

**INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
MA MODULE: INVESTIGATING RESEARCH**

CRITICAL REVIEW

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**‘Using grounded theory to understand teacher socialisation: A
research experience’
(by Esthery Dembo Kunkwenzu and Chris Reddy)**

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**Date of Submission:
3rd September 2012**

**Number of words:
1507**

Overview

In this paper Kunkwenzu (2009) seeks to explore the professional experiences of beginning teachers through conducting a qualitative study using a grounded theory approach. The study attempts to produce a theoretical framework that is grounded in questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, reflective diaries and focus group discussions with 6 newly qualified teachers in Malawi, South East Africa. Over a five month period the author collects data that is analysed effectively using a grounded theory approach and from this a 3 stage substantive theory emerges. The reliability of this is unclear however, as there is little space allocated to the reflection of collected data or interpretation of the emergent theory. The relation of theory to the conclusions drawn is therefore tenuous; the main result of the study being Kunkwenzu's (2009) conclusion that constraining school environments can be seen to exacerbate the vulnerability of beginning teachers as they restrict the opportunities for the reflection needed for continuing professional development.

Rationale; aims and initial claims:

Kunkwenzu's (2009) interest appears to derive from the experience of being an educator of Home Economics teachers and a teacher herself. Initially the aims of the paper appear directed towards the research process and approach of grounded theory itself. As the paper progresses however, the aims in regards to the empirical field emerge more clearly. This critical review will reflect upon these by referring to them as they arise in relation to the research area discussed.

The overriding claim Kunkwenzu (2009) appears to make relates to what it is felt to be missing from research on new teachers and the start of their careers. It centres on what is insinuated to be a void in theory, and aims to develop a theoretical framework that the author claims is an attempt to fill this. The context of the empirical setting (the African education system) is briefly touched upon, with the author citing that there is a greater lack of concerted effort in evolving systems of teacher education there compared to that of Europe and the USA.

Research Design and methodological choices made

There is a thorough attempt to contextualise the approach of the study in relation to theory and previous research. Kunkwenzu (2009) makes the epistemological assumptions made explicit, and that of the interpretative paradigm, whilst justifying the chosen process of developing interpretive grounded theory. Creswell (2007) identifies that the relation of the researcher to the participants in a qualitative study following such assumptions as needing to be as close as possible. By engaging with the samples in their respective schools over a period of time, and being from within the practitioner field of teaching themselves, the author demonstrates their attempt in following this identified philosophical approach.

The paper presents sound justifications with regard to the chosen approach of grounded theory. The way in which Kunkwenzu (2009) uses the terminology could benefit from some clarity however; grounded theory is often referred to in relation to being a method in itself - rather than an approach. Creswell (2007) cites it as a systematic approach that provides a procedure for developing categories of information, Silverman (2006) as an approach to

methodology. Clarity could have been gained by ensuring grounded theory was not mentioned as a methodological choice but rather as a way in which to approach the qualitative study.

The empirical setting of Malawi in Africa is briefly discussed, with the study following the experiences a small sample of beginning teachers (4 male and 2 female) having just been employed by the Ministry of Education and sent to various schools – 3 in the central region of Malawi, 3 in the southern region. There is a limited amount of contextual information available with regard to the empirical setting - we have no information on how access was gained, how Kunkwenzu (2009) came to this sample, or what level of confidentiality was promised. Dowling and Brown (2010) call for caution when research does not make a detailed reference to the empirical setting as in its absence we are unable to ask the required questions of its ethical field.

Theoretical sampling is identified as a key element of grounded theory but it is unclear if this is the sampling strategy that has been implemented. In fact sampling strategies are not talked about at all. Without paying attention to sampling procedures Dowling and Brown (2010) feel the validity of generalising beyond the sample itself is brought into question. Qualitative data does not necessarily seek to generalise however, but if data collection is not controlled by the emerging theory, as in theoretical sampling, Glasser and Strauss (1967) cite the alternative pre-planned sampling routines as potentially forcing the researcher into ‘irrelevant directions and harmful pitfalls’ (p.48) during analysis. Either way it is clear that by providing

more information on sampling strategies Kunkwenzu (2009) would have provided a greater level of validity in regards to the data collected.

The data is collected using a range of what the author calls ‘research tools’, including questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, reflective diaries and focus group discussions. Each research tool is briefly described through presenting a rationale for their inclusion in the research design through reference to theory. Though this enables the demonstration of sound and appropriate methodology, it did not leave space for greater discussion on how data collection was implemented. There is little information on observations for example – a schedule is not offered. Neither the observations nor reflective diaries are discussed. Little of the data is referred - leaving us knowing very little about what the teachers felt about their experiences, and therefore unsure if the analysis of this data has accurately reflected actual findings. For the purpose of this research it would have been pertinent to justify these methodological choices by signposting the areas of data collection that are referred to in the paper, and which are left out and why.

The research contains 2 points that Creswell (2007) identifies as characteristics of a good qualitative study; the triangulation of data and the presentation of stages in analysis. The data analysis is an area of strength in this study. Elements that Glaser and Strauss (1967) outline as tools in the effective development of any grounded theory; open coding, constant comparison, the use of memos to aid category identification and attempt saturation, are not only evident but are used to demonstrate reflectively the processes involved in a grounded theory approach. Though paid to the dialogic relation of data collection and data analysis,

as noted by Dowling and Brown (2010) as a further fundamental characteristic of grounded theory, is also evident - the author's research design ensures data analysis starts as soon as data collection does, enabling one to inform the other. It is in this reflection and analysis of data that Kunkwenzu (2009) discusses limitations; this is the only part of the paper that does this however. Creswell (2007) identifies ethics of a good study to address issues throughout all phases of research. The absence of any limitations that may have occurred in the empirical setting, sampling and data collection seem unlikely; therefore raising questions with regard to the reliability of the data collected and ethical considerations made.

The grounded theory that emerges from this study is labelled as a '3 stage substantive theory'. It provides 'socialisation shock, problems and challenges, and establishing self as a teacher' as the main characteristics involved in the process of becoming a new teacher. The conclusions drawn do not directly refer or reflect these stages however. No judgements on the thoroughness of the research process, or reference to the findings in terms of being empirically grounded, are made - elements Creswell (2007) identifies as providing validation to conclusions. We are left once more with questions with regard to the evidence made available to us that may substantiate the Kunkwenzu's (2009) original claims.

Conclusions

The research study contains many strong elements; Kunkwenzu's (2009) claims are relevant, the theoretical background is sound, the empirical setting (though not fully described) is relevant to the research question set, and the research design and methodology are thorough. Overriding this however is the fact that it is unclear if the emergent theory is truly grounded

in the data collected from the empirical field, nor how the conclusions directly relate to this. Glaser and Strauss (1967) cite that when a researcher has completed research they face the problem of conveying the credibility of the grounded theory in 2 ways; firstly to ensure it is understood, and secondly to describe the data so clearly that the reader can ‘literally see and hear its people – but always in relation to the theory’ (p.228). The latter point is something this study fails to do.

Though successful in being a thorough and reflective illustration of the processes involved in a study taking a grounded theory approach, the development of a theoretical framework, though evident, is limited. Kunkwenzu’s (2009) claims that the theory emerging from the research will fill a void – enabling us to better understand the experiences of beginning teachers, is unsubstantiated by the evidence and theory that is presented.

References

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