This chapter introduces the fundamental elements of qualitative research methods, beginning with a definition of qualitative of research, followed by discussion on the evolution of qualitative research methods and how it is different from quantitative research methods. Also discussed is the importance of ethical considerations when doing qualitative research.
Just like all research, qualitative research is a type of research that seeks answers to a question; is systematically conducted and involves the collection of evidence. However, the uniqueness of qualitative research is that you may produce findings that were not determined in advance and also the findings may be applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study. It is especially effective if you want to obtain culturally specific information about the subjects involved; i.e. the values, behaviours, and opinions of a particular population. However, the term *qualitative research* is a general definition that includes many different methods used in understanding and explaining social phenomena. The following are some definitions by prominent scholars in the field:

- According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research focuses on **interpretation of phenomena** in their **natural settings** to make sense in terms of the **meanings people bring** to these settings. Qualitative research involves collecting information about personal experiences, introspection, life story, interviews, observations, historical, interactions and visual text which are significant moments and meaningful in peoples' lives.

- Patton (2002) defined qualitative research as attempting to **understand the unique interactions** in a particular situation. The purpose of understanding is not necessarily to predict what might occur, but rather **to understand in depth** the characteristics of the situation and the **meaning brought by participants** and what is happening to them at the moment. The aim of qualitative research is to truthfully present findings to others who are interested in what you are doing.

- According to Pope and Mays (1995), qualitative researchers study things in their **natural settings** in an effort to **discover the meanings** seen by those who are **being researched** (or subjects) rather than that of the researcher.

- Qualitative research seeks to provide **understanding of human experience**, perceptions, motivations, intentions, and behaviours based on description and observation and utilizing a **naturalistic interpretative approach** to a subject and its contextual setting (Encyclopedia.com 2009).

- Qualitative research is a process of **naturalistic inquiry** that seeks **in-depth understanding** of social phenomena within their **natural setting**. It focuses on the "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the **direct experiences** of human beings as **meaning-making agents** in their every day lives (University of Utah, College of Health, 2009).

- Merriam (1999) characterises qualitative research as understanding the **meaning people have constructed** in which the **researcher is the primary instrument** for
**Data collection and analysis.** It usually involves **fieldwork** as primarily employing an **inductive research** strategy **focusing on process, meaning and understanding** resulting in a richly descriptive product.

Qualitative research begins by accepting that there are many different ways of understanding and of making sense of the world. You are not attempting to predict what may happen in the future. You want to **understand** the people in that setting. ‘What are their lives like? What beliefs do they hold about the world? In short, qualitative research is concerned with the **social aspects of our world** and seeks to find answers to the following questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992)

- Why people behave the way they do?
- How opinions and attitudes are formed?
- How people are affected by the events that go on around them?
- How and why cultures have developed in the way they have?
- What are the differences between social groups or between males and females?

Besides the social sciences, qualitative research methods are gaining in public health, medicine, nursing, marketing, education and international development research. Quantitative research methods continue to dominate these fields, but researchers are beginning to draw from a more diverse repertoire of quantitative methodologies.

Qualitative methods have become important tools in applied research, in large part because they provide valuable insights into the local perspectives of the population studied. The great contribution of qualitative research is the **culturally specific** and **contextually rich data** it produces. Such data are proving critical in the design of comprehensive solutions to problems in various disciplines. For example, the success of intervention programmes in education, health, nursing and psychology rests on how well it addresses socio-behavioural factors such as cultural norms, ethnic identities, gender norms, stigma, and socioeconomic status; i.e. gain an insight into “WHY” (see Figure 1).
In the 1950s and 60s, research in education was very much influenced by the behaviouristic perspective which used the scientific method in studying animal behaviour which later was generalised to humans. This is described as the quantitative approach which dominated much of educational research until the publication of the book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn. The ideas proposed by Kuhn played a significant role in influencing scientific thinking.

### A) PARADIGM SHIFT

He introduced the concept of “paradigm” which was identified as the scientific achievements and discoveries which provided solutions and explanations of various phenomena at a particular point. 

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**Figure 1 Qualitative Research Seeks to Gain Insight into “WHY”**

**LEARNING ACTIVITY**

a) Based on the definitions provided, make a list of the key words that describe qualitative research.

b) Qualitative research seeks to gain insight into the “WHY” of a topic. Elaborate.

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**EVOLUTION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION**

**Qualitative techniques used:**
- Interview
- Observation
- Correspondence (emails, letters, memos)
- Diaries
- Audio recordings
- Video recordings
- Feedback forms
- Pictures
- Artefacts (products)

Gain insight into people’s” - WHY?

- attitudes,
- behaviours,
- value systems,
- concerns,
- motivations,
- aspirations,
- culture,
- lifestyles.
in time. He suggested that when the paradigm at that point of time is unable to explain satisfactorily phenomena, a “paradigm shift” should occur within the existing paradigm. A paradigm shift will lead to the introduction of new research methods and tools and how the researcher sees the world.

At the same time, the 60s was a period of turmoil in the United States and Europe. Society was going through radical changes. Society was most concerned about issues such as racial integration, poverty, women’s rights and the cold war (the threat of Russia). People began to question the use of quantitative methods (such as experiments and surveys) in explaining social phenomena such as juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, truancy and so forth.

Referring specifically to the school system, interest shifted towards understanding “school culture”. This gave rise to the use of qualitative methods in education. For example, the ethnographic method which focuses on studying processes and practices in the classroom became a popular technique in educational research. Increasingly, it was realised that quantitative methods were not able to explain in detail what is happening in the classroom and the individuals involved.

B) CHANGING PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS
In educational research, the quantitative approach may be described as based on the **POSITIVISM** while the qualitative approach research is based on **PHENOMENOLOGY** ((Benz, & Newman, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1984).

- **Positivism**: According to positivism, reality is stable, observable and can be measured. Knowledge is obtained using the scientific method which is objective and measurable. To prove that a phenomenon exists, one has to collect data scientifically and what that cannot be tested empirically cannot be regarded as proven. For example, we can establish that Person A has a lower self-esteem that Person B based on the data obtained from a self-esteem scale both person responded to. Positivism has no value judgements, only statements which can be tested scientifically. To prove the validity of a statement, data must be collected.
(e.g. using experiments, surveys) using methods that are agreed on by the scientific community. Also, the research when repeated should yield the similar results.

- **Phenomenology**: On the other hand, phenomenology focuses on the processes and experiences one goes through. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena” or the things we experience and the ways we experience such things. Experience is a complex concept and not directly observable by an external observer. For example, a person might ask “Is my experience with love the same as yours?”. It may be difficult to answer such a question in a concrete way because it is subjective. However, ‘intersubjectivity’ is often used as a mechanism for understanding how people give meaning or interpret their experiences (Benz, & Newman, 1998).

**EXAMPLE:**

You are interested in investigating the experiences of a group of adults learning how to use a computer for the first time. You get them to relate their experiences and how they feel about touching the keyboard and looking at the computer screen for the first time in their lives. You study their experiences which include their perceptions, misconceptions, emotions (feelings), their desires, their actions and their thoughts about using the computer for the first time. In conducting the study you are seeking to understand the processes and experiences these adults learners go through.

To illustrate, let us examine how a quantitative researcher (positivist approach) and a qualitative researcher (phenomenological approach) would study *Reasons for Dropping Out of Secondary Schools*.

**Issue: Study on Reasons for Dropping out of School**

- **Positivism** (Quantitative Approach)
  You begin by suggesting the factors influencing or your beliefs as to why students drop out from school. Some of the factors you may have identified are poverty, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, peer pressure and so forth. Based on these beliefs you develop a questionnaire and administer it to a sample of students who had dropped out of school. You analyse the data and identify the factors explaining why students drop out from school. You might rank the factors or reasons for students dropping out of school.

- **Phenomenology** (Qualitative Approach)
  You do not propose any factors or attempt to measure anything. You do not begin with any beliefs or preconceived ideas about the reasons for students dropping out of school. You are more interested in understanding the experience of dropping out of school. You interview and interact with a small group of school dropouts.
You observe their behaviours and record what they talk about. You also examine documents such as reports by counsellors and their school progress report (Mays & Pope, 1996).

Qualitative researchers were willing to sacrifice validity and reliability of methods to be able to inquire into the minds of subjects; they were also willing to trade-off generalisability of findings (which is an important aims of quantitative research) in order to understand and interpret what was going on, which they felt was much more useful (Patton, 1996). For example, if it was found that only 37% of teachers in Malaysian secondary schools are against streaming students according to academic performance; does it mean that streaming should continue and ignore their position. We are not sure of the strength of feeling of the teachers who were against streaming nor why they hold such a view. It might be that they feel it demoralises academically weak students; it only makes teaching easier for teacher or they might prefer a different method of handling students with varying academic abilities. Indeed until we find out more detail why these teachers hold such an opinion, a range of possibilities can be imagined for policy and practice.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

a) How has a paradigm shift in research approaches affected the evolution of qualitative research methods?

b) What is the difference between ‘positivism’ and ‘phenomenology’ in educational research?

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Proponents of qualitative and quantitative research have and still argue about the differences between the two approaches of conducting research. Proponents of quantitative research have been critical of qualitative research arguing that it is not scientific and too subjective. Table 1.1 lists the differences between qualitative and quantitative research (Benz, & Newman, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1984).
1. **Philosophy:**
   Generally, the underlying philosophy of qualitative research is phenomenology while the underlying philosophy of quantitative research is *positivism* (*we discussed the difference earlier*).

2. **Goal:**
   - In qualitative research, we are interested understanding the **meaning people have constructed**. Focus is on finding out how people **make sense** of the world they live in and experiences they have undergone. For example, when you ask a teacher about her principal’s leadership style, she will tell you how she feels based upon her experience working with the principal and how she interprets her relationship with the principal. You are interested in the meaning that is embedded in the teacher’s experiences in the school and her interaction with the principal.
   - On the other hand, in quantitative research we are more interested in **testing the hypothesis** that there is a different between variables studied or there is a relationship between the variables examined. We are more concerned with **prediction**. For example, is there a relationship between motivation and academic achievement.

3. **Focus:**
   - Qualitative research focus on process, meaning and understanding based on thick and rich description. Words and pictures and not numbers are used to explain phenomena. Also emphasised is description about a situation, the people involved and the activities observed. Data in the form of communication of the participants themselves, extracts from documents, video and audio recording supporting the findings of the study.
   - In qualitative research focus is on the products, the figures collected when a test, scale or questionnaire is administered. Numbers are used (with the help of statistics) to explain phenomena.

4. **Method:**
   - In qualitative research, the methods most commonly are ethnography, action research, qualitative case study, content analysis and so forth.
   - On the other hand in quantitative research, the more common research methods are experiments and surveys (data may be collected in written form by subjects answering a questionnaire or collected through face-to-face interviews).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Philosophy: Phenomenology</td>
<td>Positivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Goal: Understand, meaning</td>
<td>Prediction, test hypothesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Focus: Quality (features)</td>
<td>Quantity (how much, numbers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Method: Ethnography/Action research</td>
<td>Experiments/Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Data collection: Interviews, observation documents, artefacts</td>
<td>Questionnaire, scales, tests, inventories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Research Design: Flexible, emerging</td>
<td>Structured, predetermined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sample: Small, purposeful</td>
<td>Large, random, representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Generalisation: Unique case selection</td>
<td>Generalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Analysis: Inductive (by the researcher)</td>
<td>Deductive (by statistical methods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Role of Researcher: Immersed</td>
<td>Detached</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

5. Data Collection Techniques:
- In qualitative research, you are the instrument (“human instrument”) and as such you take into consideration the total context (which is not possible when a questionnaire is used). For example, when you interview the teacher, you are able to record non-verbal responses.
- In quantitative research, the main instrument in data collection is the questionnaire, scales, inventory or tests.
6. Research Design:

- The research design in qualitative research is dynamic; constantly shifting with the changing phenomenon and context: what method fits now and also use trial error (but don't get stuck in one approach that works best at one point in time). Realise things may unfold differently than expected, go with the flow. Also, you have the option to adapt data collection techniques depending on the situation. For example, if you find that in the first interview with the teacher you were not clear about certain things mentioned, you can go back to field and get the teacher to elaborate on the things that were not clear (“When you said that he was friendly, can you some examples in what ways is he is friendly”).

- *Flexible design* - you don't always specify it completely before research; variables and hypotheses and sampling and methods are at least partly emergent - needs to unfold. Need to be able to tolerate ambiguity. Trial and error with categories too - need to reformulate many times. "Recursive." Go from parts to whole and back to parts - cycle back and forth: pull it apart, then reconstruct, pull data apart again, make better reconstruction, etc. Also may need to immerse in social situation, then draw apart to reflect, then immerse again, etc. Use multiple methods, or many as feasible, as long as get better picture of what is happening and how it is understood - even use quantitative methods.

7. Sample:

- In qualitative research, the sample is small and not chosen randomly. Rather, the choice of a sample is purposeful (Patton, 1996). For example, if you intend to study drug addicts at a drug rehabilitation centre you will select a few addicts to study (see the discussion on ‘sampling’ later).

- In quantitative research, the sample should be large enough to be representative of the population. Also, sample size may be determined by the statistics used because certain statistical tool require a certain sample size to be effective.

8. Generalisation:

- In qualitative research, you select cases or subjects based on their uniqueness (i.e. *unique case selection*). In other words, you are not as concerned about generalisation of your findings. Actually generalization is a cooperative venture of researcher and reader. The researcher describes the context fully and the reader decides if the context is similar or is representative of his or her situation.

- In quantitative research, you are interested in generalising on the findings you obtained from the sample to the population. For example, if you found a significant different between males and females in your sample, you would like to generalised that there is a significant difference between males and females in the population from which the sample was drawn.
9. Analysis:
- Qualitative research adopts the inductive approach (see Figure 2 below). Such research is conducted because of a lack of theory or existing theories are unable to explain phenomenon convincingly. Because of this no hypotheses are put forward to guide research. The qualitative researcher begins by observing phenomena and continues of find patterns in the form of themes, categories, concepts and typologies that emerge. Tentative hypothesis are introduced and additional information are collected to explain the phenomenon.

![Figure 2 The Inductive Approach in Research](image)

10. Role of the Researcher
- You must physically go to the people, location, setting or site (or the “field”) in order to observe, interview or collect documents (or artefacts). You immerse yourself in the situation and you do not manipulate the situation, but rather watch naturally occurring events and not controlling them, i.e. qualitative research is naturalistic (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994).
- In contrast, in quantitative research, the researcher is detached but he or she manipulates the situation, such as you would do when conducting an experiment in which a treatment is given to one group while another group is not given the treatment and acts as the control group.
- The researcher being the main instrument of data collection is more responsive to the situation and he or she is able to adapt to the changing conditions. For example, the researcher is more sensitive to reactions of participants and the data can be immediately processed and he or she is able to take whatever action to check and confirm with the subject if there is doubt or uncertainties.

If you are asked why you have chosen the qualitative perspective and if your answer is, “….because there is no statistics is involved!”; your argument is weak because you do not know in depth the philosophy and orientation of qualitative research. Your choice of using the qualitative approach should be based on the basic question, ‘Is the quantitative
or the qualitative approach appropriate in answering your research questions? The decision to conduct research using the qualitative approach should be based on your orientation as a researcher towards issues such as:

- **Reality**: You must accept the fact that when you use qualitative research methods, you are interested in ‘multiple realities’ or multiple interpretations and not just one conception of reality or one interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).
- **Aims of the study**: You are interested in patterns when analysing qualitative data rather than one right answer.
- **Knowledge**: The knowledge produced from your study will ‘emerge’ and you may be interested in developing a theory rather confirming a theory.

### LEARNING ACTIVITY

a) How has a paradigm shift in research approaches affected the evolution of qualitative research methods?
b) What is the difference between ‘positivism’ and ‘phenomenology’ in educational research?

### Qualitative Research Methods in Education

Different authors have discussed qualitative data collection methods differently. Patton (1996), Denzin & Lincoln (1994) and Merriam (1999) have identified several different types of qualitative research methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Case Study</strong></td>
<td>Attempts to shed light on a phenomena by studying in depth a single case example of the phenomena. The case can be an individual person, an event, a group, or an institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnography</strong></td>
<td>Focuses on the sociology of meaning through close field observation of socio-cultural phenomena. Typically, the ethnographer focuses on a community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phenomenology</strong></td>
<td>Describes the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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assumptions from other disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical</th>
<th>Systematic collection and objective evaluation of data related to past occurrences in order to test hypotheses concerning causes, effects, or trends of these events that may help to explain present events and anticipate future events.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Research</td>
<td>Action research is inquiry or research in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of practice and is typically designed and conducted by practitioners who analyse the data to improve their own practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Analysis</td>
<td>Content analysis is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. Researchers quantify and analyse the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Grounded Theory is most accurately described as a research method in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around. That makes this an inductive approach, meaning that it moves from the specific to the more general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic Qualitative Method</td>
<td>The generic qualitative method does not have a guiding set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the established qualitative methodologies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 2 Selected Types of Qualitative Research Methods |

Table 2 lists selected types of qualitative research methods oftentimes used in educational research. However, in this course, focus will on the following methods: Ethnography, Action research, Case Study and the Generic Qualitative Method. See Figure 3.
Figure 3 Selected Qualitative Research Methods Used in Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Research Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic Qualitative Method</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**Strengths of Qualitative Research**

- Depth and detail—may not get as much depth in a standardised questionnaire
- Openness—can generate new theories and recognize phenomena ignored by most or all previous researchers and literature
- Helps people see the world view of those studies—*their* categories, rather than imposing categories; simulates their experience of the world
- Attempts to avoid pre-judgments (although some recent researchers disagree because “we always make judgments, but just don't admit it”);
  - Judgement is made about the choice of one location or group
  - The goal is to try to capture what is happening without being judgmental
  - The research tries to represent subjects from their perspectives so the reader can see their views.

**Weaknesses of Qualitative Research**

- Fewer people studied usually
- Less easily generalised as a result
- Difficult to aggregate data and make systematic comparisons
- Dependent upon researcher's personal attributes and skills (though it is also true with quantitative research but not easily detected)
- Participation in the setting can change the social situation (although not participating can always change the social situation as well)
The National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (2009) proposes the following checklist that may be used by researchers to determine whether what they are doing is qualitative research.

**CHECKLIST ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

How do I know what I am doing is qualitative research?

**SECTION 1: THEORETICAL APPROACH**

This section deals with the underlying theory and principles applied to the research.

**a) Is a qualitative approach appropriate?**
A qualitative approach can be judged to be appropriate when the research sets out to investigate phenomena that are not easy to quantify or measure accurately, or where such measurement would be arbitrary and inexact. If clear numerical measures could reasonably have been put in place, then consider whether a quantitative approach may have been more appropriate. Qualitative research commonly measures:
- personal experiences (for example, of a condition, treatment or situation)
- processes (for example, action research, practitioner or patient views on the acceptability of using new technology)
- personal values and beliefs (for example, about death, birth, disability)
- interactions and relationships (for example, the quality of the teacher-pupil relationship, the openness of a counselling relationship)
- service evaluations (for example, what was good or bad about teachers’ experiences in discussion group).

b) Is the study clear in what it seeks to do?
The design of qualitative research tends to be ‘theory generative’ rather than ‘theory testing’; it is therefore unlikely that a research question will be found in the form of a hypothesis or null hypothesis in the way that you would expect in traditional quantitative research. Nevertheless, it should be stated early and clearly what the study is investigating and what the parameters are. The research question should be set in context by the provision of an adequate summary of the background literature and the study’s underpinning values and assumptions.

SECTION 2: STUDY DESIGN

This section considers the robustness of the design of the research project.

How rigorous is the research design/methodology?
There are a large number of qualitative methodologies, and a tendency in education studies to ‘mix’ aspects of different methodologies or to use a generic qualitative method. From a qualitative perspective, none of this compromises the quality of the study as long as the following criteria are fulfilled:

- The research design should capture appropriate data and have an appropriate plan of analysis for the subject under investigation. There should be a clear and reasonable justification for the methods chosen.

- The choice of sample and sampling method should be clearly set out (ideally including any shortcomings of the sample) and should be reasonable. It is important to remember that sampling in qualitative research can be purposive and should not be random. Qualitative research is not experimental and does not purport to be generalisable, and therefore does not require a large or random sample. People are usually ‘chosen’ for qualitative research based on being key informers.
SECTION 3: DATA COLLECTION

How well was the data collection carried out?
Were the methods of data collection used the most appropriate, given the aims of the research? Was the data collection robust, and are there details of:

- how the data were collected?
- how the data were recorded and transcribed? (if verbal data)
- how the data were stored?
- what records were kept of the data collection?

SECTION 4: VALIDITY

Assessing the validity of qualitative research is very different from assessing that of quantitative research. Qualitative research is much more focused on demonstrating the causes of bias rather than eliminating them. It is therefore good practice to include sections in the report about the reflexive position of the researcher (their ‘role’ in the research), the context in which the research was conducted and the reliability of the actual data. [Validity is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2]

a) Is the role of the researcher clearly described?
The researcher should have considered their role in the research; for example, as a reader, interviewer or observer. This is often referred to as ‘reflexivity’. The ‘status’ of the researcher can profoundly affect the data. For example, a middle-aged woman and an 18-year-old man are likely to get different responses to questions about sexual activity when interviewing a group of teenage boys. It is important to consider age, sex, ethnicity and ‘insider’ status (such as where the interviewer or researcher is part of the group being researched). The researcher can also profoundly influence the data by use of questions, opinions, judgements and so on, so it is important to know what the researcher’s position is in this regard, and how the researcher introduced and talked about the research with the participants.

b) Is the context clearly described?
It is important when gauging the validity of qualitative data to engage with the data in a meaningful way, and to consider whether the data are plausible and realistic. To make an accurate assessment of this, it is important to have a good feeling for the context of the research in terms of the physical context (for example, playground, staff room, gang headquarters) and who else was there (for example, participants are likely to position themselves very differently, and thus to respond very differently, in a discussion with parents present compared with a discussion with peers present). You should also feel that
the participants are described in enough detail that the reader can have some sort of insight into their life and situation. Any potential context bias should be considered.

c) Were the methods reliable?
It is important that the method used to collect the data is appropriate for the research question, and that the data generated map well to the aims of the study. Ideally, more than one method should have been used to collect data, or there should be some other kind of system of comparison that allows the data to be compared. This is referred to as ‘triangulation’.

SECTION 5: ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is very different from quantitative analysis. This does not mean that it should not be systematic and rigorous; however, systematisation and rigour require different methods of assessment.

a) Is the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?
The main way to assess this is by how clearly the analysis is reported and whether the analysis is approached systematically. There should be a clear and consistent method for coding and analysing data, and it should be clear how the coding and analytical strategies were derived. Above all, these must be reasonable in light of the evidence and the aims of the study. Transparency is the key to addressing the rigour of the analysis.

b) Are the data ‘rich’?
Qualitative researchers use the adjective ‘rich’ to describe data that are in-depth, convincing, compelling and detailed enough that the reader feels that they have achieved some level of insight into the research participants’ experience. It is also important to know the ‘context’ of the data – where they came from, what prompted them, what they pertain to, and so on.

c) Is the analysis reliable?
The analysis of data can be made more reliable by setting checks in place. It is good practice to have sections of data coded by another researcher, or at least to have a second researcher check the coding for consistency. Participants may also be allowed to verify the transcripts of their interview (or other data collection, if appropriate). Negative or discrepant results should always be highlighted and discussed.

d) Are the findings convincing?
• In qualitative research, the reader should find the results of the research convincing or credible. This means that the findings should be presented clearly and organised logically, they should not contradict themselves without explanation or consideration, and they should be clear and coherent.

• Extracts from original data should be included where possible to give a fuller sense of the findings. These data should be appropriately referenced – although
you would expect data to be anonymised, they still need to be referenced in relevant ways (for example, if gender differences were important, then you would expect extracts to be marked male/female).

SECTION 6: ETHICS

How clear and coherent is the reporting of ethical considerations?

- All qualitative research involves ethical considerations, and these should be considered within any research report. Ideally there should be a full discussion of ethics. Important ethical issues that are raised by a particularly sensitive piece of research should be discussed in enough detail that the reader is convinced that every care was taken to protect research participants.

- Any qualitative research should be approved by a research ethics committee, and this should be stated in the report.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

Researchers oftentimes loosely use the term qualitative research to conclude that their study is qualitative. What would you take into consideration in determining whether the study you plan to undertake is qualitative research?
DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Consider the following list of research problems and explain what would be the most appropriate qualitative research method for each one. If you think that more than one method would be appropriate, explain why.

a) an evaluation of drug rehabilitation centre
b) the role of counsellors in primary schools
c) leadership style of principals
Qualitative research focuses on interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings.

Qualitative research as attempting to understand the unique interactions in a particular situation.

On validity, qualitative research is much more focused on demonstrating the causes of bias rather than eliminating them.

According to positivism, reality is stable, observable and can be measured; knowledge is obtained using the scientific method which is objective and measurable.

Phenomenology focuses on the processes and experiences one goes through; it is the study of “phenomena” or the things we experience and the ways we experience such things.

In qualitative research, interest is on understanding the meaning people have constructed and how people make sense of the world they live in and experiences they have undergone.

Thomas Kuhn suggests that when the paradigm at that point of time is unable to explain satisfactorily phenomena, a “paradigm shift” should occur within the existing paradigm.

A paradigm shift will lead to the introduction of new research methods and tools and how the researcher sees the world.

In qualitative research, the sample is small and not chosen randomly but rather, the choice of a sample is purposeful.

A qualitative approach can be judged to be appropriate when the research sets out to investigate phenomena that are not easy to quantify or measure accurately, or where such measurement would be arbitrary and inexact.

There should be a clear and consistent method for coding and analysing data, and it should be clear how the coding and analytical strategies were derived.

All qualitative research involves ethical considerations, and these should be considered within any research report.
REFERENCES


