

The Qualitative Approach as a Viable Option in Social Science Research in Kenya

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Abstract: *In this paper, we argue for the qualitative approach as an option of conducting social science research besides the quantitative approach, which is not only dominant but often regarded in Kenya as “the correct way” to do research. We start by identifying an approach as a key aspect of any research design; secondly, we explain the need for consistency between an approach and the paradigm within which a study is conceptualised. Thirdly, we highlight the consistency between the qualitative approach and the relativist-interpretivist/constructivist paradigm in research. We then trace the development of the qualitative approach in the social sciences, particularly in education, highlight the common methods used in qualitative research, the techniques of data generation and data analysis. We expect that this paper will sufficiently highlight qualitative research in the Kenyan context to enable our postgraduate students, and indeed all researchers in the social sciences to read further about its features with a view to adopting the approach to study issues that do not lend themselves to the more prevalent quantitative approach.*

Key words: *research, social science, qualitative research, educational research.*

I. Introduction

The word research is used by different people to mean different activities or sets of activities. We define it after a number of writers as a deliberate, purposeful, systematic, critical, trustworthy and ethical process of inquiry that is undertaken to make a worthwhile contribution to knowledge within a particular aspect of life. In the field of education, and particularly for our purposes in this paper, such a process is intended to facilitate further understanding of any aspect that is related specifically or broadly to the teaching and learning process (e.g. Basseys' 1999; Gilham, 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Nunan, 1992). The key words to underline in this definition are deliberate (meaning that it is a conscious effort and not done by chance); purposeful (meaning designed to achieve particular aims or to answer specific questions); systematic (meaning that the study follows a well laid out design of inquiry); critical (making use of carefully reasoned and justifiable procedures); trustworthy (that the reader can trust the findings and conclusions of the study as being convincingly based on the study); and ethical (that a study is conducted with the informed consent of the participants, necessary, anonymity is guaranteed, honesty is ensured and no harm is posed to all the people involved).

To ensure that any piece of research meets the definition (and implied characteristics) stated above, it is necessary to have a clear research design in mind. We define a research design as a broad conceptualisation of the entire research process encompassing research questions (or aims), paradigm, approach, method, sampling, data generation procedures and the relationships between them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Litchman, 2006; Silverman, 2006; Yin, 2003). Very briefly put, the research questions are fundamental expressions of intent for the researcher and must be clear and answerable within the time and resources at the disposal of the researcher.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm means the sets of abstract views of knowledge and the process of creating that knowledge, which provide a foundation for the entire design and what the researcher makes of the findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln explain that a paradigm indicates a researcher's philosophical leaning noting that some paradigms may not be explicit but they will still influence the research process. Citing Bateson (1972:320), they note that all researchers are philosophers in that “universal sense in which all human beings... are guided by highly abstract principles”. According to these writers, the two main philosophical concepts that govern researchers' principles and practices are ontology and epistemology. Ontology may be defined as the nature of being or reality; while epistemology refers to the way being or reality or knowledge is studied, understood and/or interpreted (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Lichtman, 2006; Richards, 2003; Mason, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that principles about these philosophical concepts determine the way the researcher perceives the world and approaches research activities.

According to Richards (2003) there are two main paradigms ontologically: realism and relativism. Richards explains that the realist perspective looks at the world as a real one that has rules and regulations that govern behaviour. The relativist, on the other hand, holds that there is no single position or reality that is not

dependent on human understanding and that people construct meanings and behaviour in different ways; hence different realities (p.34). The ontological positions tend to be consistent with certain epistemological orientations. Broadly, there are two rather extreme stances, although along that continuum, there are various positions. These broad epistemological orientations could be identified as the “positivist/post-positivist stance on one side and the constructivist-interpretive” stance on the other (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:22). They have also been referred to as “objectivist” and “subjectivist”, respectively (Richards, 2003:35). explaining the main difference between these epistemological orientations, Richards notes that it can be said that the realist believes in the existence of an objective truth which is possible to attain, while the relativist takes a subjective position – the view that knowledge is constructed as people (e.g. teachers and learners) interact (p.35).

To explain these positions briefly and broadly, from the research point of view, the positivist stance is that there is an objective reality or truth that can be attained using well established procedures and that the information thus obtained from a representative sample of a population in a valid and reliable way is generalisable to the universal population from which the sample was taken (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Richards, 2003;). On the other hand, constructivist-interpretivist stance is that “reality is socially constructed, so the focus of research should be on understanding of this construction and the multiple perspectives it implies... An understanding of this develops interpretively as research proceeds” (Richards, 2003:38). Some researchers have suggested that it is important that researchers in social sciences show awareness of their philosophical paradigms, and acknowledge their orientations towards them, so that their studies can be read against a particular position (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2002; Lichtman, 2006; Richards, 2003). Creswell suggests that “individuals preparing a research proposal or plan make explicit the larger philosophical ideas they espouse” (p.32). We do not have space in this paper to dwell much on the paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Creswell (2007) and Lichtman (2006) are examples of texts that explore this issue in great detail and we recommend them for further readings.

After stating the research questions and deciding (explicitly or implicitly) the paradigm in which to operate, the next level of decision making at the point of design is then the approach. This is a word that does not enjoy a universal definition or use in research literature. For purposes of this paper, we suggest that there are mainly three approaches to research in the social sciences, especially in education. These are the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach and currently gaining momentum is the mixed-methods approach (involving some sort of blend of the quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this paper, we are concerned with the development of the qualitative approach, which we now turn to.

II. What is the Qualitative Approach to Research?

The term qualitative is defined variously for different purposes. In terms of research, it has been used to mean different sets of activities, some of which are consistent while others may have amounted to misuse of the term (Silverman, 2005). There have also been questions on what qualitative research really constitutes and how exactly it differs from quantitative research. As Mason (2002:2) points out: “there is no consensus on these questions, and we should not be surprised by this, because qualitative research – whatever it might be – certainly is not a unified set of techniques or philosophies, and indeed has grown out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions”. Denzin and Lincoln (2005:2) assert that “qualitative research is a field in its own right that cross cuts disciplines, fields and subject matter (and that it is) a complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions surround the term qualitative research” (ibid). So, what exactly do we mean by the qualitative approach to research? We adopt the definition by Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:10) who define it as an approach that:

Implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on process and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between researcher and what is studied, the situational constraints that shape inquiry.

Qualitative research is guided by the principles that research can be subjective, particular, and context-based and need not necessarily be based on simple random samples and be generalisable (Nunan, 1992; Richards, 2009/2003). Qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Mason (2002) point out that qualitative research, as a set of interpretive activities, privileges no single methodological practice over another. It has no theory or paradigm that is distinctively its own. It claims use of multiple paradigms, methods and strategies; from constructivists, to cultural studies, feminism, Marxism, and other ethnic models of study. It also does not belong to any single discipline. As such each method used bears traces of its disciplinary history. Therefore, next we now trace the historical developments in qualitative research specifically in education.

Developments of Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences

Denzin and Lincoln (2005:3) trace the development of qualitative research from the 1900s to the present. With reference to research in North America and Europe, they divide the rise of qualitative research into eight stages which overlap and simultaneously operate in the present;

- The traditional age, 1900-1950-associated with the positivist- foundational paradigm
- The modernist or golden age, 1950-1970
- Blurred genres 1970-1986
- The crisis of representation, 1986-1990
- The post-modern- a period of experimental and new ethnographies 1990-1995- associated with a new sensibility, doubt and a refusal to privilege any method or theory.
- The post-experimental inquiry, 1995-2000
- The methodologically contested present 2000-2004
- The fractured future which is now, 2005-

The traditional period was associated with positivist paradigm in which researchers were concerned with “offering valid, reliable, and objective interpretations of their writings. In their language, the ‘other’ whom they studied was alien, foreign, and strange” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:15) and popularly referred to as ‘subjects’. The positivists argued that there is reality out there to be studied, to be captured and understood.

Between 1950 and 1970 (the modernist or the golden age) questions started to emerge regarding the approaches to research used by the positivists, especially with the appearance of a group of researchers that have come to be referred to as post-positivists. The post-positivists argued that reality could never be fully apprehended; only approximated. Post-positivism relied on multiple methods as a way of capturing as much of reality as possible. At the same time, it emphasised the discovery and the verification of theories. During this age, a variety of new interpretive, qualitative perspectives were taken up, including hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, phenomenology, cultural studies, and feminism. Thus it was marked by social realism and naturalism. The modernist researcher attempted rigorous qualitative study of important social processes, including deviance and social control in the classroom and society.

Other writers have also traced the development of qualitative research, especially in education from what were predominantly quantitative approaches such as experiments and surveys to the modern age (e.g. Atkinson et al., 1993; Bird et al., 1993; Freebody, 2003). Bird et al. (1993) point out that the rise of qualitative approaches was because of what was considered as the failings of quantitative approaches;

In particular, it was argued that, although the numerical evidence produced by quantitative research looks similar in kind to that used in the natural sciences, and therefore appears authoritative, there were some fundamental doubts about whether it represents accurately what it claims to represent (p.10).

Atkinson et al. (1993), like Bird et al. trace the rise of qualitative research in education in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the expansion of the university and college sectors at a time when there was widespread questioning of educational and other orthodoxies. They argue that many scholars developed approaches to educational research which refused to take conventional educational wisdom for granted and set out to explore what happens in schools from the point of view of the participants.

Similarly, Freebody (2003:35) argues that qualitative research grew in popularity out of a particular concern with the ways in which quantitative research methods and their attendant techniques evident in experimental and survey research in the Social Sciences were being applied to the study of education. It was out of the feel that the research activities structured through the logics of quantification left out a lot of interesting and potentially consequential things about the phenomena - not just in terms of the concerns and understandings of the educators, but also in terms of the richness of the accounts of educators’ experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that during the 1970s to the mid 1980s (referred to as the blurred genres) qualitative researchers had a full complement of paradigms, methods and strategies to employ in their research. Theories ranged from symbolic interactionism to constructivism, naturalistic inquiry, positivism, postpositivism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, critical theory, semiotics, structuralism, feminism and various ethnic/racial paradigms. Applied qualitative research was gaining in stature. Research strategies and formats of reporting research ranged from grounded theory to case study to methods of historical, ethnography, action and clinical research. Diverse ways of collecting and analysing empirical materials were also available including qualitative interviewing (open –ended and quasi-structured) and observational visual, personal experiences and documentary methods.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to the next five years - from the mid 1980s to about 1990 - as the period of the crisis of representation during which researchers struggled with how to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive tests. According to the writers, at this point, the humanists migrated to the social sciences, searching for new social theory, new way to study popular culture and its local, ethnographic contexts. Researchers became more reflexive and called into question the issues of gender, class and race. Qualitative

researchers sought new methods of truth, method and representation. Issues of validity, reliability and objectivity previously believed to be settled were once more problematic. Similarly, pattern and interpretive theories, as opposed to causal linear theories were more common.

Then, there followed the post-modern and post experimental period, which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) were defined in part by the concern for literary and the narrative turn, a concern for story-telling and for composing ethnographies in new ways. It was shaped by a new sensibility, by doubt, by refusal to privilege any method. Researchers continued to move away from experimental and quasi-experimental criteria. Alternative criteria were sought that might prove evocative, moral, and rooted in contextual understandings. The concept of aloof observer was abandoned. More action, participatory and activist-oriented research was on the horizon. The search for grand theories was being replaced by more local small scale approaches fitted to specific problems and situations.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also identify the periods from 2000 to 2005 and from 2005 to the present as key in the development of qualitative approach to research. Referred to as the methodologically contested period and fractured future, respectively, these periods are concerned with moral discourse and with the development of sacred textualities. There is an increasing endeavour in the social sciences in general and education in particular to explore critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community. This period is associated with the evidence-based social movement and more sensitivity to the context in research as well more emphasis on reflexivity.

These development of qualitative research as explained above confirm the argument that the approach cuts across all the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and, in some cases the physical sciences. Its practitioners are variously committed to modern, post-modern, and post-experimental sensibilities and the approaches to social research that these sensibilities imply.

Today, qualitative research is accepted as a viable option in studying education. Richards (2009), citing Lazaraton (2003) is categorical that qualitative research “has come of age” (p.148). He argues that qualitative research has made it possible to view and study phenomena in education and other social sciences in ways that were not feasible about two decades ago and that there are likely to be even more developments in the new millennium. Based on a review of research trends in qualitative research since 2000, Richards (2009) summarises the main tenets of this approach at present, explaining that qualitative research is:

- Locally situated (it studies human participants in natural settings and conditions, eschewing artificially constructed situations);
- Participant-oriented (it is sensitive to, and seeks to understand, participants perspectives on their world);
- Holistic (it is context sensitive and does not study isolated aspects independently of the situations in which they occur);
- Inductive (it depends on a process of interpretation that involves immersion in the data and draw on different perspectives. (p.149).

Following the review on developments in the qualitative research and the current understanding, we define the qualitative research as a flexible approach that seeks to generate and analyse holistic data on an issue of interest or concern (e.g. in education) using sufficiently rigorous, trustworthy and ethical methods and techniques. The data is then presented using a thick description that includes participants’ voices and interpreted in a reflexive, iterative but systematic manner that pays attention to the unique circumstances of the context and participants and acknowledges the options available to the researcher. With this definition in mind, next, we explain in more detail the features of the qualitative approach.

Features of the Qualitative Approach

In the introduction, we briefly explained the meaning of a research design, pointing out the need for a researcher to consider the paradigm within which they are working. Building on what that explanation, we would like to point out that qualitative research is generally more consistent with the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm (sometimes called relativist), which in brief posits that knowledge (especially in the social sciences) is essentially based on human interpretation and construction and is in many cases relative to different contexts and circumstances. Based on this view, qualitative research (hereafter QUAL) has the features discussed below.

QUAL Focuses on Natural Settings

Hammersley, et al. (2001:49) observe that qualitative research is concerned with “life as it is lived, things as they happen, situation as they are constructed in the day-to-day moment”. Thus, qualitative researchers seek lived experiences in real situations. In general, they try not to disturb the scene and aim to be unobtrusive in their methods. This is an attempt to ensure that data and analysis will closely reflect what is happening. In this case the situations are deemed important because they influence behaviour and so there is a need to preserve the natural environment where the research is conducted as much as is practicable.

Because of this, some qualitative researchers prefer a fairly lengthy and deep involvement in the natural setting. They argue that social life is complex in its range and variability, and also operates at different layers. That is, social life has many layers and meanings. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole. Giving an example of a school, Hammersley, et al. maintain that a researcher who stays in a school for one or two weeks might discover more than a casual visitor about how the school really works, for the public façade cannot be maintained for long. “A longer stay is needed and much work is necessary, however, to develop the knowledge, skills and trust that will permit entry into innermost arenas and confidences” (Hammersley, et al., 2001:51).

Closely linked to focus on natural setting is an elaborate description of the setting. As Stake (1995: 63) argues, to develop vicarious experiences for the reader, to give them a sense of ‘being there’, then physical situation should be well described. The entry-ways, the halls, the rooms, the landscape, its place on the map should all be described. There should be a balance between the uniqueness and the ordinariness of the place. Methodologically, a focus on natural settings means that:

- Firstly, maintaining a certain openness of mind, not pre-judging the matter, nor necessarily settling for first or even second appearances. As in all research, curiosity should be fostered, in this case to see beneath the various layers. What is presented is carefully noted, but the status to be attached to it is temporarily suspended. Guesses might be made, tested along the way and abandoned, changed or revised in the light of new discoveries.
- Secondly, in its purest form, this kind of investigation is conducted in an actual situation of the object of study and over a period of time. Depending on the area under investigation, it can take months or years working in the ‘field’ - but there is also room for small scale interviews.
- Thirdly, this mode of study has implications for the relationships the researcher fosters with participants in the research. People are unlikely to allow total strangers into their private and confidential gatherings, or to tell them their innermost thoughts and secrets without certain guarantees. They must be backed by certain trust in the researcher reflected in the ‘rapport’ traditionally developed between the researcher and the participants.

QUAL is Interested in Meanings, Perspectives and Understandings

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995/2007) point out that the qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations and what their perspectives are on particular issues. Just as situations can influence perspectives, so perspectives can help determine situations. For example, the way students perceive the school may always be different from that of the teachers, and similar teaching conditions may also be perceived and interpreted differently by different students.

As a result, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995/2007) argue that the methods employed have to be sensitive to the perspectives of all the participants. “In addition, the research methods must pick up the interaction between perspectives and situations to see how they bear on each other” (Hammersley et al., 2001:52). Hammersley et al. assert that researchers must also sample across time, since the same items or activities may mean different things on different occasions. For example, the researcher in a school who takes the students perspective only, may conclude that teachers are unreasonable but if the teachers’ views are taken into consideration then the students would be blamed for disorder. Therefore, qualitative researchers work to obtain ‘inside’ knowledge of the social life under study. If they are to understand people’s outlooks and experiences, researchers must be close to groups, live with them, look at the world from their viewpoints, see them in various situations, and in various moods, appreciate the inconsistencies, ambiguities and contradictions in their behaviour, explore the nature and extent of their interests, understand their relationship among themselves and other groups. In short, the researchers should, if possible, adopt the roles of the people being studied.

In essence, the researcher tries to appreciate the culture of these groups. The task is to try to capture the meanings that permeate the culture as understood by the participants. Equally, close monitoring of scenes is required if we are to identify their inner mysteries. Understandings among pupils and teachers can become extremely recondite, triggered by the briefest signals among them, which are inaccessible to outsiders.

QUAL Places Emphasis on Processes

Hammersley, et al. (2001:55) argue that educational research in the 1950s and 1960s was strongly interested in input and output factors, such as parental social class and academic achievements, and in measuring the relationship between the two. Qualitative researchers by contrast, are concerned with what goes on in between the input and the output, that is, with process. They are interested in how understandings are formed, how meanings are negotiated, how roles are developed, how a curriculum works out, how a policy is formulated and implemented and how pupils become deviant. The researcher attempts to penetrate the layers of meaning and to uncover and identify the range and depth of situations and perspectives that apply in the area

under study. This has been called “thick description”, which Ponterotto (2006) defines as: the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed action...describing fully the participants of the study without compromising anonymity...describing the setting and procedures in adequate detail [that] provides a context for understanding the study’s results...adequate ‘voice’ of participants [and] a thickly described discussion section... [that] merges the participants’ lived experiences with the researchers interpretations of these experiences (pp.543-547)

Therefore, qualitative approach reveals in fine detail just how change occurred in day-to-day activities, negotiations and decisions. They are designed to grasp the complexity and flux of social life. They may reveal that some forms of behaviour are fairly stable, others variable, others emergent and developmental. Some forms of interaction proceed in stages, and the research methods need to encompass each stage and its place in the whole.

QUAL Uses Inductive Analysis and Grounded Theory

Hammersley et al. (2001) also identify inductive analysis and grounded theory as some of the main features of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers do not on the whole, start with a theory which they can aim to test and prove or disprove, though there is not reason why they should not do that if they wished (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They mainly work the other way round, seeking to generate theory from data. The theory is then said to be grounded in the social activity it purports to explain (Glaser and Strauss 1967 cited by Hammersley et al., 2001:57). However, not all qualitative researchers are concerned with generation or test of theory. The thick description typically produced is often termed “theoretical description”. It might involve the generation of an idea or concept that offers to cast new light on the activity under study. Once an activity or process has been identified in this way, one can study the conditions that give rise to the activity, the context in which it is embedded and how it is managed. Equally, predictive theories can be developed from this kind of analysis and they can then be tested.

QUAL Tends to Work with Unstructured Data

Qualitative research also tends to work with unstructured data. That is, with data that have not been coded at the point of collection in terms of a closed set of analytical categories or formally constructed scale (Bird et al, 1993). For example, in using interviews and observation, qualitative researchers use audio- or video-recordings of what happens or write detailed open-ended field notes, rather than coding behaviour in terms of a set of categories, or rating them on a scale as would be the case in a quantitative research. Similarly, when interviewing, open-ended questions are often asked rather than questions requiring choices from pre-specified answers.

QUAL Works with a Relatively Small Number of Cases

Silverman (2005) argues that qualitative research tends to work with a relatively small number of cases. As such, qualitative researchers are prepared to sacrifice scope for detail. However, we acknowledge that what amounts to small number of cases and detail, may appear relative. Qualitative research involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural and social setting (Litchman, 2006) which can only work better when dealing with a few participants. Mason (2002) also explains that “whether or not the sample is big enough to be statistically representative of a total population is not your major concern” (p.134). She argues that in this type of research “the key question to ask is whether your sample provides access to enough data, and with the right focus, to enable you to address your research questions” (ibid).

Related to the issue of number of participants is the question of sampling. Mason (2002) defines sampling as the way through which the people who will be the sources of data are chosen and accessed. She reiterates that this process needs to be done carefully because it has implications for the trustworthiness of the findings. Mason acknowledges that “the conventions of sampling in qualitative research are less clear-cut or well established than for statistical and quantitative research” (p.124). That notwithstanding, she explains that sampling in qualitative research is mainly guided by two principles - practicality and focus of the study. She therefore suggests sampling strategically (our italics) which she defines as sampling that targets a relevant range of contexts, participants or characteristics related to the issue under investigation. She supports this type of sampling as follows:

One of the driving logics of some forms of qualitative research is that whatever it is we seek to investigate, it is likely to be complex, nuanced, situated and contextual. If we sample strategically across a range of contexts, we increase our chances of being able to use that very detail not only to understand how things work in specific contexts, but also how things work differently or similarly in relevant contexts. From there we may be able to develop cross contextual generalities which are very well founded because they are based on the strategic comparison of sensitive and rich understandings of specific contexts, whose significance in relation to a wider universe we can demonstrate (p.125).

Mason's suggestion above is similar to that of Stake (2005) who indicates that "for qualitative fieldwork, we draw a purposive (our italics) sample, building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study.... That may mean taking the most accessible or the one we can spend most time with" (p.451). The major aim of sampling in qualitative research is to identify participants who are likely to give rich and in-depth information on the issue being studied so that we learn the most about it (Dörnyei, 2007). Creswell (2007) suggests that the need "to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process or event" under study and also to go for accessible cases (p.75). For example, in a study of student teacher learning during the practicum, it would be important that the researcher samples from the three categories of participants involved: student teachers, cooperating teachers and educators so as to provide various perspectives.

There is Need for Reflexivity in QUAL

Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999: 228).

There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. 'Personal reflexivity' involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. 'Epistemological reflexivity' requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found?' How has the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings (Willig, 2001).

Criticism of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has been criticised by some writers – mostly those in qualitative approach for lacking in rigour and exactness or even objectivity (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Gillham, 2000; Mason, 2002; Richards, 2003; Yin, 2003). Stake (1995), for example, cites Miles (1979) who had referred to qualitative data as 'an attractive nuisance'. Gillham (2000: 10) notes that "qualitative methods are essentially descriptive and inferential in character and, for this reason, are often seen as 'soft'. But description and inference are also necessary in 'scientific' research".

Bird, et al. (1993) also observe that the criticisms on the qualitative approach are often formulated as a conflict between the positivist assumptions of quantitative research and the very different assumptions, sometimes referred to as 'naturalistic', 'interpretive' or 'phenomenological'. However, Bird et al. note that the philosophy of qualitative research stresses the way that people's perspectives of the world shape their actions, and these perspectives are diverse.

Qualitative researches have also been criticised for being impressionistic, subjective, biased, and idiosyncratic and lacking in precision (Hammersley, et al., 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Although this is a charge that can be made of particular studies, Hammersley et al. (2001) suggest that there are rigorous procedures available to withstand this charge, such as triangulation, due attention to sampling, documentation, appropriate claims, reflectivity and tightness of fit between data generation, analysis, and theory formulation.

Therefore, as expected, such criticisms have been countered vigorously by qualitative researchers. Richards (2003:6) notes that 'qualitative inquiry is anything but a soft option because it demands rigour, precision, systematicity and careful attention to detail'. Perhaps one of the strongest defences of qualitative research we have come across is by Berliner (2002), that:

In this hardest-to-do science, educators often need knowledge of the particular – the local – while in the easier-to-do sciences the aim is for more general knowledge. A science that must always be sure the myriad particulars are well understood is harder to build than a science that can focus on the regularities of nature across contexts. The latter kind of science will always have a better chance to understand, predict, and control the phenomena they study' (p.19).

In our view any criticism of a study or studies – whether qualitative or quantitative based on lack of systematicity, rigour, detail, trustworthiness, poor ethical considerations or misplaced interpretations are fine because members of the research community must safeguard standards of practice. Nevertheless, we reiterate that it is important to critique qualitative research based on an understanding of its paradigmatic orientation, methodological, analytical and interpretive processes.

III. Methods in Qualitative Research

Closely related to the point above, in the introduction, we suggested that the next issue to consider after deciding on an approach is the method. This is another word that is used variously and in some research literature, it is used to refer to what we call techniques of data generation in this paper, such as interviews, observations, document analysis and focus-group discussion. In this paper, we use the method in qualitative research to refer to what the researcher feels s/he is doing: that is are you immersing yourself to some degree in the life of a people (ethnography)? Are you taking a detailed look at an aspect or aspects of the phenomenon under study (case study)? Are you exploring the daily records of the participants on a particular issue as captured by themselves or others (narrative research)? Are you comparing the manifestation of one issue to another (comparative study)? Or are you analysing one text or more on a particular subject (text analysis) and so on. We consider method to be a broader level of a research design than techniques. That notwithstanding, it is important to point out that there are several overlaps within what might be called different methods and in some studies, one or more methods are employed. For example, one might do an ethnographic case study. The most important point in the use of research terminology is consistency. Having explained that, we shall briefly define a few methods used in qualitative approach. A more detailed discussion of these is contained in our book on qualitative research (Jwan and Ong'ondo, forthcoming).

Ethnography

Creswell (2007:68) defines ethnography as: “a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and language of a culture-sharing group - as both a process and an outcome of research”. Creswell explains that ethnography as a process involves a more or less prolonged encounter with the participants in their own setting, usually through participant observation. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:3) advance the same view on ethnography as one of the many approaches of qualitative research which usually:

involves the researcher participating overtly or covertly in people' daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are emerging focus of inquiry.

Thus an ethnographic method is grounded in commitment to first hand experience and exploration of a particular social setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation (Mason, 2002). Mason adds that in ethnographic studies researchers see people and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings as the primary data sources. The analysis of data involves interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local and wider context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Pole and Morrison, 2003). Ethnographers stress that “we move within social worlds, and that to understand the behaviour, values and meanings of any given individual (or group), we must take account of their cultural context” (Walford, 2008:7). In this respect, ethnography balances attention to the sometimes minute everyday detail of individual lives with wider social structures.

Jeffrey and Troman (2004) and Hammersley (2006) observe that current ethnographic studies, especially in educational institutions, tend to move from the older anthropological model of ethnographic fieldwork where a researcher would be in the field for years to its more recent forms in which we study only parts of people's lives over relatively short periods. They refer to these as ethnographic time modes, which may be considered as different types of ethnography.

Case Study

A case study may be defined as a piece of research which “involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (Creswell, 2007:73). It is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon or object within its real-life context (Yin, 2003). We acknowledge that there are many different, sometimes conflicting definitions of case study (our italics) and some scholars may not even look at it as a method (VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). However, we agree with Creswell (2007) that a case study can be viewed as a method within the qualitative approach.

Practically, case study typically involves an in-depth observation of a case. That is “a specific bounded system” (Stake (1995:1). A case can be an individual unit such as a student, a family, a school, an entire culture and is used to gain in-depth understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2009; Gerring, 2007; Litchman, 2006; Silverman, 2005). Silverman (2005:126) argues that “the basic idea is that one case (or perhaps a small number of cases) is studied in detail, using whatever methods seem appropriate”. He adds that whilst researchers may have a variety of purposes for their study as well as research questions, the general objective is to develop as full an understanding of that case as possible. It is therefore ideally suited to the needs and resources of a small

scale researcher (Blaxter, et al., 2001). Silverman (2005) and Stake, (1995/2005) identify different types of case study. These are:

- The Intrinsic case study where the case is of interest ... in all its particularity and ordinariness. In the intrinsic case study, no attempt is made to generalise beyond the single case or even to build theories.
- The instrumental case in which a case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to revise a generalisation. Although the case selected is studied in depth, the main focus is on something else.
- The collective or multiple case study where a number of cases are studied in order to investigate some general phenomenon.

Narrative Method

A narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her/his audience. According to Moen (2006), narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives. Narrative research is thus the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). It is a relatively new branch within the qualitative approach or interpretive research tradition. When reading about narratives and narrative research, one is left with the impression that the focus of attention becomes diffuse, spreading in many directions. Very often, the concept of narrative is used in connection with how to represent a qualitative research study. Thus, it is maintained that a case study, a biographical study, a phenomenological study or an ethnographic study may have a narrative form of representation (Creswell, 1998).

Narrative research focuses on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. According to Carter (1993), human beings come to understand sorrow or love or joy in particularly rich ways through the characters and incidents we become familiar with in novels or plays. The richness and nuances cannot be expressed in definitions or abstract propositions. They can only be demonstrated or evoked through storytelling. Narratives are therefore inevitably linked to language. The narration of experience comes naturally, like learning a language. Stories cannot be viewed simply as abstract structures isolated from their cultural context. They must be seen as rooted in society and as experienced and performed by individuals in cultural settings (Bruner, 1984). Human knowledge and personal identities are therefore continually constructed and revised.

In narrative research, stories of experience are shaped through discussions with the research subject in a dialogue. A number of techniques of generating data can be used, as the researcher and the participants work together in this collaborative dialogic relationship. Data can be in the form of field notes; journal records; interview transcripts; one's own and other's observations; storytelling; letter writing; autobiographical writing; documents such as school and class plans, newsletters, and other texts, such as rules and principles; and pictures.

Data Generation Techniques in Qualitative Approach

In this section we only mention some of the techniques used for data generation within the qualitative approach. As we said about the methods, these are discussed in more detail in our forthcoming book. These data generation techniques include interviews (usually semi structured) and observations (again semi structured) involving working from some general guidelines on issues to focus on but staying open to all related issues that emerge during the study. We discussed the use of **interviews** and **observations** in more detail in a paper published in an earlier volume of this journal (see, Barasa, L.P., Ong'ondo, C. O. Jwan, J. O. and Agumba, M.N. (2008). The use of interview and observation as data collection methods in educational research. *The Educator: A Journal of School of Education, Moi University*, 2(1); 27-38). Other common techniques of data generation in this approach are **focus group discussions**, which are defined as collective conversations or group interviews (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005), informal conversations in which researchers can also talk informally with the participants, for example to explore issues that emerge from observations (Pole and Morrison, 2003), **document analysis**, which is usually of much value in corroborating data from other sources (Yin, 2003) and **journals**, which in a nutshell are entries in personal diaries or blogs (Bailey, 1990) or simply put, are "notes made by the research participants on their experiences" (Bassey, 1999: 83). Bassey calls journals a 'variant of observation' (p.83).

Analysing Qualitative Data

Hammersley, et al. (2001) point out that in qualitative research, it is not easy to be precise in the initial stages of planning about the nature of the analytic techniques which will be employed. This is because such techniques are rather less formalised than in the case of quantitative research, and because of the inductive nature of qualitative research. The goals of the analysis are to "reflect the complexity of human interaction by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others" (Rubin and Rubin 2005:210).

There are different techniques of data analysis used within the qualitative approach. These include the use of elements of the grounded theory, thematic analysis, discourse analysis and content analysis. Again, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed explanation of these techniques. In this paper, we only briefly explain the technique that is commonly used in educational research –thematic analysis. As the name implies, thematic analysis is the search for themes of relevance to the research topic under which reasonably large amounts of data from different sources - such as observations, interviews and documents - can be organised (Hammersley et al., 2001). Braun and Clarke (2006) observe that thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. They add that:

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently, it goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic (p.78).

Using thematic analysis is done first by reading and listing the patterns of experience from the transcribed data and field notes then identifying all the data that illustrate the patterns (Aronson, 1994). Related patterns are then combined into themes. Aronson suggests that the themes that emerge from the informants responses should be pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience, adding that the researcher should build a valid argument for choosing the themes by reading and making inferences from the literature. The themes may concern the preoccupations of the people studied, recurrent features of their behaviour, key policy issues and so on (Hammersley et al., 2001). It aims to ‘understand’ rather than ‘know’ the data (Marks and Yardley, 2004). The coding process (identifying and grouping together key issues in the data) depends on whether the themes are more ‘data-driven’ (emerging from the data) or ‘theory-driven’ (approaching the data with specific questions in mind that the researcher wishes to code around) (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These researchers point out that a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. Whilst some of the themes can be derived from the literature (theoretical) others can be derived from the data (inductive). Thus, as Marks and Yardley (2004) emphasise, thematic analysis provides a good audit trail from data collection to synthesis of results.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper we have highlighted some of the key issues that we need to consider when conducting qualitative research in education. We have particularly paid attention to the features of qualitative research in education, highlighted the methods used within the qualitative approach, techniques of data generation and procedures of data analysis. In conclusion, we wish to emphasise that we have only scratched the surfaces of the issues mentioned because they require more detailed discussion than can be covered in this paper. Nevertheless, we are confident that the debates and contentions that we bring to the fore can generate enough curiosity in many educational researchers who may want to venture into qualitative research. Most importantly, we expect that this paper has succeeded in introducing the qualitative approach as a viable option to carrying out research in education. In particular, we hope that this paper will enable postgraduate students in our universities to use qualitative approach in studying issues that do not seem to lend themselves to the dominant quantitative approach. In other words, we hope that we shall see less attempts to force quantitative procedures (especially statistical tools) in studying issues of a qualitative nature. Finally, we suggest further reading of the qualitative approach starting with accessible texts such as Creswell (2007), Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), Litchman (2006) and Mason (2002) and the many other publications that are listed in the references section.

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