**Qualitative Research in Educational Settings**

**Approaches to Qualitative Research**

**Phenomenology**

The first major approach to qualitative research is phenomenology (i.e., the descriptive study of how individuals experience a phenomenon).

* Here is the foundational question in phenomenology: *What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon by an individual or by many individuals?*
* The researcher tries to gain access to individuals’ life-worlds, which is their world of experience; it is where consciousness exists.
* Conducting in-depth interviews is a common method for gaining access to individuals’ life- worlds.
* The researcher, next, searches for the invariant structures of individuals’ experiences (also called the essences of their experience).
* Phenomenological researchers often search for commonalities across individuals (rather than only focusing on what is unique to a single individual). For example, what are the essences of peoples’ experience of the death of a loved one? Here is another example: What are the essences of peoples’ experiences of an uncaring nurse?
* After analyzing your phenomenological research data, you should write a report that provides rich description and a “vicarious experience” of being there for the reader of the report.

**Ethnography**

The second major approach to qualitative research is ethnography (i.e., the discovery and description of the culture of a group of people).

* Here is the foundational question in ethnography: *What are the cultural characteristics of this group of people or of this cultural scene?*
* Because ethnography originates in the discipline of Anthropology, the concept of culture is of central importance.
* Culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, practices, language, norms, rituals, and material things that group members use to understand their world.
* One can study micro cultures (e.g., such as the culture in a classroom) as well as macro cultures (e.g., such as the United States of America culture).

**Case Study Research**

The third major approach to qualitative research is case study research (i.e., the detailed account and analysis of one or more cases).

* Here is the foundational question in case study research: *What are the characteristics of this single case or of these comparison cases?*
* A case is a bounded system (e.g., a person, a group, an activity, a process).

Because the roots of case study are interdisciplinary, many different concepts and theories can be used to describe and explain the case.  
Robert Stake classifies case study research into three types:

1. Intrinsic case study (where the interest is only in understanding the particulars of the case).
2. Instrumental case study (where the interest is in understanding something more general than the case).
3. Collective case study (where interest is in studying and comparing multiple cases in a single research study).

Multiple methods of data collection are often used in case study research (e.g., interviews, observation, documents, questionnaires).  
The case study final report should provide a rich (i.e., vivid and detailed) and holistic (i.e., describes the whole and its parts) description of the case and its context

Fraenkel and Wallen (1996) describe five general characteristics of qualitative research studies. These include:

1. Researchers collect their data in naturalistic settings (e.g., classrooms), by observing and participating in regular activities.
2. Data are collected via words or pictures (not via numerical or quantifiable indicators).
3. Processes (i.e., how individuals communicate with each other about a lesson) are as important as products (i.e., whether or not students obtain the correct answers to a problem).
4. Most qualitative researchers do not start out with specific hypotheses; rather, they use inductive methods to generate conclusions regarding their observations.
5. Qualitative researchers care about participants' perceptions; investigators are likely to question participants in depth about their beliefs, attitudes, and thought processes.

**Methods for Conducting Qualitative Study**

A variety of methods can be used to conduct qualitative studies. For example, qualitative researchers can collect their data from direct observations, from analyses of video or audio recordings, from interviews, or from long-term ethnographic studies.

**Is More Always Better?**

**Single-Subject Research.** In a single-subject study, there is only **one participant.** Researchers generally examine **a variable** at a baseline stage (prior to the start of an intervention), and then later examine how this variable changes at different time intervals, as an intervention is introduced. In single-subject research, control or comparison groups are not used. Researchers are particularly interested in whether or not patterns replicate over time within the same subject; in addition, researchers also examine whether or not similar patterns can be generated in new subjects.

Single-subject studies are particularly common in the special education literature, although this methodology can be used in other areas of educational research as well. An example of a single-subject study would be an examination of the effect of classical music on the ability of a learning-disabled child to solve single-digit addition problems. First, the child's baseline addition skills would be assessed; then, the student's skills in the presence of music would be measured. The music might then be alternately started and stopped several times, while the student's problem-solving skills are continuously assessed.

**Action Research.** Action research is research that is conducted **by classroom teachers, examining their own practices**. The goal of action research is to examine one's practices critically and then to make changes to those practices based on the results of the research. Action research can be conducted by a single teacher, or by a group of educators working together.

**So How Do I Get Started With an Action Research Project?**

Ferrance (2000) summarizes five steps in action research. These include:

1. Identify the problem or question that is going to be investigated.
2. Gather data to help answer the driving question. Data can be collected in many forms (e.g., interviews with students, surveys, journals, video or audio tapes, samples of student work, etc.).
3. Interpret the data by critically examining all data sources, and identifying major themes.
4. Evaluate results; in particular, examine whether or not the research question has been answered.
5. Take next steps—develop additional research questions, or make changes to instructional methods.

Action research can improve instruction for students; in addition, it can empower teachers, since it is a tool that allows them to judge their own efforts and evaluate the outcomes of their practices.

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