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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Reading Qualitative Educational Policy Research

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Qualitative research refers to a broad collection of research methods which are primarily based on observations and interviews. While a quantitative study uses numerical outcomes to draw conclusions that could be generalized to a larger population, a qualitative study seeks to add a deeper understanding of the program, policy or intervention being studied. It might, for example, include interviews with teachers, parents, students, community members and others, as well as observations of the meetings where results and approaches are discussed. It might explore how an intervention changes what is taught or how it is taught. It would explore intended consequences but also might tease out unintended consequences.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have strengths and weaknesses; more importantly, the two approaches answer different yet important questions. Typically, qualitative techniques are more process-based, interpretive, and designed to understand a particular case. Through observations and interviews, focus groups, surveys, developmental studies, documentary analysis and a host of other approaches, qualitative research can fill in gaps in our understanding that quantitative methods cannot capture.

Policymakers are often presented with research reports espousing certain policy directions. Regardless of the research method used, readers should insist on high-quality work. Just as readers would look for signs of quality and usefulness with a quantitative study, they must

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demand the same of any qualitative study. Key elements to look for:

- Was the study conducted with rigor? That is, rigor in qualitative inquiry is defined by truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability), and neutrality (confirmability).¹
- Are the study's data sources appropriate for its conclusions? For example, for an interview-based study, were appropriate interviewees selected who could adequately inform the analysis? Were the subjects selected in a sensible way—whether randomly or purposefully; e.g., stratified by roles? Did the researchers follow sensible interview protocols or use another sound way of gathering information and insights? Did the researchers allow the data to emerge or did they appear to bias the data collection and analysis toward a predetermined conclusion?
- Was the study placed within the larger body of research? That is, the study should include a complete literature review, rather than implying that the new study somehow supersedes past research. The reader should look for balance and whether the examination of reasonable alternative explanations is objectively presented.
- Did the study display signs of quality such as independent peer-review, source integrity, and absence of obvious bias? Is the researcher housed at a reputable academic institution or at an organization with a mission to advocate for a given policy?
- Are the methods clearly explained? Do they have enough subjects to justify their conclusions? Does there appear to be a bias in the data collection format? Does the information provided give enough guidance for a new research team to repeat and confirm the study's findings and conclusions? Are the conclusions logically and tightly linked to the data and consistent with the literature review?²

Notes and References

- 1 Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.
 - 2 Sofaer, S. (1999). Qualitative methods: what are they and why use them? *Health services research*, 34(5 Pt 2), p. 1101. Retrieved April 22, 2016, from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1089055/pdf/hsresearch00022-0025.pdf>
- Family Health Institute. *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide*. Retrieved April 18, 2016, from <http://www.ccs.neu.edu/course/is4800sp12/resources/qualmethods.pdf>

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