Educational Researchers, Processes and Procedures: A Theoretical Overview

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Abstract: Social science researchers use qualitative research for in-depth understanding of life experiences with reference to social and cultural depositions. Qualitative research is principally anchored on three theoretical frameworks namely phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography. The characteristics of qualitative research are humanistic, naturalistic and holistic in dynamic social realities. On methodology, the qualitative approach is found in the interpretive paradigm, with a case study as the research design. The data generating methods are interviews, observations and document analysis. For ethical considerations, issues of anonymity, confidentiality, human dignity, consent and privacy are of paramount importance for avoidance of psychological and physical human harm. The data analysis requires qualitative data management through content and thematic analysis. In pledging trustworthiness the approach uses prolonged engagement, member checking, peer review and triangulation. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to probe inner humanistic issues whereas the limitation is that its findings cannot be generalized since the study happens within closed parameters.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Paradigm, Social Science.

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INTRODUCTION

The education phenomenon alongside other phenomena faces enormous changes due to the influences of globalisation. In an endeavour to meeting the needs and expectations of the society, practitioners in various disciplines engage themselves in social research. Social research enables researchers to gain understanding and insights of the existing views of the world as well as improving on provision of the services (Creswell, 2007). Each and every research involves a planned, ordered and systematic approach to find out most appropriate results for a particular study. There are generally three approaches which most of the researchers adopt. These approaches are qualitative, quantitative and mixed approach popularly called the post-positivist approach. Social science researchers strive to contribute ideas to the existing body of knowledge or towards ground breaking findings with the view of creating theoretical conclusions. Of the aforesaid approaches a distinct logical format on data collection, analysis and subsequent publishing of the findings is systematically adhered to in solving a particular problem. This paper presents a theoretical overview on qualitative research paradigm, being a key research approach for educational researchers.

A research is a studious inquiry that involves the collection, generation and analysing data which is necessary to solve a problem (Mafora & Lebeloane, 2001). Problems are solved by social researchers through depth study which is characterised by soliciting for data which will be analysed to make an understanding of the prevailing situation. Social research is a research about people with reference to their beliefs, behaviour, cultures, interactions, institutions and their values. A qualitative research is a form of social responsive action that stresses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals in order to gain a deeper understanding of the surrounding circumstances (Flick, 2014). It is also a multi-perspective approach to social interactions (Schulze, 2002) aimed at describing and interpreting the interaction which are meanings that the participants attach to a discourse. Cibangu (as cited in Mohajan, 2018) asserts that qualitative research is comprised of such procedures as logic, ethnography, discourse analysis, case study, open-ended interview and participant observation. According to Mohajan (2018) qualitative research is a systematic and subjective approach to highlight and elucidate daily life experiences, and to further give them appropriate meaning that are normally measured by quantitative

research. So, qualitative researchers look into meanings, interpretations, code, and the processes and relationships of social life. Due to its focus in everyday life experiences, qualitative research provides itself well to creating new theories using the inductive method, which can then be tested with further deductive reasoning.

The Theoretical Frame Work of Qualitative Research

The qualitative research approach is anchored mainly on three theoretical frameworks which are phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography (Zireva, 2013). Phenomenology requires the researcher to describe elaborately or thickly the lived experiences of the participants by using own words referred to as voice in the text. In phenomenology framework the researcher is interested in the participants' interpretations, assertions and descriptions of their familiarities and acquaintances (Hoberg, 2001). It follows that qualitative research yields a descriptive data that the researcher must then interpret using rigorous and systematic procedures of transcribing, coding, and analysing of trends and themes. The systematic procedure is achieved through qualitative data management.

Hermeneutics is a science of understanding, the skill of interpretation and the science of communication (Flick, 2009) where the researcher is expected to analyse and interpret data for subsequent communication of the findings in a comprehensive manner. Hermeneutics concerns the act of interpretation where it presumes that the act of meaning will be plural, requiring choices to be made (Davies, 2009). The analysis of data is very critical in social research since it provides the much needed understanding and interpretation which can substantially contribute to the generation of theories.

Ethnography is also another theoretical framework which social science researchers use since it studies and infers a group's culture with the aim of capturing, interpreting and explaining specific aspects of life of a particular group (Hoberg, 2001). Ethnography includes a study of people in their natural settings of existing so as to have a deeper understanding of their way of life. This presents an opportunity of achieving findings that are exceptionally attached to participants in their real-life environment which then exudes the uniqueness of such a group.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data. It is concerned with lived and real-life experiences and situations as they are created in the day to day course of events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Researchers aim to understand experiences drawn from the context of real situations. In this case, context refers to a reality of considering the physical,

intellectual, cultural and emotional settings. This approach pursues an understanding of people's interpretations in a natural context (Lune & Berg, 2017). The basis of it lies in the explanatory approach to societal realities, and in the description of the lived and reflected experiences of human beings. The goal if at all of the qualitative tradition is to have a deep understanding of the particular (Lune & Berg, 2017; Mohajan, 2018; & Berg, 2009). The particular refers to the natural setting and real life practices. The qualitative research presents a researcher as the key instrument (University Southern California Libraries, 2018; & Chisaka, 2013) since data is generated by the researchers. The qualification of data in terms of interpretations is guided by what the researcher could have seen or heard during engagement with participants. A researcher is the primary collection instrument in a qualitative research. This provides an aspect of personal or self-engagement by the researcher into the phenomena which leads to trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

The data generated in a qualitative paradigm are descriptive and subjective since they are always inform of words. Where data are in pictures and symbols there is a probability that some words need to be used to describe the pictures (Berg, 2009). The data is reflective of underlying perceptions, opinions, motivations and feelings of people in an environment. Qualitative research approach is more concerned about the processes rather than products since its bedrock is on how understandings are formed, how meanings are conveyed and how roles are moulded (Zireva, 2013). This can be ascertained by the use of descriptive analogy which is a preference of social researchers in digging deeper for the narratives. The data of a qualitative approach are analysed inductively through the use of the general laws. Abstractions and constructs are built as particulars that have been gathered and grouped according to a specific narrative which leads to theme formulation. Themes and concepts are developed from patterns in data which results in thematic approach. This research approach leads to the development of theory using a bottom-up not top-down strategy (Chisaka, 2013). This strategy leads to grounded theory (Mohajan, 2018). The grounded theory mainly contributes in data analysis where the participants are highly accorded the respect as key informants in a study.

Qualitative research is humanistic (Zireva, 2013) and the human aspect is maintained by presenting data in the words of the participant. Expressing data in words is referred to as voice in the text or verbatim which becomes evidentiary proof of participants' views. It emphasises on the perspectives of all participants which are directly quoted for credibility purposes. It is apparent that qualitative research is human centred and its orientation is the discovery of theories as evolved from collected data. Its focus is holistic which

emphasises acquiring a total or complete picture to gain real, rich and deep data (Lune & Berg, 2017). This paradigm discovers new or unique conclusions due to the human factor.

METHODOLOGY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research methodology is a process used to gather information and data with the intention of making decisions about the research (Yin, 2009). The aim of the methodology is to describe, analyse and infer a wide range of approaches which is used to collect data taking into cognisance the approaches' strengths and limitations (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). The methodology in qualitative research focuses on research approach and its design which social science researchers regularly adopt.

Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative research approach is located in interpretive paradigm. It is derived from the constructivist theory which argues that knowledge is subjective due to varying perceptions of people in the environment (Zireva, 2013). This means that the qualitative approach depends on the individual's point of view. In view of individual's point of view there is need to make deep and detailed descriptions and explanations about the phenomena. Qualitative approach emphasises on the use of actual words of the participants which becomes a tool that minimises doctoring and fabrication of the conclusions in the study (Trochim, 2006) thereby contributing towards credible findings. The qualitative approach has the ability to extract and generate detailed, rich and thick descriptions based on the views of the participants. Hoberg (2001) propounds that qualitative research has a natural setting as a direct source of data since it is mainly concerned with real situations as they unfold. It allows situations to be constructed in the day-to-day and moment to moment context which captures every detail of response (Chisaka, 2013). Salient details such as emotions, feelings, attitudes and facial expressions of the participants are the true views of social reality and these make qualitative approach so close to situational interpretations and meanings (Trochim, 2006). Situational interpretations are very significant in analysing data since that form of communication is pregnant of useful meanings. According to Berg (2009) qualitative research is the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data through observing what people say and do. The approach is also excellent in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours and dictates of social contexts of a particular social grouping (Flick, 2009). The qualitative approach is considered ideal since it enables data collection through in-depth engagement with the participants in the study. It is also unique in the sense that physical human senses are also used in trying

to understand how issues are thickly described and interpreted.

Qualitative Research Design

In a qualitative research a case study is used as a research design because it is an empirical inquiry which gives emphasis on contemporary issues within the confines of the lived experiences (Berg, 2009). According to Kamper (2004) a case study is an in-depth study of a particular research problem that is carried out by analysing variables such as people, events, decisions, institutions or other social systems. It is also defined as a research tactic and pragmatic inquiry that investigates an occurrence within its real life perspective (Yin, 2009). A case study is an exploratory study which leads to the ideal plan of confining the study to a small sample that are investigated in-depth allowing the researcher a direct interaction with participants. In a qualitative research a case study research design is flexible and allows dealing with a variety of evidence which leads to triangulation of data (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). It has the potential to provide realistic opinions since it offers opportunities for in-depth inquiry through the use of multiple instruments. However, case study research design has its own limitations of not following systematic procedures and allowing obtained views to influence and direct the findings of the study (Yin, 2009; & Briggs & Coleman, 2012). It implies the researcher has to be critical in making conclusions when analysing data or any contribution that forms part of the participants' views so as to avoid bias and other malpractices that affect the conformability, dependability, transferability and credibility of the study (Mohajan, 2018).

Sampling Methods in Qualitative Research

Sampling is important in qualitative research since it contributes towards selection of correctly informing population for a study. A sample is defined as a subset of a population (Kamper, 2004) and it categorises the population according to a specific status. It provides numbers of the expected sample on a specific category. For example a sample can be comprised of five students, five lecturers who teach Technical and Vocational courses at a particular institution. Sampling in a qualitative research uses non-probability sampling methods. These methods are convenience, purposive, snowball and quota sampling. The non-probability sampling methods are also termed non-random sampling techniques. The non-probability sampling techniques have the strength of tapping from humanistic elements of participants (Flick, 2014; & Mohajan, 2018).

Purposive sampling also termed judgment sampling (Lune & Berg, 2017) is a sample which is thought to be typical of the population with regard to characteristics under study. It is used in case study when working with small samples where selected cases are particularly informative about the subject under the

study. Quota sampling is the selection of people from quotas /persons who meet certain conditions and is typically suitable for large populations (Hoberg, 2001). It is convenient to be set up for data that is required quickly. Quotas that are normally used include age, gender, socio-economic status and social class. Social science researchers choose whom to interview within these quota boundaries or marked parameters. Convenience sampling method involves the selection of people who appear to be convenient or easy to obtain according to the researcher. This method has lots of biases and generalisations are flawed. Snowball sampling is used when it is difficult to identify members of the desired population and desired characteristics. It is made possible by asking the cases to identify further cases and it continues perhaps with further asking new cases to identify further new cases (Lune & Berg, 2017).

DATA GENERATING METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

There are four main data generation or collection procedures employed in qualitative research. These are interviews, observations, document analysis and focus group discussion.

The Interview

Interviews are the predominant and outmoded method of gathering or generating data in qualitative research. An interview is described by Hoberg (2001) as a two –person dialogue that an interviewer initiates for a specific purpose of getting research-relevant information. This method generates data through direct verbal interaction between individuals making it effective in soliciting information from participants in their natural social settings. The interview is used as a primary data collection method which provides direct citations from informants and is a direct approach of gathering data on participants' thoughts and experiences (Trochim, 2006). Interviews are conducted using an interview guide. An interview guide is a research instrument or tool. It is developed containing set of questions meant to find out the participants' views, opinions and feelings on a particular inquiry. There are three types of interviews namely structured, semi-structured, unstructured and the non-directive interviews.

Structured interviews enable the interviewer to ask each participant the same questions in the same way and has a tendency of too much controlling of the tone and pace at which it takes place (Mathers *et al.*, 2002).Semi-structured interviews comprise a series of open-ended questions founded on the topic areas the researcher desires to cover and it provides opportunities for both the entities to discuss a number of topics in more detail. When the interviewee expresses difficulty in answering a question or provides only a passing reaction, the interviewer can resort to using cues or

prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer also has the liberty to inquire the interviewee to elaborate on the original answer or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee (Mathers *et al.*, 2002; & Libarkin & Kurdziel, 2002).Semi-structured interviews are of importance when soliciting attitudinal information or when the research is exploratory with little known about the subject area. The unstructured interviews which are also referred to as "depth" or "in depth" interviews are so referred because they have very little if any structure at all. These are too flexible which may distract the direction and the goal of the interview. In the non-directive interview there is minimal control of the interview by the interviewer meaning the interview has a possibility of degenerating into irrelevant conversation (Zireva, 2013).It implies that a careful approach in selecting the type of an interview to adopt is crucial towards directing the research .The structured interview is normally preferred because it allows the content and procedures to be organised prior to the interview eventually allowing for the arrangement of necessary details such as the wording of questions, sequence of questions and the timing of the interview.

The Observation

Observation is another data generation procedure which is used in a qualitative research. It is an act of careful watching something or someone in order to gain information (Kamper, 2004). Observation is a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).Using an observation guide the researcher makes observation and analytic notes of the real events that transpire during observations. Mamvuto (as cited in Zireva, 2013) points out that the observer should write some thick descriptions of the happenings in their words so as to give a word-picture of the scenery with respect to actions and interactions that were observed. Analytic notes will also be made about what will be observed. Zireva (2013, p. 38-39) notes that,"..... for the analytic notes ,the researcher writes down feelings ,jots down ideas and interpretations ,clarifies earlier interpretations and makes plans for the subsequent observations. "There are two types of observations namely participant and non-participant observation. The participant observation is when a researcher participates in the activities of the group being observed in the same manner as its members, with or without their knowing that they are being observed.Yet non-participant observation is when the researcher does not get involved in the activities of the group but remains a passive observer, watching and listening to its activities and drawing conclusions from this.The recording of the observations will be done through taking notes and photographs where possible (Zireva, 2013; & Libarkin & Kurdziel , 2002).

Observing individuals in a laboratory or natural setting may make them wonder on what will be doing. Participants in this case may try harder or become nervous thereby faking the normally practiced behavioral patterns. These are known as “demand characteristics” because the researcher is making demands on the individual and this may affect the research (Briggs & Coleman, 2012). This is the reason why social science researchers need to be tact in dealing with social entities during the study so that every detail worthy picking is taken aboard.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is basically content analysis (Hoberg, 2001). Content refers to words, pictures, symbols, ideas or any message that can be communicated. It also involves text which is anything written, visual or spoken that serves as a medium of communication (Zireva, 2013). Documents have content and are in form of text which Neuman (as cited in Zireva, 2013) cites as books, newspapers, official documents, video clips musical lyrics, photographs and artefacts among other things. Document analysis could both be a primary and secondary data collection method. The primary data generation is when the documents being analysed were not specifically created as transcripts of other data collection methods, yet secondary generation method is when documents under study were compiled from other methods directly aimed at generating data about a particular study (Berg, 2009). Document analysis includes both unsolicited and solicited documents which are classroom assignments and surveys respectively.

The Focus Group Discussion

The focus group is an meeting style planned for small groups of not related individuals, formed by an researcher and led in a group discussion on some exacting topic or topics (Lune & Berg, 2017). Using this approach, researchers strive to learn through discussion about conscious, semi-conscious, and unconscious psychological and socio-cultural characteristics and processes among various groups (Creswell, 2007). The focus group discussion usually comprise of six to eight people who share common characteristics. These participants are encouraged to discuss around a particular set of issues in what is termed group interview. The focus group provides the moderator with an opportunity to initiate a platform from which members of the group interact with each other on a given topic (Silverman, 2011).

Credibility of Qualitative Research

The qualitative research achieves its credibility through trustworthiness. Trustworthiness allows for quality checking and vetting of the accuracy of the information to be collected from the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Evaluative criteria for qualitative studies is needed to judge vitality and truthfulness of the study findings. The evaluative

aspect is normally done by checking for credibility, conformability and transferability of the study findings. Credibility is the truth-value of the findings, and is based in the environmental and cultural context of the participants. Conformability refers to the establishment of verifiable direct evidence from the experiences the researcher has with the people. Transferability indicates that relevancies can be transferred to similar situations, circumstances, and contexts (Mohajan, 2018). Issues of credibility can be ensured by having appropriate research instruments which should be used to collect first-hand information for the study. First-hand information is free from distortions and other fabrications which generate credibility. Briggs & Coleman (2002) propose that for trustworthiness of the study the accuracy of the information should be based on the credibility of the researcher, in taking all necessary steps that conform and apply to the principles of obtaining data as proper to the qualitative research.

Other measures for credibility are when the researcher takes a prolonged engagement with the participants during the data collection so as to have ample time to make follow-ups and further inferences (Lune & Berg, 2017). Prolonged engagement is also referred to as long-term observation which emphasises gathering data over a long or extended period in order to increase trustworthiness. All participants who are interviewed should have their voices tape recorded as well as transcribed onto the data sheets for consistency in analysing data. The data sheets and audio formats have to be kept safely and be readily available for confirmation in the event that verification and other evaluative trails are requested.

Trustworthiness can also be provided through the use of triangulation or crystallisation of data where several investigators, sources and methods should be used to compare the findings with one another (Lune & Berg, 2017). Triangulation reduces the risk of chance association and systematic bias due to the provision of collecting information from a diverse range of individuals, teams and settings using a variety of sources. There is also member checking which is a process whereby data and results are verified by other participants besides those originally involved. Trustworthiness can also be guaranteed by peer examination or review which allows solicitation of the opinions of colleagues and co-researchers for sound review of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The concerns about research ethics revolve around salient issues of harm, consent, privacy, and the confidentiality of data (Lune & Berg, 2017). The ethical considerations uphold values of providing for privacy by giving protection and the dignity of respecting the views of the participants which at most are sensitive nature of some discussions (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012;

& Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). The consent of the participants to partake in the study is valued and even when they feel like discontinuing in contributing in the study, the respect of such a decision is guaranteed. The participants are given ample time to go through the consent form and they voluntarily agree to its contents by putting their signatures resulting in informed consent (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). There is need to provide anonymity through avoidance of using the participants' names or an identity that can lead to their recognition by any other persons besides the researcher. The use of letter codes such as TR for teacher on presenting the participants' views is used for anonymity's sake (Creswell, 2007). The researcher confirms that the participants have received a full revelation of the nature of the study, the risks, payback and alternatives, with an complete chance to ask questions so that they feel free and secure as much as possible about their contributions (Briggs & Coleman, 2012). These are ethical interventions which guarantee solicitation of uncompromised data as participants would feel respected.

Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Analysis is the reasoning strategy with an objective of splitting a complex whole into its parts in order to understand the relationships of the parts (Lune & Berg, 2017). During data analysis there is breaking down of data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships (Mouton, as cited in Zireva, 2013). The objective of analysis is to comprehend the different constitutive parts of data by inspecting relationships between concepts and finding out if there could be any patterns or trends that can be isolated so as form themes in the data. A view of Mohajan (2018) is that qualitative research data analysis entails the searching for patterns in data that is recurrent behaviour. In a qualitative research data analysis follows a number of characteristics which includes data generation and data analysis which usually occur concurrently. The qualitative research encompasses triangulation approach in analysing data. A diverse approach of multiple methods (triangulation) is employed to have a triangulated analysis and this is achieved through the use of coding and thematic analysis. Yin (2009) posits that data coding is a systematic way of condensing massive data into smaller units such that it will be easier to analyse. Themes are patterns of order that seem to cut across various aspects of the generated data (Hoberg, 2001).

Pros and Cons of Qualitative Research

Authorities like (Creswell, 2007; Mohajan, 2018; & Lune & Berg, 2017) cited advantages of qualitative research as follows: Qualitative research creates an in-depth understanding of the attitudes, behaviours, interactions, events, and social processes that comprise everyday life which makes it sufficiently fit into the context of social researchers. This set of methods also has the benefit of being flexible and easily

adaptable to changes in the research environment and can be conducted with minimal cost in many cases. Qualitative research reflects the detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The advantages of qualitative research makes it possible to gather and analyse individualistic data on deeper levels. This is ensured by the using methods that can guarantee credibility and dependability of the study such as prolonged engagement and crystallisation of data. In qualitative research, it is possible to gain new insights into participant's thoughts, demographic behavioural patterns, and emotional reasoning processes (Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative research is social in nature, meaning that it extracts its findings from affective nature of humanism. It takes qualitative values on board to have insights on behavioural patterns that are unique to a particular sample. Interviews are not limited to particular questions, and can be redirected by researchers in real-time to probe for a deeper understanding of a phenomena. Data are based on human experiences and observations resulting in being more convincing and powerful.

On the other hand (Berg, 2009; Mohajan, 2018; & University Southern California Libraries, 2018) state the draw backs of qualitative research as follows: Results of qualitative research are not generalizable. Qualitative research scope is fairly limited so its findings are not always widely generalisable (Berg, 2009). Researchers also have to employ concern with these methods to confirm that they themselves do not control the data in ways that considerably change it and that they do not carry too much personal bias to their explanation of the findings.

It is difficult to demonstrate the scientific rigor of the data collection exercise due to the results in data which are not objectively verifiable (University Southern California Libraries, 2018). This is factored by the reason that qualitative research is subjective due to its human centeredness. The participants have more control over the content of the data collected because engagement carried out through interviews is open-ended. Replicating results can be very difficult with qualitative research (Mohajan, 2018; & Berg, 2009). In qualitative research contexts, situations, events, conditions, and interactions cannot be replicated to any extent, nor can generalizations be made to a wider context than the one studied with any confidence.

CONCLUSION

Social science researchers use qualitative research for in-depth understanding of life situations with specific reference to social relations. Qualitative research is mainly anchored on three theoretical frameworks namely phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography. The characteristics of qualitative research are humanistic, naturalistic, discovery and holistic. On

methodology, the qualitative approach is found in the interpretive paradigm, with a case study as the research design. The data generating procedures are interviews, observations and document analysis. For ethical considerations issues of anonymity, confidentiality, human dignity, consent and privacy are of paramount importance since it deals with humans. For analysis of data the qualitative research uses content and thematic analysis with voice in the text being its credibility positioning. In pledging trustworthiness qualitative research uses prolonged engagement, member checking, peer review and triangulation. The limitation is that its findings cannot be generalized since the study happens within closed parameters.

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