

An Article-Based Story

Qualitative inquiry is human inquiry— humans trying to understand other humans in natural settings. How inquirers interact with the people they study and how they use their own human traits (such as feelings) is very important in coming to understand the perspectives of others.

This chapter is designed to guide you through some of the issues to be considered in fieldwork relations. The chapter begins with an story about teacher research and an elementary school teacher who conducted qualitative inquiry in her third grade. Please also refer to an abbreviated introductory account in Appendix C: An Elementary School Example. Her experiences with field relations will be discussed after her story has been introduced. As you read this article and the teacher’s story, think about parallels with your own inquiry setting.

The point has been made repeatedly that educational research and evaluation findings are seldom used by practicing educators (Bell, 1975; Borg and Gall, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Osguthorpe and Johnson, 1981). One of the common reasons given is that practitioners are not involved in identifying research and evaluation issues, gathering data or interpreting results; so they see little value in the information provided by others. Anthropologists, responsive evaluators, and others who advocate the use of qualitative forms of inquiry (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Spindler, 1963; Yoder, 1981) have suggested that teachers are ideally situated to study their own settings qualitatively; therefore, they should be encouraged to participate directly in the research and/or evaluation processes.

For example, in a brief article to composition teachers, Hoagland (1984) made the following claim: “How do you feel about research in the field of composition? Does the research you read make you feel passive? Disinterested? Are you ever the unwilling receiver of another’s findings? I invite you to join a growing number of teachers who are becoming active researchers. Every writing class, including yours, offers research opportunities - why waste them? The methodology that taps these chances is qualitative research, . . . Researchers in composition now recognize that much of the needed research can be done best by the person most familiar with the context of school-sponsored writing — the classroom teacher. These case studies serve two purposes: first, they are learning experiences for the teacher-researchers, and second, as they are published, they become a storehouse of knowledge about the teaching of writing from the perspective of the classroom teacher.” (pg. 55)

If teachers could gather information themselves, they might value that data and be motivated to use the results to improve their practices. Also, the results they obtain would be extremely valuable to other researchers who want to discover how educational variables interact in natural settings. Many research objectives could be met if teachers were to conduct qualitative studies while they teach.

Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life

Yet, even the advocates of qualitative approaches caution that it could be extremely difficult for a teacher to simultaneously teach and gather feedback as a participant observer. As Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggest, most teachers usually conduct many of the inquiry activities qualitative evaluators and researchers employ but less rigorously and for different reasons:

“Many intelligent laypeople are astute observers of their world, do systematic inquiries, and come to conclusions. Good teachers do this consistently. What they do is like naturalistic research, but it is different in a number of ways. First, the observer’s primary duty is to the research; he or she does not have to devote time to developing curriculum, teaching lessons, and disciplining students. The researcher can thus devote full time and energy to taking it all in. Also, researchers are rigorous about keeping detailed records of what they find. They keep data. Teachers keep records too, but these are much less extensive and of a different sort. Further, researchers do not have as much of a personal stake in having the observations come out one way or the other. The teacher’s life, career, and self-concept are always intimately tied to seeing what he or she is doing in a particular way. This is not to say that teachers cannot transcend this to do research or that researchers do not also have a stake in their studies. But for the researchers, success is defined by doing what certain others define as good research, not seeing what the teacher does in any particular way. Another way that the researcher and the teacher differ is that the researcher has been trained in the use of a set of procedures and techniques developed over the years to collect and analyze data. Last, the researcher is well-grounded in theory and research findings. These provide a framework and clues to direct the study and place what is generated in a context.” (pg. 40)

This list of differences could be discouraging to those who believe that teachers and other practitioners must participate in the inquiry process if research and evaluation efforts are to be truly fruitful and if the lessons learned from such investigations are to be put into educational practice. A useful first test of this belief would be to see if teachers could be taught to use qualitative assumptions, procedures and techniques while teaching and to assess the usefulness of the results to them and to the research community in light of the difficulty and costs involved in doing the study.

To explore these assumptions empirically, a class in qualitative inquiry methods was offered to practicing teachers. During the first 2-3 weeks of a 15 week semester, participants read extensively about qualitative methods and identified a site in which they could conduct a study. The rest of the course was spent doing the studies, discussing the experience in weekly class meetings and writing a final report. This summary describes the inquiry experiences of one teacher, “KL”, who used her third grade class for this experience (see Appendix C: An Elementary School Example for an introduction to this report).



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