

Qualitative Research in International Education

What's Next?

In the world of international education, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are the predominant research designs used for program impact evaluations. RCTs are just one type of research design, however—they are often not even the most valid for the context of international education—and almost any RCT study can benefit from the explanatory power of qualitative research methods.

While quantitative researchers look at the world in terms of variables and correlations, numbers, and generalizable findings and can quite effectively determine the “what” of things (how many boys versus girls are enrolled in school in rural Malawi, or how well children in Ethiopia perform in reading), qualitative researchers look more at events and processes (Maxwell, 2013) and at ways to help explain why things are the way they are. For instance, qualitative researchers may design a study to explore answers to such questions as, “Why are more boys than girls enrolled in school?” and “In what ways are children underperforming in reading in Grade 2?”

In designing research—whether for exploration, program evaluation, or any other purpose—it is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the range of design options available. This document explores the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research designs.

What is qualitative research?

When done properly, qualitative research uses rigorous and replicable methods to obtain data. Qualitative research has the following characteristics, in that it:

- is a type of research that aims “to understand, describe, and explain social phenomena from the inside” (Banks, 2007)
- incorporates emic and etic perspectives to understand human behavior and phenomena (Yin, 2015)
- is a way to “facilitate the study of issues in depth and detail” (Patton, 2015)
- “involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not easily reduced to numbers” (Anderson, 2010)
- is research in which questions begin with “how” or “why” (Yin, 2009)
- is intrinsically local (Yin, 2009)
- uses an iterative design—that is, elements of the study are revised and adapted to ongoing data analysis (Maxwell, 2013)



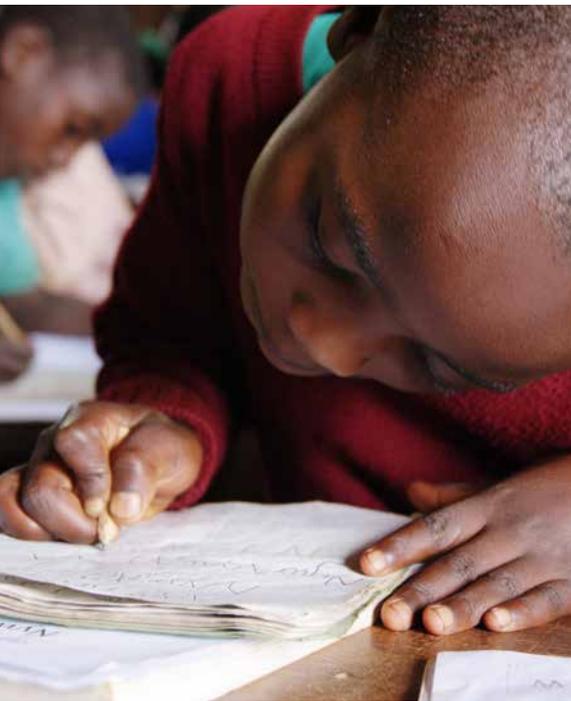
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What qualitative research is not

It is also important to keep in mind what qualitative research is not:

- Simple use of methods that are often associated with qualitative methods, such as observations and focus groups, without a clear link to the problem formulation
- Evidence that is not triangulated
- Success stories, descriptive reports of what happens in a classroom or training, or reports from participants in an intervention about their personal experiences

The value of qualitative studies in international research

There are many specialized types of qualitative research that can be tailored to meet the needs of country-specific contexts and programs. This type of research provides an opportunity to conduct in-depth studies across many contexts. Qualitative research can be conducted to meet the following research objectives:

- As a part of capacity assessment, to understand in detail what is happening in a country before beginning an intervention

Example. For a new project, before beginning to develop materials, we conduct a capacity assessment of what teachers are already doing in classrooms with reading and math, as well as how they are using existing materials. Based on these results, we develop materials which build on their strengths while introducing new pedagogical strategies and content.

- Explore more deeply the patterns that have been revealed by quantitative snapshot or baseline studies

Example. In a particular country, we see a pattern that students in one region perform lower on most subtasks on the Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessments (EGRA/EGMA) than in a different region. A study can be designed to understand more about the process of teaching in these two regions: What is happening instructionally in the two regions, and in what ways do outside influences such as home language affect what is happening in the classroom?

- Explore a phenomenon that program staff, coaches, or home office staff notice, or that a client wants to know during the implementation of an intervention

Example. In Malawi, more information was desired beyond just knowing if teachers are using the scripted lesson plans or not. A study is in progress that will provide an in-depth understanding of the ways in which teachers are using and thinking about the scripted lesson plans.

- Test instructional strategies, materials, teacher training methods, and coaching techniques that we hypothesize will improve learning outcomes

Example. We may want to introduce a particular instructional approach for improving how we teach comprehension in grades 1-3, based on what we know about the local context and reading comprehension instruction. We may develop a few weeks' worth of materials, work with a teacher, and try out the materials with students, revising along the way, and measuring student learning resulting from these lessons. After finalizing the lessons, we would integrate them into a new or ongoing program.

Components of qualitative research

While there are many procedures and methods to choose from in the research design, qualitative research is systematic research that contains the following components:

- Problem formation and hypothesis
 - How the research contributes to current knowledge or solves a practical problem
 - How it relates to relevant literature
 - Theoretical or conceptual framework, including a hypothesis—developed and refined in the research process (Banks, 2007)
- Study design
 - Is clearly and explicitly related to the research question
 - Includes planning for triangulation of data: “An essential tactic is to use multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2009, p. 2)
- Sources of evidence
 - Who is being studied, why they were selected, and how they were selected
 - What sources of data are being gathered
- Analysis and results
 - Analysis process is iterative, with clear descriptions of the process of coding and presenting results
 - All results must have evidence presented to warrant all claims, detailing the process of how this evidence was analyzed
 - Researchers present plausible alternate hypotheses and detail challenges to validity, along with how they were dealt with in the study

Using Qualitative Research Results

One potential drawback of qualitative research is its lack of generalizability to populations other than the group of individuals directly studied.

- Most qualitative research is generalizable not to populations, but instead to the theoretical framework and hypotheses.
 - Results confirm, revise, and build on theory by explaining and documenting relationships
 - Revisions and additions to the theory feed back into the project
- For example, qualitative research:
 - **May say:** Teachers make informed modifications that are related to topics covered in the teacher training.
 - **Can't say:** Teachers make informed modifications because of the high quality of the teacher training they received.
 - **Can't say:** Teachers in Malawi find the scripted lessons useful to their teaching.





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Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research is research in which the problem and questions require methods that are both quantitative and qualitative in order to answer them effectively. A mixed methods design requires the systematic use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and analysis, where the different sources of evidence inform one another. A mixed methods study is conceptualized as mixed methods from the design phase in which research questions are formulated.

Qualitative Research Study

Malawi Scripting Study, conducted by RTI

Field staff on the Malawi Early Grade Reading Activity were interested in understanding how teachers were using the scripted lessons, beyond simply knowing if they used them or not. A qualitative study was designed to answer the questions of how teachers were using the lesson plans, what they thought about the lesson plans, and how the support they received from the teacher training, coaches, and the head teacher met (or didn't meet) their needs. Six schools of different achievement levels (high, medium, and low) were selected. The methods included classroom observations with different foci, teacher interviews, head teacher interviews, and coach interviews. These methods allowed for triangulation of the data and analysis of patterns that emerged among the different schools and teachers. Analysis and results are currently in progress.

Mixed Methods Study

Rwanda Results-Based Aid in Education Evaluation, conducted by Upper Quartile and the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research-Rwanda (IPAR)

A mixed methods evaluation was conducted to understand the success of the Results-Based Aid (RBA) in Education program funded by the UK Department for International Development. The purpose of the study was to understand how the RBA program contributed to the stated results of the project, which included increases in learning outcomes and teacher capacity. The study utilized political economy analysis; national-level key informant interviews; quantitative modeling; and qualitative interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations on a subsample of the population to triangulate data and present a comprehensive evaluation. Results pointed to broad findings (i.e., children with disabilities were at the greatest risk of never attending school) in addition to more nuanced findings (i.e., there was evidence for practices that may improve teacher proficiency in English) due to the mixed methods approach.

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