

Review

The struggle for recognition: Qualitative research in adult education

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Qualitative research designs over the years had been down played in research work by a number of researchers particularly those with flair for quantitative methods. They believed that it is only when rigorous statistical measures are applied to research analysis that it could be deemed scientific. They also believed that when predetermined questions and figures are applied to research work that interpretations and conclusions could be drawn. These post- positivists use deductive means to arrive at reality and conclusions. Post-positivists or positivism holds the philosophy that the problems that they study in education reflect the need to identify and assess the causes that eventually influence outcomes as found in experimental research. Such studies tend to utilize large samples and make inferences without providing critical reasons for such occurrences. However, constructivists and qualitative researchers also beloved that working through ethnographic design and observation of behavior can bring about shared patterns of behavior over time and help explain the worldview of participants and groups. This controversy has been waged within the educational realm particularly in adult education for some time. It is therefore the view of this paper to bring about the role qualitative research plays in adult education as it seeks for recognition among researchers in education.

Key words: Qualitative research, Education, Adult education, Research designs, Quantitative research.

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, two patterns or approaches to the study and analysis of research in education had been identified. Since the 1960s, quantitative analysis of research had dominated the scene. Today, the use of the qualitative method for studying various educational issues is growing (Fagunwa, 1991; Black, 1995). The term qualitative research was used in social sciences in the late 1960s. It was used as an umbrella term to refer to research strategies that share certain characteristics outside that of quantitative research.

Most educational researchers are positively disposed to the changes that have occurred in research strategies with majority incorporating qualitative approach in their research and work. This is because most educational

research are dominated by a *psychological agenda* and by experimental methods. Psychologists in the field of adult education are beginning to use qualitative methods in their research as it relates to educational issues and the understanding of learning and cognition. However, most of them fear that their findings may not be considered important to their colleagues in the same field. They are unsure about the scientific value of qualitative studies they have read because they can understand them without statistics. They see serious research as something which is beyond their understanding, full of abstract ideas and inferential statistics. They equate their lack of knowledge about experimental statistics and studies as being synonymous

with rigor and acceptance by a distinct and unapproachable scientific other. They indicate that they cannot defend qualitative research to their administrators because the administrators do not see the research as rigorous or 'scientific'.

Beginning qualitative research needs hands-on experience with data analysis. Presently, some organizations are demanding researchers with qualitative skills. In some universities and departments, the two methods are treated separately as independent courses. Also, there are emerging on the research scene large volumes of qualitative books and research works (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Maykut and Morehouse, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995). Qualitative research is now a growing enterprise in Australia, Britain, Germany, United States, Canada and the Scandinavia (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

The origins of qualitative research dates back to the 1930s and were in the fields of Anthropology and Sociology. These include the works of Mead, Dewey, Malinowski and others but soon lost touch to the psychologists who saw the scientific approach as the most appropriate.

Qualitative research for adult education takes many forms and is conducted in many settings (Biklen and Bogdan, 1992). These forms are manifested in the data collection procedures.

Types

Qualitative research concentrates attention to investigating the methods used in the social and behavioural sciences especially Anthropology, Sociology, history, psychology and linguistics. Also, humanistic disciplines such as philosophy and aesthetic criticisms have provided useful methods. These studies employing such methods are regarded as "qualitative research" because their measurement procedures usually involve verbal descriptions and interpretations rather than statistical analysis of numerical data.

The main types identified include: Naturalistic Inquiry, Ethnographic (effect of culture on education e.g. How the cultural values of the Ghanaian society affects school-girl attrition or retention). Others include Symbolic Interactionist, inner perspective, the Chicago School, Phenomenological (Van Manen), Case Study, Interpretative, Feminist perspective, Action research, hermeneutic Inquiry and Grounded theory (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

Goal of Qualitative Research

The goals of qualitative research do differ from the type of qualitative study being conducted. It ranges from and attempt to develop a grounded theory to the creation of

sensitizing concepts, and descriptions. Qualitative researchers in adult education do not see themselves as collecting "the facts" of human behavior, which when accumulated provide verification and elaboration on a theory that eventually allow scientists to state cause and predict human behavior. Qualitative research in all forms understands human behavior as complex.

The goal of qualitative research according to Bogdan and Biklen, 1992 is to understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are. They use empirical observation because it is with concrete incidents of human behavior that investigators can think more clearly and deeply about the human conditions (p.49). It must be noted further, that qualitative research in the areas of feminist and action research study marginalized people hoping to empower their research informants (Roman and Apple, 1990). This is done by engaging the informants in *dialogue* about their analysis of observed and reported events and activities. They use this format to encourage the informants to gain control over their experiences in their analysis of them (situation) (Freire, 1970).

Borg, Gall and Gall, 1992 stated that the purpose is to develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural state, taking into account the relevant context. The researchers try to understand the phenomenological reality of particular individuals and groups and the cultural settings within which they function. Borg, Gall and Gall indicated that by "phenomenological reality" they mean an individual's perceptions of inner experiences and the world around him/her.

Data Collection

Data collected is referred to as *soft*. This is because it is rich in description of people, places and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical procedures. Research questions are not framed by operationalizing variables, rather they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity, and in context. People conducting qualitative research develop a focus as they collect data, but do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypothesis to test. Data collection may not be saturated. It depends basically on the issue and when new ideas emerge in the course of data collection. In this case, individuals are recontracted for further information.

The researcher is concerned with understanding behavior from the subjects own frame of reference. External causes are of secondary importance in qualitative research. Collection of data is done through sustained contact with people in setting where subjects are normally engaged (the coast for fishermen, villages for farmers etc).

Two major methods are often used – *participant*

observation and in-depth-interviewing. In Participant observation, the researcher keeps a detailed written record of what is heard and observed. This is supplemented by other data sources as memos, records, newspaper articles and photographs. With in-depth interviewing, unstructured or open ended (Jahoda, Deutsch and Cook, 1951), non-directive (Meltzer and petras, 1970) or flexible (Whyte, 1979) questions are used. This is to bring out the information needed allowing the participants to express their views and opinions in their own words rather than the structured interviews with cooked-ready answers or responses.

Interaction is very crucial in qualitative research as the researcher interacts in a personal way with each other or respondent. The researcher interacts with his respondents in a natural, unobtrusive and non-threatening manner. This allows them to open-up. It also helps to study how they act and think. Borg, Gall and Gall (1992) asserts that the researcher's data collection procedures are open to modifications depending on how the individual acts. The researcher is free to use her intuition and judgement as a basis for deciding how to frame questions or how to make generalization.

The individual (participant) may be given opportunities to volunteer ideas and perceptions and even to participate in the analysis of the data.

Unlike quantitative research where the investigators goal is objectivity, that is, keeping personal values, beliefs and biases from influencing data collection and analysis process, qualitative research is quite subjective. In quantitative research the participant's role is passive. Their functions it to react to the researcher's questions and interventions as each individual answers identical questions. In some cases or in most cases, participants are not asked to offer any opinions other than those requested by the measuring instruments (Borg, Gall and Gall). Qualitative research, however, establish better rapport with the individuals to be able to interpret the meaning of their responses.

Data analysis

Data analysis is the heart of qualitative research. It is one of the places that qualitative research is mot different from quantitative research methods. There is no time as computer programs. Analysis is done personally or often with the help of the participants if literate. Today, few statements could be computerized using special programs but not statistically derived. For example, Maykut and Morehouse had this to say about graduate students in America:

Only see the statistical result as they come to them from the computer screen, they do not have a clear

understanding of these results even though they have spent a semester studying statistics (p.58).

Qualitative research examines peoples words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely, and representing the situation as expressed by the participants. These are further distinguished by their philosophic underpinnings (Maykut and Morehouse) while quantitative data deals with explanations, predictions and proofs, objective enquiry based on measurable variables and probable propositions (positivism). The analysis is comprehensive in scope, elaborate I detail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Researchers construct from the data narrations descriptions, detailed narrations of people, incidents and processes. The entire descriptive narration is completed after data collection because of the discovery-orientation of the research. To generate inductively a descriptive narration, certain kinds of data must be in the field notes, transcripts, or notes of historical/legal documents. Descriptive narrations contain at least four elements: people, incidents, participants language, and participants "meanings". Participants in the first place are described as individuals who have different personal histories and display different physical, emotional and intellectual characteristics in various situations. The second element concerns incidents in the form of narration about the social sciences, similar to telling a story. The third emphasizes the participants language not that of the researcher or of social science. Participants names for incidents, locations, objects, special events and processes are noted. Language refers to any form of communication such as verbal and non-verbal expressions, drawings, cartoons, symbols and the like. Participants "meanings" are people's views of reality or how they perceive their world. Participants meanings are conveyed when a person states "why" or "because" an event occurred.

Four types of Interpretative analysis are identified: Descriptive narration, Typology, Theme analysis and Grounded theory. For example, an analysis of a situation of am master craftsman's reminiscence when he was apprenticed was reported as:

Let me recall, my master, how I came to do an apprenticeship. I remember the day my father came from the farm and said that I could no longer attend school. How I cried for I could not understand why my father should do this to me. Me, his beloved son, whom he had promised to raise to the sky and make the best of for people in our village to see. How my hopes came crushing down..... (From Fagunwa, 1991:56)

Or a statement from a woman practicing family planning: I thought having many children was a credit to a couple but after I have attended the family planning programme, I have seen that having many children is a problem to a couple, society and the nation (from Badu-Nyarko, 1992:138).

Data are studied for their content, and the topics/categories are formed as a result. The main interest here is comparisons – similarities and differences. This Bogdan and Biklen call “the constant comparative method” of data analysis. This type of analysis is so unique to qualitative researchers only.

Issues affecting qualitative research.

The major issues and criticisms labeled against qualitative research are indicated below:

1. Words vrs numbers
2. Perspectives vrs objective views
3. Discovery vrs proof
4. Validity and reliability
5. Generalization
6. Sampling

Words are used to describe situations and issues rather than figures and statistics. It reports the individual ideas presented from different perspectives based on the information gathered. The information gathered from the field are narrated in the setting which it emanated.

One issue facing qualitative researchers in academic universities is that of problem formulation. In qualitative research problems are formulated several times after the researcher has begun collecting data – planning stage, during data collection and throughout the data collection. The continuing reformulation of the research problem reflects an emerging design. This helps the researcher to have a clear indication of the totality of the phenomenon (Gestaltic) while in quantitative research, problems are stated before data collection. The problems in qualitative research depends on the prior knowledge of the events, the people etc to be interviewed. The problem is not derived from an exhaustive literature review. The problem is phrased as broad general questions on how and why of the situation. As the research progresses the problem is then condensed to focus on the entire study.

It must be noted that the issue of validity and generalizations manifest itself in qualitative research. Conclusions are not statistically derived. To the qualitative researcher, he/she is interested in trustworthiness of his information and not generalizations. Trustworthiness generally refers to the believability of a researcher’s findings. In other words, the credibility of the results is challenged. This simply signifies the designing, the data collection procedures and reporting of the study. To these, qualitative research in adult education applies. Its applicability is based on triangulation – i.e. cross checking the facts, and learning to understand the ideas presented. However, it is significant to say that generalizations affect the selected respondents and those whom they represent. Also of interest to the qualitative researcher is the theme, analysis and grounded theory. The study may go beyond descriptive analysis to add a theoretical dimension. The

theory building analysis is primarily in concept analysis and grounded theory. Grounded theory relates to abstract concepts to propose theory as an explanation of the phenomena. The theory is grounded because it is developed from the data, in contrast to testing a theory from the literature.

Generalizability

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992) when researchers use the term “generalizability” they usually are referring to whether the findings of a study hold beyond the specific research subjects or the setting involved. In the same vein, Gall (1993) indicated that a generalization is thought of as a statement or claim that applies to more than one individual, object, or situation. Thus, when an adult educator makes a statement that there is a positive correlation between age and attendance at functional literacy classes he is making a generalization. The value of generalization is that it allows us to have expectations and make predictions about the future. Although predictions might not be wholly true in every case, it describes more often than not, what we expect to find. All researchers are hopeful that useful generalizations can be derived from their research. Eisner (1991) points out that not only ideas, but also skills and images can be generalized. As Eisner points out, it is this fact that images generalize that leads the qualitative researcher to look for certain characteristics in a leading situation, certain ways of teaching adults, that can apply elsewhere. Once a researcher has an image of “excellence” in adult teaching, he can for instance apply this image to a variety of situations. He states further that

For qualitative research, this means that the creation of an image

- a vivid portrait of excellent teaching *of adults (Italics mine)* for instance, can become a prototype that can be used in the education of teachers or for the appraisal of teachers (p.199).

Direct contact with the qualitative world is one of the most important sources of generalization in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers listen, observe, make discussions, hear events, use photographs, pay attention to records etc. In fact, not all qualitative researchers are concerned with the issue of generalizability. Those concerned are careful to state that. Qualitative researchers in adult education believe that human behavior is not random or idiosyncratic. As a result, they are not concerned with the question of whether their findings are generalizable, “but rather with the question of to which other settings and subjects they are generalizable” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p.45).

The main notion of qualitative research is based on the assumption that every issue studied in each indivi-

dual, each culture and each setting is unique (Borg, Gall and Gall). In fact, this type of research consider this uniqueness as vital. In most cases, qualitative study use case studies to propose tentative generalizations. Such generalizations are content dependent, that is they may lose their validity from one setting to another and over a period of time. This therefore calls for replication.

There is little question, in my mind, that generalization is possible in qualitative research. A different type of generalization is however prevalent in qualitative research. In quantitative research, the researcher generalizes from the sample investigated to the population of interest. Here, it is the investigator who does the generalization. In qualitative research, the researcher may also generalize, but it is often done by the interested practitioners – by individuals who are in a situation similar to the one(s) investigated by the researcher.

Sampling

Qualitative data rely on small samples to drive home the issues. Selection is based on the nature of the representativeness. For instance, 10 women and 10 men (across different ages) from the same community. Qualitative research does not care about sampling errors. The issue of sample size is critical to quantitative studies because it directly influences the robustness of the statistical test used to measure the significance of numerical data and the generalizability of the study results. According to Maykut and Morehouse, 1994 “there are various formulas that can be used to estimate what sample size is needed in order to detect a significant finding, if in fact one exists” (p.62).

One may therefore ask, how does qualitative researchers determine sample size? The answer is simple. They cannot decide at once how many people or settings they must include in the study in order to fully understand the phenomenon of interest. Research continues to be conducted through data collection and analysis in an on-going process until no new information is needed or uncovered. They continue to gather information until a saturation point is reached or when newly collected data is redundant with previously collected data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guba, 1978).

Lincoln and Guba (1984) indicated that qualitative researchers can reach saturation point with as few as *twelve* participants and probably no more than *twenty*. Douglas’ (1985) own research estimated that in-depth interviews with twenty-five people were necessary before he reached the saturation point. Black (1992) also used fifty participants through in-depth interviews for her doctoral dissertation. It must be noted here that, the sample size depends on time, money and other factors that impinge upon the research work.

Values

Qualitative research has been criticized of being value-laden. However, it is the belief of qualitative researchers in adult education that all research is value laden. To avoid the issue of values, researchers make explicit their personal values and try to expose the values that are embedded in the context he/she is studying termed as “*Personal Grounding*”. It must be noted that quantitative studies attempt in all cases to keep their personal values from influencing the design of the research and avoid making value judgements about individuals they study. In saying that a study is value laden rests with the choice of method and treatment of subjects.

In most academic settings, qualitative research in both education and adult education as well as in social research had been adversely criticized. Although it is criticized of being subjective and cannot judge whether the findings have any generalizations or validity, many practitioners find it easy to read thesis and reports of qualitative research and to relate the findings to their own situations.

I will argue here that both researches have much to offer adult education and the social sciences if they are used with sensitivity and discipline.

Scientificity

The question most often asked is whether qualitative research is really scientific. Most adult education practitioners and researchers in the universities model their research along the so called “hard sciences”. Their notion is that measurement is synonymous with science and anything departing from this method is suspect. According to Dalton (1967) cited in Bogdan and Biklen (1992).

Many eminent physicists, chemists and mathematicians question whether there is a reproducible method that all investigators could or should follow, and they have shown in their research that they take diverse, and often unascertainable steps in discovering and solving problems (p.60).

My contention here is that many researchers hold a narrow perspective of science, calling only research based on deductive and hypothesis testing as scientific. Scientific research as we all know involves rigorous and systematic empirical inquiry that is data-based. These requirements, I think qualitative research meets.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative researchers, are less definitive, less certain about the conclusions they draw from their research. They tend to view them as ideas to be shared, discussed, and investigated further. Modifications in different

circumstances and under different conditions will almost always welcome. It is against this background that qualitative researchers in adult education and education in general had held firmly to their faith despite criticisms. The question, therefore is, can qualitative research stand the test of time and the environment it is operating, and be recognized as an alternative research method in social science research? Only time can tell.

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