

Qualitative Research in Education: An Example from Greek Literature

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Abstract

Despite their consolidation amidst the methodological approaches of contemporary educational reality, reluctance has been expressed regarding the capacities of qualitative, versus quantitative research methods. Therefore, this paper discusses issues of qualitative research methodology in education through the critical review of a corresponding Greek study. At first, the specific research problem to be qualitatively investigated is illustrated. Subsequently, the strong and the weak authors' methodological choices are analyzed and discussed, along with the reviewed study's validity, reliability, and ethical standards. Lastly, recommending alternative solutions to the indicated methodological weaknesses, the contribution of qualitative research designs and of their particular characteristics to the exploration of the case-by-case social and educational matters, is deduced. In particular, qualitative research designs constitute a legitimate research tool for the approach of broad social and educational issues, not as alternates to quantitative methods, but sufficing the explicit theoretical parameters of each matter under debate. With this in mind, and complying with their specific methodological guidelines, qualitative studies, such as the one reviewed in the present paper, allow for the better understanding of micro-sociological educational processes that have corresponding macro-sociological implications.

Keywords: educational research, qualitative research methodology.

1. Introduction

Methodology is defined as the pattern of the conduction of a study. Beyond this, the terms of its implementation contribute both to the configuration of its methodological framework, as well as to the determination of the method of analysis of its findings [1]. In this context, the employment of qualitative research in the investigation of the dimensions of the Greek and of the international educational system has been, for decades, established and widespread. However, the limited scope of this approach has been observed [2, 3]. On these grounds, the aim of this paper is to clarify the characteristics of qualitative research methodology in education through the critical review of a corresponding Greek study [4].

2. Problem for investigation

In the reviewed research article, initially, the significant interrelationship between non-centralized, democratic school management, non-exclusive leadership, and shared decision-making, is identified; thus, the reinforcement of schools is possible, together with the amelioration of the subordinate schoolteacher levels of trust, commitment, and joint engagement and advancement of each school policy. Consequently, the need for the supportive relocation of the leading school principal's role towards all the teachers of every school, through the qualitative investigation of participatory decision-making, is highlighted [4, pp. 20-23].

3. Analysis of the authors' methodological choices

On the one hand, as a strong methodological choice of the authors, in general, the intersubjective understanding and the scientific documentation of the individual research procedures are accomplished. More specifically, the flexibility and the variability of the execution of this particular research project were observed. Firstly, the potential emergence of additional pertinent data, besides the devised research questions, throughout the employed personal semi-structured interviews, and their corresponding allocation in categories, for the gradual, comprehensive approach, and for the thorough and holistic description, analysis and insight into the inquired matter, were anticipated. Secondly, the integration and the signification of the subjective schoolteacher experiences and representations by the broader value and ideological context of the investigated school social reality, were served (qualitative methodology). Moreover, in conjunction with the researchers' acquaintance

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and appreciation for the interviewed school principals, the validation of the interviews in a framework of transparency, flexibility, trust, eagerness of cooperation, and minimal difference of power among the former and the latter, can be supported; thusly, the face-to-face, more direct documenting, and the more effective apperception of the occurring school principal stances and impressions, via verbal and non-verbal information, were permitted. At the same time, the minimum comparability of the derived data was ensured [5-7, 10, 12].

In addition, both bibliographically (by reviewing studies published in Greek and in English language) and empirically (by quoting segments of the interviews), there was sufficient acknowledgment and depiction of the school environment and context of the integration of shared decision-making, sufficing the interpretation of its subjective meaning. Also, the equivalence betwixt the partakers' lived circumstances, background, and views, and the experts' inferences, was recognized concerning the participatory school policy, given the penetrative focusing, elucidation and framing of the complexity and the ambiguity of the said phenomenon, sought within specific school units via the substantial, witnessed and useable school principal experiences (interpretative paradigm). Likewise, in the appendix of the article, the comments of the interviewees anent the positive contribution of the interviews to their contemplation with respect to the investigated competences of their directorial role, were attached. Finally, the clarity, the cohesiveness and the interdependence of the compiled narrative research report's various developed interrelated inductive thematic categories and of their associated concepts were noted, in consonance with the current research questions, in order to delineate the scrutinized phenomenon and to confirm its preceding theories [1, 3, 5, 6, 11].

On the other hand, with reference to the weak methodological points of the reviewed study, the inadequate formulation of its research questions, and the lack of the explicit wording of its research aims and hypotheses, were noticed. Similarly, the course of the deployment of the utilized interview guide was not mentioned, whereas no pilot interview was conducted for its prospective enhancement, referring to "subjects", instead of "participants" [1, 5].

Furthermore, the eventual erroneous evaluation (relegation or magnification) of certain data collected by the authors, due to their familiarity and to their esteem towards the interviewees, presumably restricted research validity and reliability. Indeed, respondent validation / member check was not carried out, by returning the texts or the findings of the interviews to the participants, and ensuring the identification and the simplification of their attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, the inadequate reflection of the researchers was detected; by not practicing a personal writing style, in the first person, their deficient realization of the influence of their subjective actions, inquiries and commentaries on the meaning and on the framework of the inspected experiences was indicated [13, 14, 17, 18]. Future studies, ought to settle the above issues.

Moreover, the choice only of purposive / convenient sampling (non-randomized sample), the size (5 high school principals), and the geographical scope (prefecture of Larissa, Greece – sample accessibility) of the research sample, as well as the focus only on the systematic, and not and on the selective participatory decision-making, or on other germane organizational models, constitute methodological shortcomings, narrowing the representativeness and the possibilities of the generalization of the research results. Alternatively, conducting at first deliberate, and then theoretical sampling is recommended, producing categories until their theoretical and conceptual saturation, verification and interconnection; hence, by increasing evolutionarily the appropriate participants, the extraction of an explanatory analytical model of this particular phenomenon and of its occurrences, applicable and in comparable circumstances, will be enabled (method of grounded theory) [8, 9, 11, 16].

Likewise, given the absence of the conduction of triangulation, hindering research validity and reliability, the triangulation of researchers, resulting independently to accordant interpretations, and of sources, exploring the perspectives and the viewpoints and of the case-by-case subordinate teachers, plus of the parents, guardians and caregivers in schools, about the examined topic, is suggested. Lastly, the employment of methodological triangulation is proposed, distributing self-administered questionnaires with closed-ended questions prior to the interviews; in this way, the enrichment of the study with quantitative data will be feasible, rendering it a mixed-methods approach, and concentrating on finding associations between its individual variables [5, 7].

4. Validity, reliability, and ethical issues

In order to ensure validity / transferability, in qualitative research, epistemological reservations have been raised apropos of the existence of a single equitable social reality, and of the capabilities of its equivalent accurate portrayal in virtue of speculative arguments. Notwithstanding, a precise, originally

dense and realistic, and then an inductive description, explanation and interpretation of the findings of the reviewed study was effectuated, taking into account the uniqueness of its framework. Also, the formation of the utilized research instrument, and the data codification of first and of second order (content analysis and constant comparative method) were consistent with the research's questions, objectives and bibliographical background. What is more, the interviews were performed in the offices of the participants, at the end of their teaching hours, promoting their attentional focus in an atmosphere of comfort, security and sincerity. Actually, afterwards their preliminary briefing and their consent as concerns the overall process, and the insurance of the anonymity of their replies, but not and of their confidentiality, prompts and detecting questions were asked to the interviewees, pursuing the elicitation of detailed responses and reducing to a considerable degree any stereotyped and predefined ones, whilst avoiding leading questions, so as to lessen any misconceptions of theirs, and interviewers' prejudices, respectively [5, 10, 12, 15, 16].

Accordingly, for the reinforcement of the reliability / credibility of this study, the criterion of the prolonged engagement of its authors in the analyzed matter exists, owing to their service in administrative positions in education, though potentially affecting the unbiased conduction of their research. Furthermore, the reasonable, translucent and bibliographically substantiated coherence amongst the theoretical framework of the reviewed article, its posed questions and aims, the adopted qualitative methodology, the majority of the features of the examined sample, and the selection of individual semi-structured interviews, for the collection of the data, together with the scrutiny and the commentary of the latter, was noticed. In addition, despite their limited number, school principals of a range of distinctive types of school units (i. e. general and vocational high schools, of urban, suburban, and rural areas) were investigated, and the same procedure was followed in the actualization of all the interviews; by assembling authentic, worthy of trustiness and utile data, equally important findings and results were expounded, and consequential conclusions were drawn [6, 8, 13, 15].

5. Conclusions

Qualitative research designs constitute a legitimate research tool for the approach of broad social and educational issues, not as alternates to quantitative methods, but sufficing the explicit theoretical parameters of each matter under debate. With this in mind, complying with their specific methodological guidelines, qualitative studies such as the one reviewed in the present paper allow for the better understanding of micro-sociological educational processes that have corresponding macro-sociological implications [19-21].

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