

MODULE CODE: BMPF7005

TITLE: Undertaking Research in Workplaces

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Critically evaluate a range of methodological approaches, research designs, and research methods appropriate to gather data from complex work-based settings, with due consideration to research ethics and issues of insider research.

Introduction:

Having graduated with a first degree in Music education 14 years ago, I am currently employed in a Church primary school in Malta. A situation, which might be described as having secured a job for life, and where prospects of career progression are very limited. Furthermore, any possibilities of career progression are not directly linked to my development as a music teacher. This practically proves that my motivation to pursue educational research in music education is a naive desire to identify ways which can tangibly improve the teaching and learning that takes place in my class. However, given that along the years I have continued with my academic professional development, this naïveté is harnessed with an awareness that research needs to be done systematically and that although my principal desire is to simply identify the link between variables that have a direct impact on the effectiveness and efficacy of my teaching, I acknowledge, that the most useful research is that which can be generalized to generate theory (Gray, 2004, p. 5). Hence, this study will present a discussion of ontological and epistemological viewpoints with an exploration of a paradigm approach and its link to the real-world scenario, in which various research methods and methodologies will be evaluated. Ethics will also be considered, especially because in the end, research aimed to impact classroom practice is likely to impact the children's experience at some point.

Epistemological and Ontological Viewpoints

Siegel (2017) argues that education is an epistemological concept by its very own nature, mostly because of the central role of rationality in one's search for truth. With epistemology being "the theory of knowledge and justification" (Audi, 2003, p.1), one might be led to think that it is a straightforward concept based on justification of beliefs that can be proven. However, as the subject of what truth is has also been put into question (Horsthemke, 2019), one can also understand that the possibility for the existence of multiple epistemological dimensions has emerged. Siegel (2006) acknowledges that different communities may find justification for their beliefs which may not hold for other communities; however, he cautions against accepting "epistemological diversity", specifically because, in accepting subjective interpretation it dilutes the values upheld in epistemological research. Greene (1994) discusses this tension between the knowledge of truth as an abstract and absolute concept, and truth as perceived within different realities throughout the history of mankind. This is

done through a historical journey starting with the concept as presented in ancient literature, with an emphasis on how 'he' as a masculine being needed to transcend emotions to be able to find truth and eventually presenting the feminist approaches which certainly do not find the 'he' element as essential to finding truth.

In contemplating the epistemological value of my research, I could identify the need for justification of the knowledge I obtain both through any data I collect, and through the reading and analysis of literature. However, as outlined in the introduction, my primary aim is to bring improvement to the teaching and learning that takes place in my classroom setting, hence, I see myself as an action researcher whose aim is not to "add to the store of knowledge", but to find ways of "improving social behavior and encouraging social change" (Gray, 2004, pp.373 - 374). This, I feel, gives weight to the fact that in identifying ways to bring such change, the knowledge gained through the research, must be made relevant to the reality of the school community I work in (Bell et al. 2014, pp.24-25). This belief is effectively illustrated through a vignette in Aróstegui et al. (2004 p.4), in which they show how in a postmodern world, where learners construct their own knowledge as they make meaning of situations, one cannot force a particular curriculum that is detached from the learners' reality simply because that curriculum is epistemologically considered correct. Grimm (2006) addresses this issue and suggests that 'understanding' is a component of knowledge, and as the distinction between "assenting" to factual knowledge and "grasping" that knowledge is made, one can conclude that the need for knowledge to be relevant is justified, and therefore, epistemologically correct.

In relation to this, it is also advantageous to consider the ontological viewpoint of the research to be undertaken. Being an educational research project, when considering the ontological aspect of the research, one is lead to search for a definition of the social world (Wood and Smith, 2016, p.115). In doing so, and in view of the epistemological position preferred, it is safe to acknowledge my personal preference to lean towards a subjective ontological approach. This does not result from a personal bias, but from an understanding that classroom settings are themselves social constructs that create norms and expectations for individuals, particularly for the children who become students, and the teachers whose identities are defined by their roles in classroom settings (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000). This reflection is in fact a key to criticize my own assumption that I am in pursuit of improving the teaching and learning that takes place in my classroom setting, because in order to do so, I realize the need to first define what constitutes learning. By refusing any assumptions

I am making, I need to factor in the ontological perceptions of my pupils themselves, besides considering their own cultural realities in order to construct an ideal that could possibly be beyond my own imagination (Pahl, 2019). This is effectively explained by Park (2017) who refers to Higgins' (2012, pp.3-6) ethnomusicological study that shows that while it is generally accepted that European classical music is often considered to be the global standard, such a musical ontology completely fails to answer the question of what music is in non-Western countries. This is probably very relevant to school contexts such as the one I operate in where diversity and inclusion have become key concepts.

Research Paradigms

Atieno (2009, p.13), who defines the word paradigm to mean "either approach or design", progresses to explain that the distinction between the qualitative and the quantitative paradigm is not a different methodology to reach the same end. On the contrary, researchers within the two paradigms choose to work within the specific paradigm because the philosophy behind their research is qualitative or quantitative by its very own nature. Quantitative research is generally accepted to be more intrinsically concrete, and, given that it deals specifically with numerical data that can be measured and proven statistically, it is sometimes also accepted to be more objective than qualitative research (Castellan, 2010). The latter type of research investigates the situation from the researcher's viewpoint (Williams, 2007 p.67) and so this adds the possibility of bias. Because of this, as from the mid-twentieth century, there has been a shift towards a preference for scientific research rather than general, philosophical, humanities-oriented research (Jorgensen and Ward-Steinmen, 2015). Reflecting upon this, I realize that, just as much as I am primarily interested in research that benefits my pupils, I also seek that any research I undertake is academically solid, and so, I feel that knowledge of this shift in preference, adds some weight to my consideration of the quantitative paradigm in a reality where I must admit my bias in favour of qualitative research. My leaning towards qualitative research is partly triggered by a fear of handling numerical data, primarily because of my lack of training in the field. However, one would be erring to assume that a quantitative research eliminates the problem of subjectivity, because after all, research is not just the gathering of data, but also includes its analysis and interpretation (Williams, 2007, p.65). Thus, in its last stage, the researcher's bias may impact the research nonetheless.

Furthermore, the many facets of education and their interrelatedness also influence the research paradigms best suited for educational research. This is explained by Husen (1988) who describes education as an art rather than a science, and after a thorough overview of the historical development of educational research, concludes that the chosen paradigm or research methodology must address the objective one has in mind, although, different paradigms such as the quantitative and qualitative paradigms can be complementary. One could interpret Kivunya and Kuyini's (2017, p.26) assertion that 'the paradigm defines a researcher's philosophical orientation' as it being the link between the personal dimension of the researcher, created through the identity of the researcher within the context of the research taking place, and the world or problem being investigated. In the case of the research I intend to undertake, the paradigm of research chosen needs to enable me as the teacher to gather data, that will then need to be analyzed and acted upon. The fact that as the teacher, I am myself contributing to that data defines me as an action researcher (Efron and Ravid, 2020, p.44) and develops a situation where reflection in action, has to be intrinsic to the chosen paradigm.

As already pointed out, to objectively look at the real world, one cannot not consider the multiple realities that exist, or at least consider the possibility of a diverse interpretation of the same reality. This is a feature of the postmodern world in which we operate, and which led to the development of three educational research paradigms which are particularly relevant to contemporary times, namely, i) neo-institutionalism, ii) constructive structuralism and iii) duality (Chiang, 2018). Neo-institutionalism that originated from scholars' dissatisfaction with educational organizations' non-conformity with educational theory has led to discursive institutionalism that gives value, not only to content of text but also to its context and agency (Nordin & Sundberg, 2018). The constructive structuralist paradigm also considers the context of the subject being investigated, because constructive structuralists believe that the social reality determines the threshold of educational development that is possible (Chiang, 2018). One could interpret this as a rather fatalistic approach that limits the scope of education as a tool to improve one's social prospects. However, one cannot negate the impact of one's social background, especially since "family social economic statuses may affect children's academic achievements more than the impact of schools" (Coleman et al. 1966; Peaker, 1971; White, 1980; Sirin, 2005; Cheadle, 2008, cited in Li and Qiu, 2018, pp.2-3). The third paradigm refers to the "duality of structure", a theoretical scheme that highlights how "social structure is both constituted by human agency and yet is at the same time the very medium of this constitution" (Giddens, 1993, pp. 128–9, cited in

Heracleous and Hendry, 2000, p.1259). When one considers how I have already hinted at my line of thought and its inclination towards a holistic view of the world, this third paradigm offers the ideal possibility of investigating a situation that is acknowledged to be the result of a social structure that already existed, but that also allows for the possibility of a change to the better in the future.

Research Design and Research Methodologies

Identifying the research paradigm within which the research will fall into, will lead to selecting the most appropriate research design and methodology. After distinguishing between 'design' as a process and 'design' as the result of that process, Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017), progress to distinguish between mixed methods research and multi-method research. The former is presented as being a combination of qualitative and quantitative research, whereas the latter refers to one paradigm of research that is constituted of multiple approaches from the same domain.

One of the most important aspects of qualitative research is that it gives value to the social and cultural aspects of the subject being researched. In fact, participants taking part in the research do not respond to the researcher but participate with the researcher (Kozleski, 2017, p.24). Efron and Ravid (2020) list the case study, ethnographic research, the narrative research, and critical research, as the most common qualitative research methods. Yin (2003), defines the case study as a research strategy that is not exclusive to the qualitative research paradigm. On the other hand, it is presented as a comprehensive approach to gathering data that sheds light on a single or possibly multiple cases being studied. While case studies may therefore be more focused and specific, Freebody (2013, p.75) explains how ethnographic research seeks to describe and analyse the cultures and practices of communities. This leads one to infer that such an approach is best suited for situations where there is a common factor that ties the members of the community together, and where that common factor is central to the reason why that research is taking place. This contrasts with narrative research where the focus lies on the individual rather than the collective experience (Lodico et al. 2010). However, the value given to the social aspect in qualitative research, probably emerges strongest through critical research studies which are carried out specifically to facilitate social equity and fight injustice (Efron and Ravid, 2020, p.47).

In the design of any of these research approaches, it is crucial to start with a set of unambiguous research questions, as this should then lead to the collection, review, and a reflective analysis of data (Kozleski, 2017). At the data collection stage, various methodologies can be employed. Allen (2012) refers to the photo method as a recent development in data collection. She offers a very balanced evaluation of this method and points out how in the attempt to capture the moment and provide evidence of the true picture, it can still be subjective as the researcher can consciously or subconsciously choose what to include in the picture and what to leave out. This implies that in choosing what to record, an element of researcher bias can already emerge. However, this led me to reflect on the various opportunities for data collection that exist through the various means of technology that are available. Consideration of this aspect is especially important in the current circumstances, where research needs to be undertaken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the various mitigation measures put in schools. As these measures have determined several changes in methodology in the pedagogical processes of music education, this needs to be factored in when choosing which research method is to be adopted, mostly because, qualitative research requires a 'long-time' investigation, where the researcher makes careful observations in the field and observes the situation over a period of time (Kalman, 2019). One might question the possibility of doing this in a world where abrupt changes are taking place due to the pandemic, and which could interrupt the data collection process. This situation however does not lead me to completely exclude the execution of qualitative research, but it rather directs me to consider data collection methods that do not require high levels of interaction and to consider instead research methods which might require me to be the narrator of my own story such as with the case of an autobiography or an autoethnography (Lodico et al. 2010, p.150).

Similarly to qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods in education also seek to bring about improvement. However, Efron and Ravid (2020, p.48)) explain how the latter focuses more on efficacy and efficiency and identify i) experimental research, ii) causal-comparative (Ex Post Facto) research, iii) correlational research and iv) descriptive research as the four most common quantitative research methods.

Experimental research is best suited for measurable data where experiments are carried out on an experimental group who experience one variable from the experience of a control group. This is however mostly effective with data gathered from large groups (Bell et al.

2014, p.30). Such a requirement leads me to question the suitability of such a research design when my groups will be made up of the pupils I teach, which is a limited number of participants. Furthermore, I cannot distinguish between pupils and give a different treatment to the experimental group because as their teacher I am duty bound to always give them the best possible education. This implies that ethical concerns emerge when designing research and these need to be addressed with caution and sensitivity, however, ethics will be discussed later, after reflecting on the suitability of the remaining three most common quantitative research methods. Similarly, ex post facto research also identifies possible cause-and-effect relationships, however this is done in retrospect with data gathered after an event has taken place (Cohen et al. 2013, p.303). This implies that unlike experimental research, where the researcher is directly manipulating the situation to measure and evaluate the degree of impact the variable leaves, in ex post facto research, this process is carried out when it is no longer possible to manipulate such variables. This partly eliminates the concern identified with experimental research as it does not require me, as the action researcher to treat my pupils differently, but instead, to identify variables within my pupils' groups that were already present and to identify how or to what extent they are having an impact on their learning. As the variable within such a research is not directly controlled by the researcher, it is important to consider that several variables may have impacted the result, and "possibilities of common cause, reversed causality, and possible alternate independent variables" need to be taken into account to present a true picture (Ary et al. 2018, p.288).

While these two research methods seek to identify how a variable impacts the experimental group, correlational research is a descriptive research method that is limited to identifying the relationship between variables and does not go into understanding any causality between these variables (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p.103). While this may seem as a limitation to this research method, one might appreciate better its utility when employed as part of a bigger research design, such as the eight-stage model of scientific research presented by Cohen et al. (2011, p.13). In such a model, correlational research leads to the identification of patterns that make it possible to form a hypothesis that needs to be confirmed or rejected through further research, before generalizations can be made and theories generated. It is interesting to note that when used as such, correlational research is no longer a descriptive research method, because descriptive research is defined to be research that 'represents the current conditions of the topic under investigation without trying to change or manipulate them' (Efron and Ravid, 2020, p.50). In terms of the quantitative

research paradigm, a descriptive research method is employed when the data is presented as descriptive statistics. Lodico et al. (2010, p.77), offer a thorough explanation of how descriptive statistics are presented and worked out, but conclude that their important function in educational research is that they provide “a basis for understanding, interpreting, and representing data”.

This discussion of the most common research methods from both the quantitative and the qualitative research paradigms (Efron and Ravid, 2020) excludes other research methods which might not be so popular, but which may be effective in particular scenarios. The choice of one research method, does not need to imply the exclusion of other research methods in the same research either. In fact, VanderStoep and Johnston (2009, p.180), encourage students to engage in a mixed-methods approach where they can choose the best elements from both paradigms to design research that provides a deeper understanding of the social world. Similarly, Lodico et al. (2010, pp.16-17) describe the mixed-methods approach as a more creative way of research that enables pragmatic researchers to fully answer their research questions. This might seem as a leeway for the researcher to move freely between paradigms and classify the research as a mixed-method, if it fails to fit fully within one paradigm. However, Nassaji (2015) cautions against this in an editorial that points out how a mixed-methods research does not simply collect data using a quantitative method and analyses it quantitatively or vice-versa. Creswell (2014, p.114) further explains that the research question itself needs to be a “mixed methods question”.

Notwithstanding the research paradigm and the methodologies selected, validity and reliability are essential to useful research (Cohen et al. 2011, p.179). This is understandable when validity is defined as “truthfulness” (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p.59) and reliability as “consistency” (Efron and Ravid, 2020, p.78). However, although simplistic in nature, they can be rather complex when applied to the different research paradigms and methods available. In fact, Cohen et al. (2011) list up to twenty examples of validity. Yet, Boudah (2011, p.64) identifies three major types of validity, namely i) internal validity, ii) external validity and iii) construct validity. Internal validity refers to the extent of the impact that the manipulation of one variable has on its dependent (Lodico et al. 2010, p.252). This suggests that it is particularly pertaining to experimental research. On the other hand, external validity refers to the generalizability of the research (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p.106). This leads me to question its relevance for case studies, where as already

discussed, the focus is on a very specific situation, the conditions of which are unlikely to be fully replicated in other scenarios. The third type of validity, construct validity, is a “composite of multiple validity approaches” (Lodico et al. 2010, p.103). Cohen et al, (2011, pp.188-189) explain how this can be applied to both the qualitative and the quantitative paradigms. In qualitative research, construct validity is achieved by showing that in the research the situation is seen through the actors' own eyes. In the quantitative paradigm, this is achieved through convergent and discriminant techniques (Ibid.). These three major types of validity suggest that it may be somewhat difficult for the validity of qualitative research to be proven. However, through triangulation this can be facilitated (Boudah, 2011, p.78 and Cohen et al. 2011, p. 195-197). Several methods of triangulation exist (Denzin, 1970), but the most widely used is methodological triangulation (Cohen et al, 2011, p.197). This refers to the engagement of different methodologies in the same research. This implies that mixed-methods research is in itself a valid research method.

Research Ethics

Another concern, common to all research methods is the issue of ethics. Researchers need to maintain a balance between their search for truth and the subjects' rights (Cohen et al. 2011, p.75) especially in contemporary times when the research world is inundated with researchers from different cultures and backgrounds, working in a globalized environment (Mustajoki and Mustajoki, 2017). Furthermore, while all individuals have their innate conscience that guides them into deciding what's right and wrong, ethical frameworks exist to assist researchers in making their choices when faced with an ethical dilemma (Wiles, 2013). VanderStoep and Johnston (2009, p.12), refer to the Belmont Report (1979), that identifies three ethical issues which researchers need to address. These are respect for the participants' autonomy, ensuring the well-being of the participant and fairness in the distribution of the risks and benefits of the research. This leads me to further question the possibility of conducting experimental research because as already pointed out, it places different groups of the children I teach in unequal opportunities for learning and development.

As ethics have to be applied in context (Cohen et al. 2011, p.76) one understands that a blanket approach cannot be adopted. To ensure that the research is ethically correct, it needs to be evaluated for ethical correctness before the research is actually carried out.

This is usually done by an institutional reviewing board (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009, p.12). The fact that the research I intend to carry out as part fulfillment of the University course requirements requires the approval of an ethics research committee is reassuring in this regard. Informed consent also features as a common concern to ensure an ethically correct research (Cohen et al. (2011), Wiles, (2013) and VanderStoep and Johnston, (2009)). This implies that in the context of my research, where the participants are children, consent might need to be obtained from the children's parents, and the children may also require an age-appropriate wording of the consent form. VanderStoep and Johnston (2009) list "offering the opportunity to withdraw" and "offering incentives" as other ethical concerns. However, these are not particularly relevant to the research I wish to conduct, because action research in the classroom context of a compulsory primary school does not allow for such a scenario once it has the approval to be carried out, as the children will not be able to choose not to attend their lessons. In fact, as this research is intended to improve my pedagogical approach, I intend to carry it out at the school where I am employed, as "access" (Cohen et al. 2011, p.81) can be gained with ease since this research will be part of my professional development. Furthermore, as the pupils already know me as their music teacher, "acceptance" (Ibid.) is not an issue and will further facilitate carrying out of the research. VanderStoep and Johnston (2009) explain how ethical correctness is required at all stages of the research and suggest 'debriefing' as the proper way of concluding one's research. This involves informing the participants of the outcome of their participation in the research, however, given that the participants in the research will be children, I am still seeking ways as to how, this could be done meaningfully.

The fact that this research is to be carried out in a primary school setting, where children, who are generally accepted to be more vulnerable members of society, may be impacted at various stages of the research, adds weight to the value of the ethical framework. The principles which will underly the ethical considerations shall be "respect for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons" (Bassey, 1999, p.73). It is desirable that this awareness serves as the backbone for the structuring of a research design that allows me to engage in participatory action research where I become an agent for change (Efron and Ravid, 2020, p.11-12). While it is very difficult to present a complete evaluation of all research designs in a limited discussion (Bell et al. 2014, p.23) such as this, in reflection upon the literature referred to and the research methods explored, it can be concluded, that in my work-based context, a qualitative study is likely to be more appropriate especially

because, the primary aim is not to generate theory that can be transferred to other contexts. This might include a multi-method approach to data collection especially if the research is to be carried out in the current exceptional circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic where mitigation measures are impacting the modes of interaction taken for granted for decades. This might imply using more contemporary methods of data sources such as the use of social media that provides an innovative way to access communities, content and conversations (Bell et al. 2014, p.175). Finally, it needs to be acknowledged, that as a researcher working within a school context and with limited resources, since this will be a personal initiative, it might not be possible to provide revolutionary solutions. On the other hand, the aim is to formulate a well-thought research question, that provides a deep understanding of a problem encountered in my teaching practice, and to find ways to alleviate or reduce the severity of that problem (Bassey, 1999, p.67), thus improving the pedagogical processes within my work-based context.

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