Qualitative research and educational leadership

Essential dynamics to consider when designing and conducting studies

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight issues relayed to appropriate design and conduct of qualitative studies in educational leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is a conceptual/logical argument that centers around the notion that while scholars in the field have at times paid attention to such dynamics, it is important that issues special to the field are considered by all.

Findings – The major findings indicate that researchers/analysts need to determine not only the existence and accessibility of the qualitative research design and its various data collection strategies for leadership studies but also its authenticity and usefulness, taking into account the original purpose, the context in which it is produced and the intended audience.

Originality/value – Certain aspects of the paper relate to general issues of sound and generally accepted standards of research practice, but the authors also consider several issues that make educational leadership scholarship unique. The originality of the paper draws attention to certain dynamics that scholars should consider when designing and conducting qualitative research on educational leadership. In doing so, the authors not only draw on the literature but also on their own experience designing, conducting and publishing qualitative research on educational leadership.

Keywords Communication, Data collection, Trustworthiness, Research design,
Qualitative research, Educational leadership, Data analysis, Rigour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Educational leadership scholars have been exploring dynamics, phenomena, contexts and perceptions using qualitative research since the mid-twentieth century (Barnhardt *et al.*, 1979; Wolcott, 1970, 1973, 1974, 1977). During the first few decades of this era, educational leadership studies were generally grounded in a specific social science, such as anthropology, sociology or political science (Bogotch *et al.*, 2008; Brooks and Miles, 2010). As time has gone on, scholars started to draw liberally from these disciplines, incorporating an interdisciplinary approach (Normore and Brooks, 2014). More recently, this has given way to education-specific adaptations of classical social science methods.

Qualitative research in educational leadership has yielded many insightful studies that have enriched and deepened our understanding of how dynamics such as influence, power, communication, collaboration, administration, abuse, equity, management and organizations work in educational organizations and contexts (Capper, 1993; Grogan, 1999; Theoharis, 2009). Certain norms have emerged with respect to the way that qualitative studies are designed, executed and reported (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

However, while there is some broad consensus on what constitutes "good" qualitative research and a proliferation of qualitative studies of educational leadership, there is relatively little methodological literature devoted to describing and considering issues specific to the qualitative study of educational leadership.

Still, a paradigm shift appears to be taking place in leadership among numerous public sectors including business, marketing, social and political decision making and the social sciences generally. This shift is placing new expectations and new demands on research which is becoming increasingly influential in social sciences and policy making. Although an increasingly growing number of printed works on qualitative research methods are currently available, it is rare to locate a text that examines the use of qualitative research methods in the context of the study of leadership; yet, leadership has produced a voluminous body of research. A variety of qualitative research methods can be placed on a continuum ranging from purely qualitative (e.g. phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory) to the use non-textual, image-based sources of data for qualitative leadership research (Kleinke, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to certain dynamics that scholars should consider when designing and conducting qualitative research on educational leadership. In doing so, we draw on the literature, but also on our experience designing, conducting and publishing qualitative research on educational leadership. While we think of this as a selective rather than exhaustive list, we accept that in this paper we cover a lot of ground in an attempt to touch on issues we see as critical to the conduct of outstanding work. Some of the dynamics we note here are explored thoroughly by other authors, and in those cases we include references you may see for additional information. However, we do raise some issues not heretofore addressed in the literature, and in so doing we invite you to think about the way they might help with your own work. We have organized the paper around five broad aspects of qualitative inquiry: research design, data collection, data analysis, rigor and communication.

Research design and qualitative studies of educational leadership

When designing qualitative studies of educational leadership, it is important to choose the appropriate research design that will help explore your research questions. In order to choose an appropriate design, scholars must have a clear understanding of: what they are studying and which design is most appropriate for that topic, phenomenon, dynamic, person or place. For example, someone seeking to understand how a principal influences school culture might choose ethnography, as it is specifically suited to the study of culture (Cresswell, 1998; Wolcott, 1970). A study of a semester, school year, classroom or school might demand a case study design (Merriam, 1991; Stake, 1995, 2005; Yin, 1994). A study of a single leader might employ a narrative, portraiture or oral history design (Horsford, 2011). Suffice it to say that choosing the appropriate research design is a critical early decision a scholar has to make when crafting an outstanding study. It helps the scholar think through the who, what, when, where, how and why issues related to the study and can be thought of as a roadmap or blueprint for the project (Merriam, 1991). Choosing a design also helps locate the work within a methodological tradition that can help inform decisions throughout the research process. One can also choose an emergent design or even combine designs to address a research question that does not fall neatly into one of these traditions. However, while this is possible we do not advise such an approach for nascent scholars – not because they cannot or should not be innovative or creative, but because mixing traditions invites a high level of complexity and often creates issues with design fidelity (Fielding and Lee, 1998).

It is also important to think carefully about epistemology and purpose when designing and conducting qualitative studies of educational leadership. Researchers should consider their beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the kinds of knowledge they intend to generate through their study. Is the purpose to improve a person, system or school? Is the purpose to explore something we know little about? Do you hope to discover, refute or refine a theory? All of these issues are particularly important with respect to qualitative studies of educational leadership because the nature of the work makes it likely that the research will speak truth to power, and it is a scholar's moral obligation to think through the reasons they have for designing the study in a particular manner (Charmaz, 2006).

One glaring omission in many qualitative research studies of educational leadership is a lack of attention to the relational, power and gatekeeper dynamics that influence the study. As leadership is a relational activity, it is important to be clear about the various relationships related to the study. Not only between the researcher and participants, but also in regard to relationships between participants, between the organization and community and any other relationship that may influence the work. For example, if a researcher is going to study the students in an educational leadership program, they must disclose their relationship to the students. If they are the students' instructor or peer, there are obvious reasons to suspect that any data collected may be influenced by the subject's disposition toward the researcher, and vice versa. Similarly, in many qualitative studies of educational leadership, the gatekeepers of the contexts are not made clear. This is potentially problematic because, for example, when conducting a study of teacher leadership in a given context, it may be of great importance whether the researcher is introduced to teachers by a peer teacher or the teacher's superintendent. Put simply, since leadership is at least part concerned with the ways that people influence each other, it is important to consider the various ways that power dynamics may influence the study. Thinking this issue through at the design stage is critical so the scholar can be clear about the role of power in the study.

In summary, choosing an appropriate research design and then adapting it to suit the specific context of the study is one of the most important processes a qualitative researcher will undertake. Carefully thinking through issues related specifically to the ways that leadership practice might influence those decisions is critical to maintaining the fidelity of the study and enables or prevents a scholar from exploring their research questions.

Data collection and qualitative studies of educational leadership

Over the past 50 years, there have been many exciting developments in terms of the types of qualitative data a research might collect. Innovations with visual data, internet-based data and other sorts of qualitative data have opened up new possibilities for answering complex and interesting research questions. That said, there are three basic types of qualitative data that scholars have generated in order to explore their research questions: interviews, observations and documents. In the following sections, we consider each.

A semi-structured interview (i.e. individual and focus group) is an overarching term used to describe a range of different forms of interviewing most commonly associated with qualitative research. According to Lewis-Beck *et al.* (2004), the aim is usually to ensure flexibility in how and in what sequence questions are asked, and in whether and how particular areas might be followed up and developed with different interviewees. The composition of a focus group needs great care to get the best quality of discussion (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). There is no "best" solution to group composition, and group mix will always impact on the data, according to things such as the mix of ages, sexes and social professional statuses of the participants. What is important is that the

researcher "gives due consideration to the impact of group mix (e.g. how the group may interact with each other) before the focus group proceeds".

Often interviews in qualitative studies of educational leadership are a form of elite interview (Harvey, 2010; Marshall, 1984). Elite interviews are those conducted with those at the top of an organization or social structure. This might include, depending on the context and the topic of study, principals, superintendents, teachers, policy makers, university professors, etc. While these perspectives are certainly interesting, important and critical to many leadership studies, it is important to interrogate the power dynamics of the interview between the interviewer and interviewee, the motivation of the interviewee to speak freely and the various ways that the elite may have privileged information or capacity to influence the organization. As such, it is important to understand that with privilege and power come many temptations or necessities to present information in a particular manner. One common issue we have observed in our own work is for school leaders to keep their interview responses at a high level of abstraction. For example, we have had several experiences where an interviewee spoke of missions, visions, dispositions, teacher quality, etc. without wanting to further explain or articulate what those concepts actually looked like in practice. This is perhaps motivated by a desire not to disclose potentially sensitive personnel data or by a fear that certain things they say might reflect poorly on their performance as a leader. In order to get them to move away from responding with abstract answers we have used probing follow-up questions that ask for examples or instances generate richer responses. In any event, it is critical that educational leadership scholars consider the motivations, power and privilege of interviewees when conducting interviews.

Observations can be useful in myriad ways as a means to check for nonverbal cues and expression of feelings (e.g. movement of eyes, head, gestures, etc.), determine who interacts with whom, grasp how participants communicate with each other, and check for how much time is spent on various activities. When conducting observations in qualitative studies of educational leadership it is likewise important to consider the relationship between the observer and observed and the relationship between the subjects. The ways that people manage, inspire or communicate with each other is likely influenced by ways that leadership is practiced in context. That is, it may be a norm in a particular school for teachers to engage with each other in a certain manner in meetings or for students and teachers to interact in a way that is framed by leadership practice.

It is important to think carefully about the way that observations might be shaped by the people who exert dominant influence over others. Moreover, the researcher should think carefully about whether they are making sense of what they observe from an etic (outsider) or emic (insider) perspective. Since the settings in which most leadership studies are conducted are somewhat familiar, there is a temptation for scholars to feel as though theory can interpret the significance of what they see based on prior experience. However, in many cases the researcher is conducting the study from an etic rather than emic perspective. Confusing the two can lead to erroneous observation data based on the researcher's bias.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic material. Bowen (2009) states that "Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 27). Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. Researchers refer to documents as "social facts" which are produced, shared and used in socially organized ways (Corbin and

Strauss, 2008). Documents in qualitative research on educational leadership must be carefully considered in terms of their level of abstraction and formality.

It is common for scholars to use school improvement plans, meeting agendas/minutes, school newsletters, letters home to parents and the like as qualitative documents. This is appropriate for many studies, however, it is important to treat them as what they are – intentionally shaped documents created for the purpose of communicating formal organizational dynamics to a critical audience. Such public and public-private records present an individual perspective as a collective perception, and should be approached as such. In a sense, it is important for the researcher to ascertain the degree to which such documents represent an idealized or espoused perspective on the work rather than an actual or critical perspective.

Data analysis and qualitative studies of educational leadership
While there are many issues related to analyzing data, we draw educational leadership scholars' attention to two matters: the use of theory and transparency of analytic procedures. Put simply, many studies ostensibly focussed on educational leadership are indeed not studies of educational leadership at all. As a field, the scholarship has tended to be very strong on leadership and very weak on education. Many studies in the field are indeed organizational analyses of efficiency that pay no attention to teacher or student learning, instructional dynamics or curriculum matters. A careful examination of numerous studies makes it clear that students, schools, learning and many other educational-specific people, places and pedagogies are treated as latent variables rather than being the subject of scrutiny. Many theories in the field have only a tenuous connection to education – just because a study takes place in a school, it is not necessarily a study of education – it is critical for educational leaders to contribute to our understanding of individual and collective learning rather than offer studies that might well have been conducted in a meat-packing plant as a school (Wolcott, 1982).

A second issue that educational leadership scholars should consider with respect to the way that theory is used in their qualitative studies has to do with making their analytic procedures transparent. Often in qualitative studies, scholars do not report how they arrived at the themes they report as their findings. We commonly read a solid literature review and in some studies a well-argued theoretical framework, only to be left guessing at how these concepts helped the author(s) arrive at their findings and subsequently their conclusions. We are not concerned so much that scholars have used inappropriate analytic techniques, as it would be helpful to follow the lines of thinking and analysis that lead to themes. Laying bare this part of the research process would help us understand how theoretical constructs evolve to a much higher degree than we are currently able to see. This, in turn, will help the field do a better job developing, refining, exploring and discovering new ideas and theories.

Rigor and qualitative studies of educational leadership
While each research design has a specific approach to establishing rigor, there are a few issues specific to qualitative studies of educational leadership that scholars should consider. It is critical that scholars are aware of the ways that various research designs establish rigor and then even more important that they do not violate these norms and rather meet various thresholds for quality and rigor. For example, case study research uses concepts such triangulation and member check to establish the reliability and trustworthiness of the work. If triangulation

is to the technique a scholar uses, then they should actually follow through and explain how they approached this aspect of the study. It is currently common for triangulation or rigor to be given a few sentences in a methodology section, and then for it to remain unclear how or if the technique was actually employed in the study. For example, if a study claims that data were gleaned from an analysis of documents, interviews and observation, all three forms of data should be evident in the findings. If there is an imbalance – say, if there is only or primarily interview data and only a sprinkling of observation or document data – we should call into question the rigor and quality of the study. Again, this is not an indictment of scholars in the field, it is a call for greater transparency, care and explanation in the conduct of research.

We also feel strongly that one special approach to establishing rigor bears greater consideration in qualitative studies of educational research – transferability. In a field desperate for sharing best practices and learning lessons from around the globe that might be helpful in local contexts, it is curious that researchers have not more carefully considered the transferability of the work beyond the context of a specific study. It would be useful, for example, to have scholars think beyond quantitative-bound concepts like generalizability when discussing their qualitative work and consider the possibilities of conditions under which the lessons might be applied elsewhere. For example, instead of simply reporting the processes and outcomes of a single-school study, imagine if it were common for educational leadership scholars to openly discuss their perspective on the conditions under which other schools might meet failure or success should they try and implement a similar initiative? This basic issue gets surprisingly short shrift in qualitative studies of educational leadership, which often end just short of taking this final step. We would call for articles to report, after their findings, sub-sections entitled:

(1) Discussion, wherein the author(s) show readers how their work helps refine, deepen or refute ideas we read about in their literature review and theoretical perspective.

(2) Conclusion, where author(s) explain the implications of the work for both research and practice, broadly speaking.

(3) Transferability, where authors consider issues that would make clear whether conditions under which scholars and practitioners would expect to encounter if the initiative were undertaken in another setting: policy context, finance, curriculum history, equity dynamics, etc. Basically, would the researcher(s) encourage or discourage others to try what was described, and under what conditions might they find the most success or failure?

Communication of qualitative studies of educational leadership

Qualitative studies of educational leadership should be written in an accessible manner and we encourage scholars to adopt a writing process that communicates in multiple formats. For example, the writing process for a piece of qualitative research might include all (or even more) of the products listed in Figure 1. Often, scholars produce a few of these products when they conduct qualitative studies. In our experiences, the most common among them are the conference proposal, conference paper or an article. We would add these others, and still more (grant proposals, for example) to the communication of qualitative research. Offering key findings and ideas in multiple

formats allows for a scholar to reach the greatest possible audience, and also helps scholars, policy makers, community members and practitioners understand the substance and utility of the work.

There are a few further issues we would urge scholars designing and conducting qualitative studies of educational leadership to consider. First, it is important to think through what aspects of the research are handled as a closed or open feedback loop – what products are designed for use in the context you are studying? To whom are the results communicated? Is the timing and manner of reporting useful? Second, it is critical for scholars to succinctly and clearly articulate the "so what" of the study – how should the work help people rethink or approach their work as scholars and practitioners in a new way? Third, can you develop discussion or implementation guides for school leaders? This is a useful way to help communicate complexity in an accessible manner. For example, do the chapters, article or book end with discussion prompts to help people think through how the issue at hand might manifest in other contexts? Do you prompt leaders and those who train or study them to reconsider certain common practices or reinforce those that may be useful?

Summary

Qualitative research has been a strong and vibrant part of the educational leadership knowledge base for at least 50 years. There are many well-designed and executed studies that have helped refine, deepen and challenge our thinking about the ways that leaders are prepared, the way they practice the art and science of their craft. In this brief paper, we have tried to think carefully about both basic and idiosyncratic aspects of qualitative studies that educational leadership scholars should consider. We contend that researchers/analysts need to determine not only the existence and accessibility of the qualitative research design and its various data collection strategies for leadership studies (e.g. interviews, observations, documents) but also its authenticity and usefulness, taking into account the original purpose, the context in which it is produced and the intended audience. As Bowen (2009) asserts, the subjective interpreter of data contained in qualitative research should make the process of analysis as rigorous and as transparent as possible. Qualitative inquiry on educational leadership demands no less. While there is a wealth of solid work in this area, there is always room for improvement, and we urge all scholars in this area to take seriously the processes and content of the work they do.
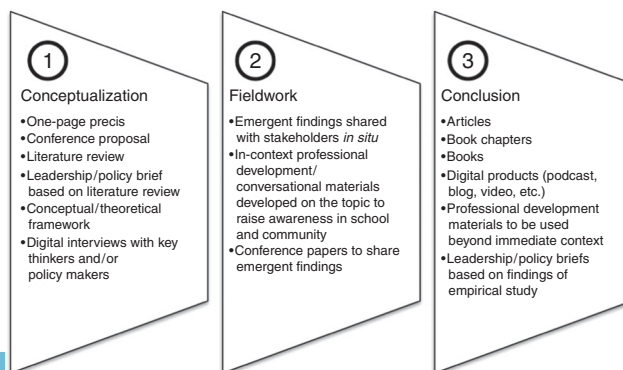

Figure 1.
Research dissemination products for qualitative studies of educational leadership

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