



Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) (full-time pathway)

Introduction to Research Methods in Education

ECDE7002

Assessment Component 2 – (45%)

**Critical Reflection upon the Ethical Issues Related to
Research Methods - Essay 3,500 words**

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Experience-based Question: ‘What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales’?

Section 1 Introduction

To introduce, this essay aims to provide critical reflection upon ethical issues and research methods related to the qualitative data collection, extracted from the mixed methods exploratory research strategy proposed in Rationale Assessment Component Part 1. There have been proposed three exploratory research questions, however, this essay will focus, in detail, only on the following qualitative question that captures the Experience-based measures: *‘What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales’?*

1.1 Experience-based paradigm

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) highlighted the experience-based approach as fitting with the main aim of the proposed study. The proposed study aims: *‘to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales’*. Therefore, the empirical qualitative data collected during face-to-face interviews might provide valuable qualitative findings. Consequently, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has been identified as a suitable data analysis method when studying the mental health, wellbeing and subjective factors such as experience, feelings or beliefs of individual participants (Coolican, 2014).

This essay recognised three objectives to meet: first, to critically evaluate the chosen research methods and strategies, second, to explore and discuss the importance of ethics in empirical research, and third, to identify possible limitations that might arise during the data collection process. Further, this essay will emphasize the study design, sampling method, ethical considerations, proposed research tool and method of data analysis (Biggam, 2021; Wellington, 2015).

Section 2 Chosen Method

With the intention to meet the first objective of this essay, moving to a critical evaluation of the chosen research methods and strategies. The chosen exploratory research strategy was based on empirical qualitative data collection as such research strategy fits the qualitative exploratory research question *'What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales'?* Based on the scientific approach of the socio-educational wellbeing phenomenon, which examines the subjective professional experience, practical barriers, and individual challenges that might negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales, the qualitative experience-based approach might help to obtain a range of qualitative primary data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). The qualitative question does not aim to exhaust the possible individual opinions, instead, aims to identify a common and mutual in-depth understanding of possible factors that affect the experience, feelings or beliefs of individual participants (Biggam, 2021). Qualitative exploratory research examines non-numerical data. Therefore, it might provide a detailed overview of possible factors, themes or patterns that affect the mental health and wellbeing of teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales.

To justify, the importance of the qualitative findings obtained through the empirical data collection might be recognised in broadening the understanding of practical issues and navigating further improvements and practical application of innovative recommendations that might enhance further promotion and support of the wellbeing of the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. As portrayed within the proposal document of this study, the Welsh Government highlighted the necessity of further examination and future and robust research related to education and wellbeing support of teaching practitioners in Wales (Ball, 2021; Wellington, 2015; WG, 2023).

However, there have been identified three main limitations that might occur during the qualitative exploratory research method. Firstly, due to the nature of the qualitative question that focuses on subjective experience, feelings and beliefs of individual participants, the research finding might be valuable, valid and enhancing to education practice, however, cannot be highlighted as representative of a large population nor generalised due to the fact, that the targeted population will be selected based on the Convenience Sampling approach, further explained within the Sampling section of this essay.

The second highlighted limitation is linked to the subject-centred nature where data analysis focuses on the individual experience of participants, which might provide mainly biased points of view and subjective opinions. Therefore the reliability of the findings can be compromised. However, due to the exploratory qualitative research method chosen for the proposed study, the subject-centred approach fits the purpose of the qualitative exploratory study. The proposed study focuses on and targets a specifically selected population of teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales, which can be categorised as an under-researched population. Lastly, the limitation of the small sample size cannot provide a robust conclusion that can be generalised, however, can provide a better in-depth understanding of individual challenges, issues and barriers related to the promotion and support of mental health wellbeing in the education practice in Wales (Biggam, 2021; Bryman, 2008; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Ogden, 2019).

Given that, the qualitative question is only part of the mixed methods research approach of the proposed study, therefore, the possible finding might fit the purpose and provide experience-based findings, that might enhance the current knowledge and fill the occurring gaps in the current academic and scientific literature related to mental health and wellbeing promotion and support in education practice in Wales, as well as worldwide (Coolican, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). To conclude the importance of the chosen methodology, the possibly acquired qualitative findings might help to broaden the understanding and explore the factors, psychological processes, and wellbeing conditions reported by the participants (Biggam, 2021; Wellington, 2015).

Section 3 Sampling Method

To continue with the sampling method, the proposed study and its qualitative exploratory question will accommodate the Convenience Sampling method. This sampling approach and strategy is often highlighted as a non-probability sampling method, that chooses the participants based on their accessibility and availability (Biggam, 2021; Coolican, 2014). This approach is often used within clinical or educational research and, therefore fits perfectly for the purpose of this qualitative exploratory study, where the focus is on a specific group of people, with specific professional practice experience (Long et al., 2023; Swindell et al., 2023; Wellington, 2015). The participants have to be carefully selected to address the main aim of the proposed study *‘to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales’*.

3.1 Selection Process

Moving to the selection process of the potential participants, as mentioned throughout this essay, the chosen population sample and participants sample are teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. This population has been chosen due to the professional and academic focus of the student-author. The Welsh Government (2023) highlighted repeatedly within their documents, that future scientific research focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of the education actors in Wales is in high demand and filling the gaps in knowledge and literature with new, modern and scientific qualitative and quantitative finding could be beneficial for the new educational curriculum reforms, that currently happening in Wales (Ball, 2021; Bryman, 2008; Long et al., 2023).

3.2 Key Strengths and Limitations of Convenience Sampling

Furthermore, Wellington (2015) and Coolican (2014) agreed on three key strengths of the Non-probability Convenience Sampling method. First, the cost and time efficiency as the researcher can choose the sample group of participants in her proximity and reachable radius (for example Swansea, Wales) which might significantly reduce the transport cost and travel duration. Second, the smooth implementation of the face-to-face interviews and precise conduction of the research as the sample group can be relatively small, therefore the researcher can fully focus on individual participants and their qualitative input to the proposed study. Third, the fact that Non-probability Convenience Sampling method is quite flexible and enables the researcher to target a specific sample group of participants. Especially, the under-researched population of teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. Such an approach and method can be very useful and beneficial for the current gaps in academic and scientific literature and might help to examine and explore more thoroughly the experience-based evidence provided by the targeted participants. This approach and method might deliver vital qualitative findings that might address the objectives of this essay and the overall aim of the proposed study (Biggam, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

On the contrary, there have been highlighted three main limitations regarding the Non-probability Convenience Sampling method. First, as mentioned previously, possible high risk of bias and subjectivity, due to the captured measures related to personal and individual experiences, feelings, and beliefs. Second, the limited ability to generalise the obtained results and findings due to the small size of the sample, subjectivity and occurring bias. Third, the variety of limitations, linked to unknown errors, skewed information or an unrepresentative population sample, possibly occurring due to the specific characteristics linked to the targeted professional practice of the participants; teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales (Biggam, 2021; Coolican, 2014; Wellington, 2015). To conclude, the sampling methods of the proposed study are closely linked to ethics, and moral principles and a number of ethical considerations will need to be addressed when human participants are involved in an empirical exploratory study (BERA, 2018).

Section 4 Ethics

To introduce, ethics in educational research are recognised as moral principles and codes of conduct, highlighted as one of the vital aspects in any planned empirical study and deserve maximal attention and understanding, especially, regarding the sensitive topic of the qualitative question focusing on wellbeing, mental health, experiences and beliefs provided by the participants (Biggam, 2021; BERA, 2018; Wellington, 2015). The proposed empirical study involves real human participants (teaching practitioners in Secondary Schools in Wales), who deserve to be treated and approached with respect, dignity, and diverse individual approach, without prejudice and with empathy, sensitivity, care and understanding (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Ogden, 2019). Consequently, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) in their fourth edition emphasized, that each researcher should be aware of the ethical and moral principles, and fully understand their meaning, purpose and importance to ensure respectable research practice (Coolican, 2014; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

BERA Ethical guidelines and its variety of responsibilities are vital documents that have to be understood and applied within any educational or social research, especially when empirical (primary) data are obtained from participants either during face-to-face interviews, case studies or via online surveys. Therefore, a number of core ethical principles and responsibilities were established, for example: towards the researcher, participants, organisation, community or sponsors (BERA, 2018; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017; Wellington, 2015). By following the ethical guidelines, each researcher should ensure that human rights are not violated, that freedom and independence are promoted, that nobody is exposed to harm and no significant damage to property, environment or individuals occurs during the research process. Hence, this essay identified seven core ethical principles, that have to be considered in aim to conduct the proposed study: consent; transparency; right to withdraw; incentives; possible harm; privacy and data storage; and disclosure. Due to the limited word count, there will be addressed just three key Responsibilities to participants, linked directly to the proposed qualitative question (Biggam, 2021).

4.1 Transparency

To meet the principle of transparency regarding the qualitative question *‘What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales?’*, there will be created a detailed *“Participation Information Sheet”* and *“Informed Consent Form”*. These documents will be printed and handed to each participant, involved in the face-to-face interview. The Information Sheet will contain detailed information regarding the researcher's position, the institution behind the study, the rights of the participant, the main purpose and aim of the study, and who to contact in case of any issue, misconduct or concerns (Biggam, 2021; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

4.2 Possible Harm to Participants

The proposed study should cause no harm, or distress or put the participants in any form of danger. However, there should be disclosure and consideration of possible negative impacts related to the sensitive and controversial topic of the proposed study. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, related to the promotion and support of mental health, wellbeing and the experience-based evidence, reported by the participants, some level of possible discomfort, distress or further emotional or mental harm to both, participants and the researcher, might occur. The questions and sub-questions capturing the experience-based measures are directly linked to individual experiences, feelings or beliefs which might cause additional stress or pressure leading to anxieties or depression within sensitive or unwell participants. Therefore, the Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form should highlight local contact centres, charities or clinics offering help and professional advice to people that facing difficult times. For example, *Mind Swansea, Samaritans Swansea, The Mental Health Forum or NHS Direct* (BERA, 2018; Biggam, 2021).

4.3 Confidentiality and Data Protection

To limit possible risks of breaching the Data Protection legislation in the UK and Wales, for example, the Data Protection Act 2018, or GDPR 2016, there will be provided a clear and reassuring statement within the Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form, regarding the procedures of the data protection. The participants will be informed about anonymity and the data protection approach, with a statement that the study is voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, no personal data such as names or addresses will be collected during the research process. However, some anonymous general demographic data might be required (for example: gender, age group, or ethnicity). A specific coding system regarding participant identification will be provided where organisation names or identifiable data will be altered and re-coded to ensure anonymity and personal data protection. Lastly, any paper documents, notes, interview transcripts or recordings will be stored in a lockable unit with strictly limited access or electronically via password-protected Cloud storage (BERA, 2018; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Wellington, 2015).

Section 5 Research Tool

To introduce the research tool selected to deliver the exploratory qualitative findings of the proposed study was the method of face-to-face interviews. This research tool has been identified as an appropriate and common research tool within educational research in the UK and Wales, ideal, for capturing the experience-based evidence from the participant (Biggam, 2021; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Ogden, 2019). Based on Wellington (2015) and Bryman (2008) the experience during the face-to-face interviews relies on well-structured interview concepts, the chosen environment, the time, or the season as many factors might affect the state, mood or feelings of both, the researcher and the participants. There have to be made a number of practical considerations, regarding, possible factors affecting the success of the face-to-face interview. For example, think about the timing, as participants who work night shifts might not be available or in the mood to attend early morning interviews.

Similarly, participants with small children of school age will not be able to attend interviews around the 'school-run' time. Likewise, times around festive seasons (Christmas, Easter holiday, half-term break at primary schools) might negatively affect the availability of the participants (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, the proper planning process regarding the conduction of face-to-face interviews is very important, to minimise any disruptions, limitations, or postponement to complete and submit the planned research within the set timescale and timeframe. This can be linked to the quality of personal and academic skills of the researcher, good time management, and strong interpersonal and transferrable skills well adopted and implemented within the planned exploratory study, focusing on the importance of promotion and support of the wellbeing of the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Ogden, 2019).

Further, this section will briefly discuss the identified process of planning related to the face-to-face interviews based on the qualitative data research. The well-planned process related to the conduct of the face-to-face interviews might help to deliver new, enhancing evidence that might emerge from the qualitative question: *'What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales'?*

5.1 Interview Questions Process

The interview questions and sub-questions will be inspired and based on the 'Quality of Working Life' theoretical concept and model due to the experience-based approach of the proposed study (Stamm, 2005). The nature of the qualitative data expected to be obtained via the face-to-face interviews is closely linked to the socio-educational wellbeing phenomenon, that is planning to explore and understand the subjective professional experience, practical barriers, and individual challenges that might negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales (Wellington, 2015). Therefore, such an approach requires a pre-preparation process for each qualitative question and sub-questions, to minimise dichotomous closed-ended questions, leading to 'small-talk' limiting the range of qualitative information that can be provided by the participants (Biggam, 2021).

The interview questions will be well structured, to provide some direction regarding the chosen topic of the proposed study (Biggam, 2021). The interviews intend to explore and understand areas related '*to the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales*'. Therefore, the main focus of the researcher should be on providing some direction and guidance to the interview accordingly. It would be highly ineffective and would not provide valid, reliable or trustworthy qualitative findings if the interviews shifted to very different topics or themes (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This was agreed upon by the student-author of this essay, based on her personal experience as a researcher, in the conduction of face-to-face interviews. However, this could be linked to possible limitations and barriers of face-to-face interviews, discussed in detail below.

5.2 Strengths and Limitations

To continue, there have been highlighted a number of common limitations related to the face-to-face interview method. First, limitations related to the nature of the chosen topic that focus on individual and subjective experience-based evidence, extracted from the interview transcripts. As mentioned throughout this essay, due to the high risk of bias, lack of objectivity and possible inaccuracy such data cannot be generalised. This can be partially overcome, if the qualitative method design does not stand alone but serves as a qualitative part of the mixed method research design. Therefore, further combination and comparison with quantitative reliable data compared with current scientific evidence via systematic literature review might deliver more robust, reliable, valid and in-depth findings (Biggam, 2021; Coolican, 2014). Second, the identified barriers related to time constraints and time demand due to the need for manual data entry, detailed analysis of each interview transcript, and checking back input with the interview recordings, to ensure precise, accurate and correct interpretation of the qualitative information given by the participants (Wellington, 2015). Third, the limitation related to possible environmental distraction or disruption, as any unexpected situations or emergencies might occur during the face-to-face interview, affecting the duration or whole atmosphere of the interview (Ogden, 2019).

On the other hand, the possible strengths of the face-to-face interview method can be seen in the ability, flexibility and freedom to target specific populations and samples to gain more complex responses from targeted participants. Especially, Convenience sampling is a useful sampling method and goes hand in hand with the face-to-face interview planning process, while seeking experience-based evidence from the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. Another advantage of the face-to-face interview is the ability to observe any emotional, behavioural or physiological responses of the participants, to get some additional clues and ideas related to individual experiences, feelings or beliefs. This can be crucial for the proposed study, as any emotional distress or discomfort can be captured, monitored and reflected on with additional proper responses, for example, offering to take a 5-minute break, offering a drink or tissue, or withdrawing from the interview, the researcher should suggest seeking professional advice in serious cases. This information is in addition to Section 4 Ethics, part 4.2 Possible Harm to Participant, where has been discussed the possible harms to participants in more detail.

5.3 Clustered Themes

Finally, to be able to carry out the planned data analysis method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), further discussed within the following section, each face-to-face interview will be recorded, notes will be taken and an interview digital transcript will be made by the researcher. Following this, each interview transcript can be precisely analysed, and clusters of themes can be identified, coded and further compared with the Literature Review findings, presented within the proposed study essay, in the Assessment Component Part 1 (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Section 6 Data Analysis Method

Moving to the data analysis method chosen to answer the proposed qualitative exploratory research question '*What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales*', there have been identified the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a suitable method to capture and analyse the experience-based data provided by the participants during the planned face-to-face interview (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Due to the subject-centred and person-centred nature of the exploratory qualitative research, the IPA method offers great flexibility and a range of possible analytical procedures and perspectives.

This might serve well the purpose of qualitative data analysis where individual, personal and subjective experiences, feelings and beliefs will be assessed, compared, coded, and clustered into possible themes (Bryman, 2008; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Further scrutiny and examination of the theme clusters obtained from the participants and identified from the interview transcripts, might provide a better understanding, broaden current knowledge and enhance the current empirical qualitative evidence. Therefore, in order to address the overall aim of the proposed study: '*to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales*', the IPA method might enable and ensure the successful conduct of the planned study.

To continue with the justification of the chosen data analysis method, the IPA has been highlighted as one of the contemporary methodologies focusing on qualitative findings in educational, sociological, psychological or health research. Several authors recognised and highlighted the IPA as an appropriate methodology design in educational research in the UK, however, there occurs limited scientific evidence within the educational literature, based only on the IPA (Ball, 2021; Biggam, 2021; Bryman, 2008). Usually, the IPA is a part of the mixed methods approach and the qualitative findings are usually compared against the quantitative data, to support and deliver more robust and reliable findings.

This is mainly due to the highlighted limitations and barriers linked to this data analysis method (Coolican, 2014). The main limitations related to IPA are the small sample size, or the subjective and biased approach due to capturing the subjective experience, feelings and beliefs of the participants. It means, that such subjective findings cannot be generalised due to the lack of objectivity, as mentioned throughout this essay (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Swindell, 2023). However, the subject-centred and person-centred approach of the IPA might explore and identify small areas of interest, in this case, the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing, and individual experience-based evidence of the participants, in this case, the teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales. This might enlighten and enhance the current evidence, knowledge and understanding of the chosen topic of the proposed study (Wellington, 2015).

Section 7 Conclusion

To conclude, this essay critically reflected upon ethical issues and research methods related to empirical data collection. The chosen qualitative question, captured the Experience-based measures: *'What do the terms wellbeing and mental health mean to teaching practitioners in secondary schools in Swansea, Wales'?* The aim of the proposed study was: *'to explore and understand the promotion and support of mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners in Secondary schools in Swansea, Wales'*. This essay introduced: a qualitative exploratory study design, discussed the non-probability convenience sampling method, identified the ethical considerations, justified the face-to-face interviews proposed as a research tool and addressed the chosen Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method.

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