

Looking, Listening, Learning: Qualitative Research,
Developing Strategies for Teaching Children of Poverty

Author Note

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Abstract

A qualitative research course was piloted with School of Education graduate students to determine effects of qualitative methods on strategy development, instruction, and teaching in an impoverished rural district. Implications from interviews of the graduate students revealed that, following completion of the course, they had more confidence in their qualitative research skills as well as an increased interest in conducting qualitative research. Additionally, this course has encouraged teachers to look beyond test scores and develop strategies that address the needs of children of poverty.

Introduction

Qualitative data and research has an important role to play in education. Teaching graduate students how to conduct and apply the results of qualitative research may help them become more reflective practitioners. Breidenstein stated that qualitative research can be a means for becoming more reflective about teaching (Breidenstein, 2002).

Concerns about real world applications regarding research and classroom practice in P-12 educational settings arose among a group of faculty members at a small southern liberal arts university. The School of Education offered quantitative methods courses, but no qualitative courses existed in the graduate curriculum. Qualitative research is useful when exploring the social distribution of the context and processes of learning strategies in diverse classrooms. The vital link between teaching strategies and student learning can be clarified and illustrated through qualitative research. Educators can connect qualitative research to their pedagogy and share the discoveries made by students and themselves as reflective practitioners (Mullen, 2000).

We developed a qualitative research course at our university to address the needs of graduate students, and to motivate and empower them to conduct qualitative research in the classroom. Two of us had previous qualitative research education and experience, and through learning and practicing qualitative research we learned the value of the process and the results, and we wanted to provide our graduate students the opportunity to learn the methods. Quantitative research is essential to teaching practices, and qualitative research adds another level and view of the data. Qualitative researchers tend to observe what others do not see, listen when others talk, and ask questions others might not think to raise (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Not all teaching/education data can be

represented in numbers, and viewing data qualitatively and quantitatively provides more information, diverse perspectives, and broader vision of the topics. The course was approved by the university faculty in fall 2007, and was taught to graduate students for the first time in spring 2008.

At the beginning of the course, before any content was taught, graduate students completed a pre-test about qualitative research methods, and the results showed that the participants were steeped in traditional quantitative methods, and they had little, if any, knowledge about qualitative research. This was understandable since there were previously no qualitative research courses offered at this university. After the completion of the course, the post-test results demonstrated that the graduate students had developed an understanding of qualitative research methods. The graduate students who completed the course were public school teachers from districts with high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL), and will henceforth be referred to as teachers.

The teachers shared their thoughts about developing and using diverse strategies to improve their teaching practice, especially in regard to teaching children of poverty. Participatory research is critical toward gaining insight into students' perceptions and experiences of education, learning, and school climate patterns. Qualitative methods filter data and observations through theory, interpretation, and analysis. This process reflects, in part, recognition that research can be an intervention for strategy development and ongoing educational activities in the classroom, not a passive portrait (Freebody, 2003). Without this insight, appropriate development of realistic and effective teaching strategies would be less likely to occur.

After the completion of the course, the teachers were interviewed to identify how they had applied the qualitative skills they learned in their classrooms. The application of qualitative research was nascent in their teaching practice, and it would take time for them to effortlessly include and apply the practice to see the benefits; however, they were thinking and using the methods, and learning the value of their new tools. Research has shown that the addition of qualitative research to graduate programs has provided a tool for the improvement of teacher quality, assessment and evaluation practices (Breidenstein, 2002). Factors such as the transparency and depth of the account of research, the validity of the instruments used, and the appropriateness of analytical methods and presentation of the data collected are applicable to all research. Other factors, such as self-reflection of the research process or the degree to which findings are considered to be relevant to other contexts or populations on the basis of their reliability are specific to qualitative research (Naidoo & Orme, 1998). The teachers discovered this reality as they began to implement qualitative practice in their classrooms.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how graduate students applied the skills learned in the qualitative research course. Specifically, we learned how qualitative practice impacted teacher understanding of children of poverty in regard to their academic perceptions and overall dispositions. Providing a qualitative research experience during teacher training promotes understanding of the qualitative nature of teaching and develops a stance toward teaching that reflects that understanding (Breidenstein, 2002). Additionally, the investigators identified which practices sharpened teachers' abilities to feel informed about the needs of students at school and at home. Parental involvement, even from those parents who were previously reluctant to be

involved, has been shown to increase when schools made an effort to involve parents in ways to help children succeed in school (Epstein, 2007). We also learned from the teachers which practices were perceived as useful strategies for teaching effectively in diverse impoverished classrooms.

We conducted interviews with eleven of the twelve course participants to examine their perceptions of how the acquisition and application of qualitative research skills had changed or improved their teaching practices thus far. These teachers believed that they had modified their teaching practices to include qualitative research methods learned in the graduate course. The goal was to better address the needs of children of poverty in an effort to improve their academic success and the overall classroom climate.

Methods

The project was submitted and approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consents including permission to audio-tape were explained and signed by each of the participants. They understood that we would be writing a manuscript for publication using the data collected.

Participants

The 11 participants were diverse in background and teaching experience. Their teaching experiences included primary, elementary, middle level, and high school. Their areas of expertise were foreign language, secondary math, special education, and music, as well as traditional middle, elementary and primary classrooms. This group combined has more than 150 years of experience, with individual experience ranging from six to 30 years. Although their experiences and backgrounds are quite varied, the one

commonality among them was that they were teaching in an impoverished rural southeastern county.

Procedures and Data Preparation

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Then we read and reread the transcripts. A content analysis procedure was applied to analyze the interviews.

The methods detailed in Weber (1990) were used to conduct the content analysis. The basic steps are as follows: a) identify categories, b) define each category, c) code data and d) analyze data. Before reviewing the transcripts, all facilitator verbiage was deleted, so that the facilitators' comments did not contaminate the review. Through content analysis the common themes were identified and verified.

Data Analysis

Each investigator read the transcripts of the eleven participants. Categories emerged and were informally defined while reading the individual interviews. This extraction of categories continued as each successive interview was analyzed. The extraction process resulted in lists of significant words and phrases from each investigator.

Then we met and the lists were compared and examined for similar words and phrases. If a word or phrase occurred in one list but not the other, then we re-examined the text for clarity and made a determination about keeping or discarding the words or phrases. Words and phrases with similar meaning were grouped. Then, a phrase that best illustrated the meaning was assigned to represent that subset of words and became the title of the subset.

All investigators sorted the phrases and level of agreement was ascertained. The coding sequence occurred interview by interview and then the results were compared for consistency. Commonalities and differences in meanings in the coding were compared, clarified, and justified until agreement was reached on the meaning. Data that did not “fit” clearly into one subset or another were discarded. Only minimal data, largely consisting of tangential interactions, were discarded.

Data were analyzed by examining the common words and phrases and identifying patterns that had a similar underlying meaning. These commonalities were grouped together to form themes. One hundred percent agreement was obtained among the four investigators.

Results

After the interviews were coded, five themes emerged that illustrated the value of applying qualitative methods to assist teachers in the development and application of diverse strategies for teaching and effectively communicating with children of poverty. The main qualitative research tools that were denoted as essential to this process were the qualitative data collection methods of observation and interview.

The findings indicated that the acquisition and application of qualitative research skills enhanced teachers’ abilities to relate to the needs of children of poverty. Themes and supporting quotes follow:

Hone the critical skills necessary to conduct meaningful observations.

I have learned a whole lot about observing the students through my qualitative research course and just not paying attention to test scores, but paying attention to individuals. I have learned to pay close attention to details.

Examine children of poverty.

This qualitative class has made me become more aware of their [students'] culture and their diverse backgrounds and that I don't need to make any assumptions of what they know and what they don't know but let them lead me. It has helped me understand the impact of the diverse backgrounds of the students.

Comprehend the world from students' perspectives.

Has helped me to understand where my students are coming from.

In their world, a wild animal may be a cat.

Improve ability to actively and critically listen.

Spend more time in class just talking and interacting with them [students] as people instead of student and teacher. This has helped me understand what motivates them to learn.

Recognize and consider students' barriers to academic success.

Some of my assessment tactics have changed more than anything. I have learned to give students ownership of their learning. Not necessarily depending on the students to read a question and get an answer, but to be able to speak orally or to be able to demonstrate for me visually that they understand the concept.

These themes clearly indicate that qualitative research skills should be a required component of teacher education programs if teachers are to be proficient in teaching and effectively communicating with children of poverty. Data collection techniques, especially interviews and observations that are taught in entry level qualitative research

graduate courses equip teachers with additional tools to develop effective strategies and better teach children of poverty.

Discussion

The results clearly support the benefits of incorporating a qualitative methods course in a graduate education curriculum. The teachers in this study demonstrated the usefulness of acquiring qualitative research skills to aid them in teaching children of poverty.

Mullen (2000) emphasized that graduate school faculty need to demonstrate to graduate students how to do research, using the classroom as a live setting for data collection and student involvement. The participants of this study clearly illustrated that outcome.

The themes consistently were focused on the skills of the teacher in regard to effectively seeing and relating to children of poverty through the use of qualitative research. They learned that looking, listening, and learning could take place through the use of qualitative research methods. The method was always there – it was the being attentive to it, and learning to reflect on what was going on that made the difference.

Observation is a critical skill for teachers to hone. Through observation teachers are “experiencing”, “enquiring”, and “examining” (Wolcott, 1992). Teachers should be constantly observing the classroom environment and adjusting their teaching based on what they see. Observing systematically is a rigorous qualitative data collection technique (Mills, 2007). The participants in this study further honed their observation techniques. They gave themselves permission to slow down the pace and take in systematically what was happening in the classroom environment, and then reflected on those observations to

adjust their teaching strategies to examine the experiences and relationships that were occurring in the classroom. They thought about how these relationships could be used to promote cohesion and student learning in their classrooms.

The teachers noticed the diverse nature of the students once they trained themselves to become attuned to what the students were really saying. They considered the “whole” of their student’s lives. In their interviews they discussed students’ home lives, compared them to others, and began to appreciate the diversity and impact those experiences could have on students’ dispositions and learning experiences. They learned to let the students lead the way when appropriate, which opened doors for effective communication so that individual students could better respond in a more meaningful manner in regard to their personal learning styles.

The above strategies lead to better comprehension of the student’s world view because teachers could experience situations through the student perspective. The quote about a cat being a wild animal is wonderfully illustrative. The teachers were able to pinpoint diversity because to some students a cat was a domestic pet in the home, or a rodent reduction strategy on the farm, and to other children they are considered wild alley cats to be feared. That particular quote connected to an example from one of our college courses. The connection comes from teaching a University Life 100 course to freshman college students. Every semester one of the first assignments freshman complete is to write and draw on a large index card their “Secret Freshman Fear about College”. Every year at least one student will write that his or her fear is, “I am scared of all the wild cats on campus.” That example was a connection across campuses and curriculums. The

assumption could be made that those who are afraid of the campus cats were children of poverty.

All study participants commented about learning to listen to their students. Some admitted dictatorial strategies previously, meaning they were more intent on students thinking about things the way they did, or the way they wanted them to, instead of students thinking in their own individual way. It seemed dictatorial, listen to me, I am your teacher. Once they felt that they could listen to their students, it was a qualitative research method; they found they learned more about their students, and felt this strategy taught them how to motivate and engage some students who we previously difficult to reach.

The knowledge described above lead teachers to think about assessment strategies, and that was the beginning of becoming more flexible in the evaluation of some classroom work. They learned that some students could express and answer questions verbally, orally, or through demonstration more proficiently than with paper and pencil. The teachers have begun to develop new assessment strategies to meet the needs of such learners.

Some additional tools for the enhancement of graduate students and teachers beginning to work with qualitative data are histograms, matrices, graphs, scatter plots, and charts (Mullen, 2000). Learning to use diverse qualitative methods can also include alternative methods such as stories, metaphors, graphics, poems, videos, films, photographs and conversations (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

This course served as the catalyst for a relationship between qualitative research methods and improved teacher quality. Qualitative skills take time and practice to hone.

Graduate faculty has been funded to follow-up with graduate students and teachers to encourage and mentor their continuing qualitative practice. Collaborative processes are amenable for qualitative growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, qualitative research methods help teachers become more reflective practitioners. Pedagogical issues in qualitative research continue to lack prominence in current scholarship (Mullen, 2000). Graduate students need time and practice to proficiently grasp and enhance the full breadth of the utility of qualitative research. The results of this study indicate that teachers need at minimum, a qualitative research data collection methods course.

It is expected that these methods will continue to improve classroom practice and that the teachers will hone their qualitative skills. The next study we conduct with the teachers will examine how qualitative research assists in the overall student learning and assessment of children of poverty. Being more observant of the students and asking them more questions can help teachers to better understand their world. Qualitative methods have encouraged teachers to develop strategies that may more effectively address the overall needs of children of poverty.

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