Topic ▶ Qualitative Research Methods
7

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this topic, you should be able to:

1. Define what is qualitative research;

2. Trace the evolution of qualitative research;

3. Compare qualitative and quantitative research approaches;

4. Describe the characteristics of ethnography;

5. Explain the reasons for conducting action research;

6. Elaborate on the features of a case study; and

7. Describe the characteristics of the generic qualitative method.

▶ INTRODUCTION

The term qualitative research is a general definition that includes many different methods used in understanding and explaining social phenomena with minimum interference with the natural environment.

• 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 the 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 May (1995), qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings in an effort to discover the meanings seen by those who are being researched rather than that of the researcher.

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 are like? What is going on for them? What beliefs 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:

- 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?

SELF-CHECK 7.1

1. What is positivism?

2. What is phenomenology?

3. Identify FIVE common features of qualitative research in the definitions given by scholars in the field.

7.1 EVOLUTION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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. 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 in time. He further

suggested that when the paradigm at that point of time is unable to explain satisfactorily phenomena, a **"paradigm shift"** should occur together 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 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.

In education, Carr and Kemmis (1986) differentiated the two types of research as positivism and phenomenology. According to the *positivist approach,* knowledge obtained using the scientific method is objective and measurable. "Reality" according to this perspective is stable, observable and can be measured. On the other hand, the *phenomenological perspective* in education focuses on the processes and experiences one goes through. Literally, phenomenology is the study of "phenomena" or the things as they appear in our experience or the ways we experience things.

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, their misconceptions, their emotions (feelings), their desires, their actions and their thoughts about using the computer for the first time. In conducting the study your are seeking to understanding 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

(a) **Positivism** (Quantitative Approach)
    You begin by suggesting the factors influencing or your beliefs as to why students dropout 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.

(b) **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.

If you are asked why you have chosen the qualitative perspective and if your answer is, "….because there is no statistics is involved!"; 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;

(a) **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.

(b) **Aims of the study:**
    You are interested in patterns when analysing qualitative data rather than one right answer.

(c) **Knowledge:**
    The knowledge produced from your study will 'emerge' and you may be interested in developing a theory rather confirming a theory.

7.2 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 7.1 lists the differences between qualitative and quantitative research.

- Qualitative research focuses on the perspective of the subject or participants rather than the perspective of the researcher. This has been termed as the emic or insider perspective as against etic or the outsider's perspective.

- In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument in data collection and data analysis and not a questionnaire or tests as in the case of quantitative research. 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.

- Qualitative research involves field work; that is, the researcher must himself or herself 'walk the factory floor' or go into the setting where there are people and observe or interview them in their natural setting.

Table 7.1: Differences between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Focus:	Quality (features)	Quantity (how much, numbers)
Philosophy:	Phenomenology	Positivism
Method:	Ethnography/Observation	Experiments/Correlation
Goal:	Understand, meaning	Prediction, test hypothesis
Design:	Flexible, emerging	Structured, predetermined
Sample:	Small, purposeful	Large, random, representation
Data collection:	Interviews, observation documents, artefacts	Questionnaire, scales, tests, inventories
Analysis:	Inductive (by the researcher)	Deductive (by statistical methods)
Findings:	Comprehensive, description detailed, holistic	Precise, numerical
Researcher:	Immersed	Detached

Source: Adaptation from Merriam, 1999; Firestone, 1987 ; Potter, 1996

- Qualitative research adopts the inductive approach (see Figure 7.1). 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.
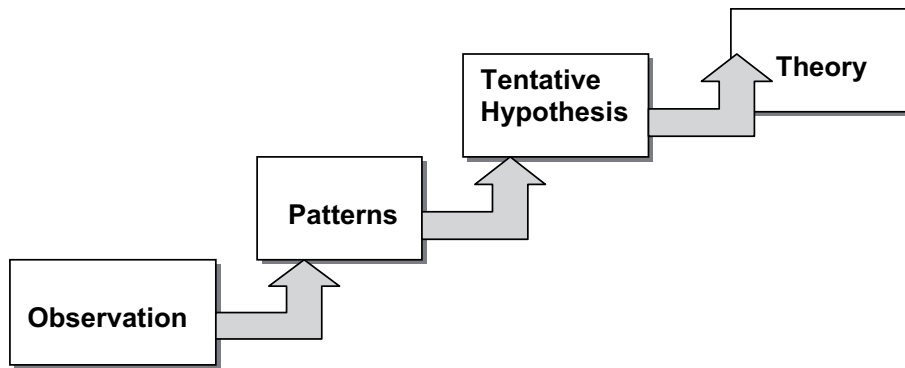
Figure 7.1: Inductive approaches in qualitative approach

- Lastly, qualitative research focus on process, meaning and understanding based on thick and rich description. Words and picture 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.

Other than that, qualitative research is also described as emerging. However, this is not characteristic of all qualitative research. Graduate students doing masters or doctoral thesis do not have much time at their disposal and so they may not be able to see the emergence of theories. The sample is qualitative research is small and not chosen randomly. Rather, the choice of a sample is purposeful. For example, if you intend to study drug addicts at a drug rehabilitation centre you will select a few addicts to study. A long time is required to enable the researcher to interact with other students in different situations.

7.3   QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS IN EDUCATION

Different authors have discussed qualitative data collection methods differently. For example Patton (1990) identifies 10 different types of qualitative research methods based on the kinds of questions a particular researcher will ask. They are ethnography, phenomenology, heuristics, ethnomethdology, symbolic interactionism, ecological psychology, system theory, chaos theory, hermeneutics and orientational inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have classified the different methods based on their strategies of inquiry and listed the following: ethnography, phenomenology, historiography, participant observation, ethnomethdology, grounded theory, biographical method, historical method and clinical research. Other such as Tecsch (1990) and Merriam (1992) have included case study, content analysis and action research to the list.

This chapter examines four qualitative methods commonly used in educational research will be examined, namely; ethnography, case study, action research and basic qualitative method (see Figure 7.2).
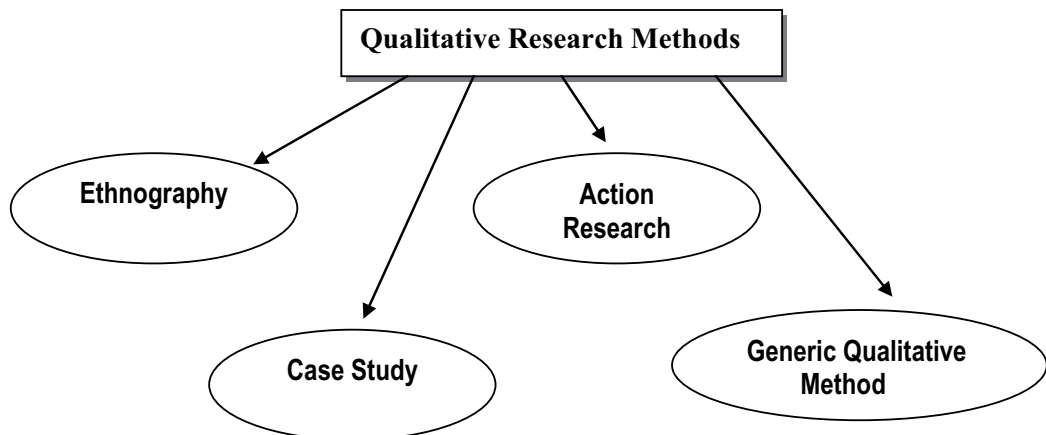

**Figure 7.2**: Qualitative research methods

7.4 ETHNOGRAPHY

We will discuss the definition, role of researcher fieldsites, fieldnotes and some practical for ethnography.

7.4.1 What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a type of qualitative research method employed by anthropologists to study human society and culture. The term 'ethnography' means "portrait of a people" which involves a description of people and culture. **Culture** has many definitions but essentially it refers to the beliefs, values and attitudes that influence the behaviour patterns of a specific group of people. When you say something is *cultural,* it means that a particular belief, value or attitude is shared

"Classic" Ethnography

by a significant number of people in the group; it is practiced by the group and is passed on to the next generation. For example, when 'punctuality' is cultural for a particular group, it is a shared belief by most members of the group; it is practiced by most members of the group and passed on their children. Hammersly and Atkinson (1989), in their book *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* stated that;
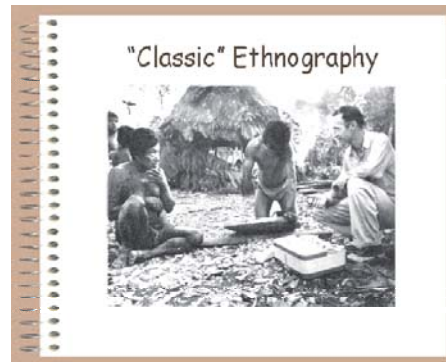
> "…ethnographers have developed an alternative view of the proper nature of social research, often termed *naturalism*…which propose that the social world should be studied in its *natural state*, undisturbed by the researcher….The research should be carried out in ways that are sensitive to the nature of the setting…because human actions are based upon, or infused by, social meanings: intentions, motives, attitudes, and beliefs…which mean different things to different people, and, indeed to the same person at different times" (p. 6-7).

The ethnographic method when applied in education focuses on studying the culture of the school community. Regardless, whether you are studying the teachers, the students, the principal, the curriculum or co-curricular activities; in an ethnographic study your focus will be on a sociocultural interpretation on what you observe. For example, an ethnographic study of a Vision School (Sekolah Wawasan) would take into account the community at large and its cultural context. The characteristics of the neighbourhood, socioeconomic factors of parents, the community's ethnic makeup, the attitudes of parents, teachers and

school administrators. All these are important considerations in this ethnographic study. Common ethnographic techniques used in education are: interviews, examination of documents and artefacts, and observations.

[*These techniques are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8: Qualitative Data Collection Methods*]. Merely using these techniques does not mean you are using ethnography.

7.4.2   Role of Researcher in an Ethnographic Study

Have you been to a party or any social gathering (such as a wedding) where you do not know many people? Unless you are an extremely confident person, this can be a tough situation for many people. How do you get yourself introduced to the strangers in the party? How do you avoid giving the impression that you are a stranger who does not know anybody? Doing ethnography is something like this. You have to first decide on your role when you enter the setting. You could wander around with a notebook but that would appear to be very intrusive and may affect the setting you are trying to observe. In other words, you might affect the natural state.

One solution, which has been adopted by some researcher, is to become completely part of group on wants to research. A classic example in the field of medicine was reported Rosenhan (1973), in which researchers managed to get themselves admitted as patients to a mental hospital. Once admitted, they openly took notes, yet because the staff were used to odd behaviour, did not think this unusual and indicative that the patients were 'genuinely' ill. The researcher gained in-depth knowledge of the hospital, including the experience of being a patient. This kind of study is called ***participant observation,*** in which the researcher assumes two roles – an observer and as a participant. Most of the time, it is not really possible to become a participant and the researcher assumes the role of a ***non-participant observer.*** [*We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 8: Methods of Data Collection Methods*].

7.4.3   Fieldsites

Traditionally, anthropologists have undertaken ethnographic research in small bounded villages while living among the village's relatively few inhabitants. These ethnographers may have been one of few non-natives the villagers may have seen. Today, however, fieldsites can be nearly anywhere. While research may still focus on villages, an increasing number of ethnographic studies have been conducted in urban areas. Sometimes the "group" does not live in one location. A fieldsites could be a bank, a religious centre, a school, a faculty and so

forth. Once a potential fieldsite has been selected, ethnographers must negotiate entry or access.

Say for example you entered a primary school and proceeded to the teacher's lounge, you will certainly be questioned by the school authorities. Obviously, you will not do this but made an effort to seek permission to gain access. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1989), gaining access requires the researcher to draw on his/her interpersonal resources and strategies. It also requires the researcher to be aware of the obstacles to access and effective means of overcoming them by understanding the social setting.

- **Getting Permission**
  Gaining access is not a single event. You may write a letter to the headmaster requesting permission to observe the happenings in teacher's lounge. Even though you are given permission, you have to explain who you are and what you want to do to the teachers. So access is continuously negotiated throughout the period of fieldwork.

- **Gaining Access from Gatekeepers**
  Getting permission of the headmaster is only 'getting your foot at the door'. Imagine entering the teacher's lounge and being reluctantly received by the assistant headmaster or the senior assistant who gives various excuses and imposes various restrictions. Gaining adequate access requires you to know who has control of the setting and the power to grant access, i.e. the gatekeepers. You may be seen as in 'cahoots' with authority and teachers may not like the fact you have come to watch their work. You may be seen as a 'management spy'. Because of this, your data may be comprised as the teachers may not behave 'naturally'. You have to always ask yourself whether your presence has in any way affected how subjects behaved.

7.4.4   Some Practical Concerns

Having gained access to the setting, the first thing you have to decide:

- WHEN to do your observation which may not be obvious when you enter the setting. For example, if you are interested in what goes on in the morning session, than you have to arrive before school begins in the morning.

- HOW OFTEN and for HOW LONG you intend to observe. You may not be able to determine precisely until you get into the field and find out what will be needed in order to gain an adequate picture [*We will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 8 under 8.6 Sampling*]. The usual criterion used is that it should not be too short (there is insufficient data) or too long (until it becomes too costly).

- where to POSITION yourself. In other words, you will have to find an appropriate place to stand that is unobtrusive (un-noticeable as possible). You have to position yourself in such a way so that people around you feel comfortable with your presence and you can explain to them (when necessary) that you are not planted by the management or those in authority. Saying that you are 'doing research' can be quite comforting and puts most people at ease about your presence.

7.4.5   Fieldnotes

Deciding what to record and what to leave out when observing people in a setting can be a difficult task. In any setting there is many things happening and it is not possible, nor desirable to record everything. Imagine the variety of things happening in the teacher's lounge when it is recess and about 60-70 teachers gather in the room! So, you have to be selective and what you observe and record will depend on the question you want answer.

Note-taking is the main method of recording data and in most cases it is handwritten taken either at the time, or immediately afterwards. If you use audio-recording you may be able to capture conversations but you still need to jot down non-verbal communication or the movements of people involved. Note-taking are done at two levels. One the surface level are the facts, which are direct descriptions of what was observed and the verbatim recordings of what was overheard. On another level are observer's comments about what was observed. "These are recorded in order to provide a context for the raw facts and to add speculations about what the researcher thinks it means" (Potter, 1996, p.99).

To help you focus on what to record, Spradley (1980) suggests the following checklist:

- Space: the physical place or places;
- Actor: the people involved;
- Activity: a set of related acts people do;
- Object: the physical things which are present;
- Act: single actions people do;
- Event: a set of related activities that people carry out;
- Time: the sequencing that takes place over time;
- Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish; and
- Feelings: the emotions felt and expressed.

Ethnographic studies involve extensive fieldwork by the researcher. Because of this, ethnography is extremely time consuming as it involves the researcher spending long periods of time in the field observing and taking notes. The notes contain rich, detailed description of everything that went on called *thick description.* At this stage the researcher does not attempt to summarise, generalise or hypothesise. The notes capture and describe what happened to permit interpretations, and most of all, to later infer cultural meaning. The following are some standard rules for taking field notes suggested by Neuman and Wiegand (2000).

- Take notes as soon as possible, and do not talk to anyone before note taking;

- Count the number of key words or phrases used by subjects;

- Carefully record the order or sequence of events, and how long each sequence lasts;

- Do not regard anything as insignificant; record even the smallest things;

- Draw maps or diagrams of the location, including your movements and any reaction by others;

- Write quickly and do not worry about spelling; device you own system of punctuation;

- Avoid evaluative judgements or summarising; for example do not call somebody "a bully", just describe his or her actions;

- Include your won thought and feelings in a separate section; your later thoughts in another section; and

- Always make backup copies of your notes and keep them in separate location.

SELF-CHECK 7.3

1. Define ethnography.
2. List what should be included in fieldnotes.
3. What do you mean by access or entry to the fieldsite?

7.5 CASE STUDY

The Case Study is a method used in both quantitative and qualitative research. As expected there are varying definitions of the case study as a method in qualitative research. Perhaps the most well-known case study is *The Man in the Principal's Office* by Harry Wolcott (1973) who studied one principal. Merriam (1988) defines 'a qualitative case study as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit (p. 21). Smith (1995) viewed the case study as a bounded system while Stake (1995) sees it as an integrated system. Miles and Huberman (1994) present a graphic meaning of a case study by suggesting that it is like a circle with a heart in the middle. The heart is the focus of the study, while the circle defines the edge or boundary of the case. What is beyond the edge or boundary will not be studied.
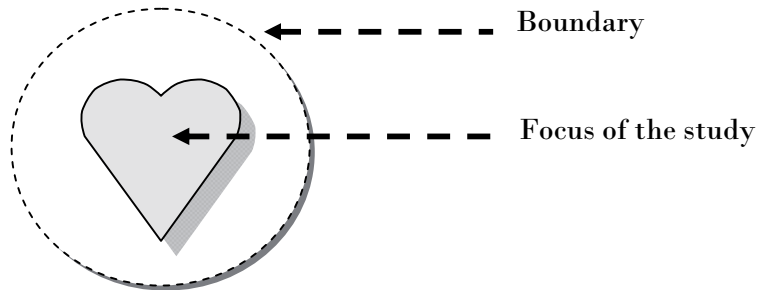

Figure 7.3: Graphical representation of a case study

In other words, to qualify as a case study, you have to state the boundary or delimit what you want to study. For example, you have to limit the number of people you intend to interview, you have to limit the amount of time you intend to spend. "If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case (Merriam, 1998, p.28).

7.5.1 The Method of Case Studies

The case study has been widely used as a research method in law and medicine and is increasingly used in education. Yin (1994) identified the following steps in conducting any case study.

- The first relates to the *research questions* which most likely to be "how" and "why"questions. For example, 'How do students interact in the school canteen?"

- Second relates to the *unit of analysis* which could be an individual, a group of individuals, or an organisation.

- Third relates to *linking the data* collected with the research questions.

- Fourth relates to the *interpretation* of findings. A useful technique is "pattern-matching' where data collected from the case may be related to some theoretical proposition (Campbell, 1975).

Case studies can be either a single-case design or a multiple-case design. According to Yin (1994), *a single-case design* are ideal for studying unique or extreme cases, to confirm or challenge a theory or for cases where the researcher did not have access to before. However, the researcher should be careful not to misrepresent what was observed. *Multiple-case designs* are more suited when the researcher is interested in using more than one case to gather data from various sources and draw conclusions from the facts. They serve to confirm or corroborate evidence which enhances validity of the study. Multiple-design cases may require more than one investigator and training may be required covering aspects such as the reason for the study, the type of evidence to collect and what variations might be expected (Tellis, 1997).

7.5.2 Techniques for Gathering Data

The following are some types of data collection techniques employed in case studies (Stake, 1995 and Yin, 1994):

- **Interviews**
  The interview is an important technique for data collection and there are two forms of interview: Closed or Structured Interviews and Open-Ended Interviews. Open-ended interviews allow subjects to express themselves more freely and insight into events.

- **Observations**
  This could be direct observation of events and behaviours as well as participant-observation where the researcher is an active participant in the events being studied.

- **Documents**
  These could be letters, memos, agendas, administrative documents, newspaper articles and any other relevant documents. Documents are useful for making inferences about events. Documents are communications between persons in the study.

- **Physical Artefacts**
  These are objects collected from the setting which could be products made by students and other individuals, the objects used such as tools or instruments.

SELF-CHECK 7.4

List the characteristics of a case study.
When would you use a case-study?

7.6   ACTION RESEARCH

This section will discuss the definition, the motive and the concept of action research.

7.6.1   What is Action Research?

Action research is a qualitative research method that has become increasingly popular in education and any can be used in any social organisation. It encourages the practioner (or teacher) to be reflective of his or her own practice with the aim of improving the system (McNiff, 1994). Action research is based on the belief that the practioner (or teacher) is the best judge of his or her practice (or teaching) and encouraged to develop his or her own personal theories of practice (or education). This research activity helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For example, teachers employ action research to test their personal theories in the classroom.

In education, action research has also been called *classroom research* (Hopkins, 1985) and *self-reflective inquiry* (Kemmis, 1982). It refers to those activities that are designed to improve the quality of education. It refers to;

> …. a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants (teachers, students or principals, for example) in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of
>
> (a)   Their own social or educational practices;
>
> (b)   Their understanding of these practices, and
>
> (c)   The situations (and institutions) in which these practices are carried out.
>
> W. Carr and S. Kemmis (1986)

7.6.2 Why Action Research?

There are two main reasons for action research. One is to involve practioners (such as teachers) in their work. The other is to encourage practioners (or teachers) to be researchers with the purpose of bringing about improvement in what they are doing. Action research means ACTION, both of the system under consideration and of the people involved in that system. The *system* could mean schools, factories, offices, airlines and so forth. The *people* means teachers, managers, workers, supervisors, principals and so forth. For example, a teacher who discovered that if he adopted an alternative style of dealing with students with discipline problems, student attention in class greatly improved. He recommends the alternative method to his colleagues and soon the whole school is seen practicing the method in all the classes. The action of action research, whether on a small scale or large scale, implies change in people's lives, and therefore in the system in which they live. "Applied to classrooms, action research is an approach to improving education through change, by encouraging teachers to be aware of their own practice, to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it" (McNiff, 1994. p.4).

7.6.3 Concept of Action Research

Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (1988) developed a concept for action research. He proposed a spiral model comprising four steps: planning acting, observing and reflecting (see Figure 7.4). The diagram shows the four steps in action; the movement from one critical phase to another, and the way in which progress may be made through the system. Action research is all about what happens in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to be researchers investigating what is happening in their classrooms.
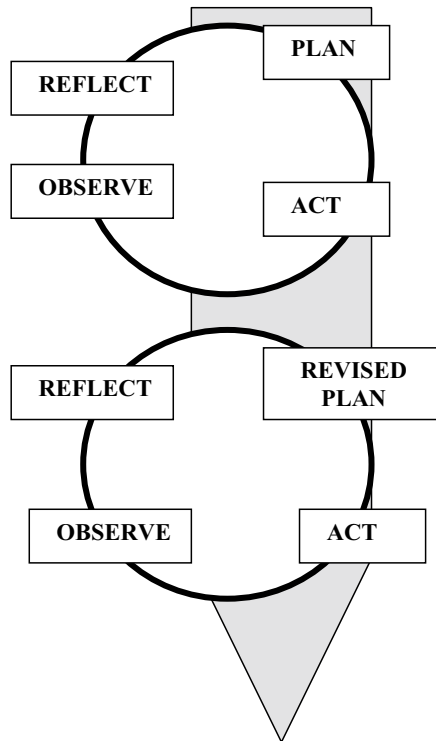
Figure 7.4: Kemmis and McTaggart's concept of action research (1988)

(a)   **Phase One**

   (i)   **Plan:** My students find geography lessons boring. How can I make the lessons more interesting and improve their thinking skills? Bring real-world situations to the classroom using computer simulations.

   (ii)   **Act:** Take students to the computer lab and show them how to use the simulation software. Select topics that are appropriate for using computer simulations.

   (iii)   **Observe:** Record student interactions and the kind of questions asked. Videotape a few lessons to see what is happening. Keep notes of my impressions in a notebook.

   (iv)   **Reflect:** The lesson is lively but not all students are asking questions. They are not discussing with other. They are glued to their individual computers.

(b) **Phase Two**

    (i) **Revise Plan:** Break up students into groups of three with each group working on one computer on a simulation.

    (ii) **Act:** Record their interactions by placing a tape-recorder in each group. Students continue working on the computer simulations and answer questions on the worksheets provided.

    (iii) **Observe:** Students are really enjoying themselves. There is greater group discussion and consensus in decision making.

    (iv) **Reflect:** Can I continue with this teaching method? Can I use the internet instead? I am worried about practical problems such as the availability of computer labs, will the school purchase more such computer software. If the internet is used, will there be broadband access?

7.7 GENERIC QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD

Many qualitative studies in education are NOT about culture as in ethnographic studies, or attempting to improve educational practice as in action research or intensive case studies of an individual or group of individuals. Neither is there any attempt to develop a theory. These qualitative methods do not fit within an established qualitative approach. Many terms have been used to describe this qualitative method. Thorne (1997) used the term "noncategorical qualitative research", Sandelowski (2000) put forward the term "fundamental qualitative method" while Merriam (1998) used the term "generic qualitative research". We will use the term "generic which is a method that "simply seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998. p.11).

The Generic Qualitative Method does not have a guiding set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one established qualitative methodology. The Generic Qualitative Method exhibits some or all of the characteristics of other methodologies or approaches but makes no claim to any particular qualitative method. In other words, the Generic Qualitative Method will use the techniques of ethnography, the case study method, grounded theory and the techniques of action research, but does not claim it is ethnography, case study, grounded theory or action research.

Unfortunately, guidelines for conducting research using the Generic Qualitative Method have been lacking. However, this has not prevented researchers from using such a methodology. It is not surprising that graduate students face many

problems, especially when their thesis or dissertation supervisors are themselves not clear about the methodology of the Generic Qualitative Method. Interestingly, the Generic Qualitative Method is common in education and is a growing trend. Perhaps, the constraints of time and resources have encouraged more researchers to use the Generic Qualitative Method. Also, because of its flexibility and not having to subscribe to any particular methodology it is become a preferred method in explaining various kinds of social phenomena in education. Such as the activities in the classroom, the playground, the hallways, the staff room, the principal's office, science teachers, mathematics teachers, social studies curriculum materials and so forth.

The Generic Qualitative Method may appear to be a loose method incorporating the use of interviews, observations and document analysis in data collection. However, it does not mean that it is less rigorous. You have to clear about the objectives of the study, you have to ensure that internal validity is maintained and your values do not influence the interpretation of data.

As mentioned earlier, the Generic Qualitative Method may incorporate many of the elements of ethnography, action research and the case study, but cannot be considered to belong purely to any of these qualitative methods. The focus is on the identification of patterns and categories with the aim of describing phenomena. Besides description, the data is interpreted to explain phenomena but not with the intention of building or developing theory. The following is a list of techniques that may be employed in a Generic Qualitative Method depending on the objectives of the study:

- To answer specific research questions or begins the study with rather general or broad questions;

- The researcher could be a passive observer or an active participant;

- The methods of data collection could include interviews, observations or documents examination or a combination of the three;

- Semi-structured or unstructured interviews;

- Various documents examined such as teaching materials, newsletters, lesson plans, memos, circulars and many other kinds of written items;

- Content analysis may be used to analyse communication (oral or written);

- Information is provided about the sample selected;

- There is no specific length of data gathering but a rationale is given for the time spent gathering data from observations/interviews;

- Subjects could be interviewed individually or in focus groups;

- The biases of the researcher are made explicit;

- Entry or access to the setting is described in detail; and

- Fieldnotes are kept of all observations: jottings, description, analysis and reflection.

The list of possible research techniques that may be adopted in a Generic Qualitative Method is very much dependent on the objectives of the study and the researcher's belief as to what is knowledge. What information will be needed to explain the phenomenon examined? How can others be convinced that the findings of the study are credible? The following are some examples of phenomena in education that may be studied using the Generic Qualitative Method:

- Racial integration in the school canteen during recess in a primary school;

- Use of portfolios in assessing language of primary school children;

- Interaction in the technology-based classroom using the internet to teach economic;

- Cognitive level of questions in an inquiry-based science classroom;

- Teacher burnout and attitudes;

- Being in an academically weak class for three years: Perceptions and attitudes of three students;

- Analysis of online collaboration in a biology class; and

- Comparative analysis of staff meetings in two schools.

SUMMARY ....

- When a paradigm at that point of time is unable to explain satisfactorily phenomena, a paradigm shift should occur together 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.

- According to the positivist approach, knowledge obtained using the scientific method is objective and measurable.

- According to the phenomenological perspective focus is on the processes and experiences one goes through.

- Qualitative research focuses on interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings.

- Inductive approach: The qualitative researcher begins by observing phenomena and continues of find patterns in the form of themes, categories, concepts and typologies that emerge.

- Ethnography is a type of qualitative research method employed by anthropologists to study human society and culture.

- The term 'ethnography' means "portrait of a people" which involves a description of people and culture.

- A qualitative case study as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit.

- Action research is based on the belief that the practioner is the best judge of his or her practice and encouraged to develop his or her own personal theories of practice.

- Action research adopts a spiral approach comprising four steps: planning acting, observing and reflecting.

- The Generic Qualitative Method does not have a guiding set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one established qualitative methodology, but instead employs the techniques of data collection of other qualitative methods.

KEY TERMS . . . .

Action Research

Case Study

Ethnography
- Culture
- Fieldnotes
- Thick description

Generic Qualitative Method

Natural Setting

Paradigm Shift

Phenomenonology

Positivism

Qualitative methods

DISCUSSION

1. 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

2. 'The flexibility of the Generic Qualitative Method may explain its popularity in educational research'. Discuss.

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