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Coursework

Part A: Critical Review (1420 words)

Part B: Research Proposal (3428 words)

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Part A: Critical review

'A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation.'
Nitta, Keith A., Holley, Marc J. & Wrobel, Sharon L.

The aim of this paper by Nitta, Holley and Wrobel (2010) was to contribute to the debate surrounding school consolidation in the United States of America. The authors did not intend to generate recommendations based on their findings but rather to offer a description of the effects of the process based on the experiences of direct participants: educators and students. They identified a need for this research as most of the literature on the topic focused on financial and community debates, for example the benefits of economies of scale, rather than on the impact on the people most directly involved. The limited studies that did exist produced contradictory results, for example on the optimal size of a school for positive social relationships. The authors justified the need for further research because school consolidation had once again surfaced on policy agendas and because the experience of students and educators was often used in arguments for or against consolidation.

The investigation focused on the experience of school consolidation in the state of Arkansas between 2003 and 2006. The researchers interviewed a total of twenty-three people, which included students, teachers and administrators, drawn from four schools that underwent consolidation. There were two main findings. Firstly, that "*students adapted better than teachers to social disruption created by consolidation*" and secondly, "*that nearly all students and all teachers, moving and receiving, reported experiencing at least some benefits from consolidation.*" (Nitta, et al, 2010, p1). Although the authors make a clear case for the relevance of their research, it can be argued that the design and execution of the investigation was problematic in several ways, which makes the findings less convincing.

The authors argue that they chose a phenomenological approach for their research because it was the "*most appropriate to understanding the lived experience of those affected by consolidation*." (p.8). To justify their choice they cite Creswell who states "*the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence*." (p.8). But although, as Crewswell (2013) points out, this approach does allow the study of the experiences of a group of individuals, and as such would be a valid method, the crucial question is if 'school consolidation' can be defined as a single phenomenon with a 'universal essence'.

Firstly, the authors themselves admit that it is a "*broad term*" (p.1) and a careful reading of their study reveals that several different processes (phenomena) may have taken place. For example, although all the schools in the sample experienced consolidation, the authors explain two different scenarios: mergers and annexations. In the mergers, two schools of a similar size and racial composition combined and created a new school with a new name and new colours, whereas in an annexation one larger school absorbed a much smaller one. In addition, in one of the cases of annexation the racial composition was very different and the process happened in the middle of the school year. It could therefore be argued that a consolidation/merger and a consolidation/annexation are two different phenomena and that the experience may vary for the participants.

Secondly, the authors combine the experiences of consolidation for students and adults to bring out the essence of the phenomenon. However, this is problematic because the significance and experience of school life is different for teachers and students, for example,

consolidation put teachers' jobs at risk: "*job losses at these districts ranged from 9 to 28%.*" (p.8). The threat of losing a job is a potentially traumatic experience that students would not have experienced, and might go some way to explaining why teachers found consolidation more difficult.

Considering the differences highlighted above, it is hardly surprising that the picture that emerged after data collection was "*complicated"* and that "*stories sometimes contradict one another*" (p.2), and that the authors find it necessary to qualify their descriptions and findings. However, having 'exceptions' (p.2 &14) is incompatible with defining the essence of a phenomenon. The reader is left wondering if it would have perhaps been better to refine the topic further, e.g. to look at experiences of merger consolidations separately.

Sampling for the study took place on two levels, the selection of the schools and the selection of student and staff for interview. In line with the needs of a phenomenological study the sampling was purposeful meaning "*that the enquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon…*" (Creswell 2013, p.299). The authors attempted to define a representative sample of schools that had undergone consolidation by the spring of 2007 and used four criteria for the selection of schools including age of students and a critical mass of moving students and staff. However, the resulting sample was not ideal because not all first choices agreed to participate and it did not cover all the geographical regions of Arkansas. It also becomes clear later in the paper that the minimum number of staff moving was not met for some schools. The authors recognize that the sample of schools had limitations that make their findings difficult to generalize, for example some of the schools that refused to participate could have had more negative consolidation experiences. In addition it is necessary to highlight that the sample contained very different schools, for example in terms of size, academic and socio-economic background of its students.

There were further difficulties with the selection of the interview subjects. For reasons that are not made clear other than to mention "logistical reasons", which included obtaining consent forms and suitable timetables (p.4), the school principals were given the responsibility of drawing up lists of students from which the researchers would randomly pick the interviewees for each category (e.g. five students who moved). Recognizing that the principals would be able to bias the sample (for example by listing the best adjusted students), the researches "*asked principals to make available a group of students that would represent accurately a broad range of experiences and specifically requested that they randomly select students from this pool*." (p.4). The question is of course how the researchers could have checked this. And they themselves state that this sample bias, which is also found with staff selection, is one of the limitations of their study.

In line with a phenomenological approach, data collection consisted of in-depth interviews that lasted an hour long. Interviews were held on site in the spring of 2007. The interviews seem to have happened a long time after the event, e.g. *"…receiving teachers experienced difficulties forming relationships, even years after the consolidation occurred*." (p.9), but the time lapse was different as schools consolidated in 2003, 2004 or 2005. This is a significant point because it is possible that reported feelings about consolidation could change over time, meaning that if subjects from one school were interviewed just after consolidation and others years after the process the data would not really be comparable. Interviews were structured around detailed questionnaires that had two main types of questions: open-ended to allow participants " to describe their experience of consolidation in their own words." (p.8), and specific questions relevant to each group. What is somewhat surprising is that the open-ended

questions were not in fact the same for all participants. Some were asked, "*do you think consolidation is a good thing?*" And others received *"…a good or bad thing*…? (pp.16-19), which could have resulted in a subtle bias in the responses.

Data analysis of the transcripts focused on finding 'significant statements' and then generating themes. Following this, the textural, structural and final composite descriptions were written. However, a reading of these themes and the descriptions leaves the reader unconvinced that the authors have managed to find truly common experiences as there are many qualifications and statements such as 'some', 'generally' and 'a few' that highlight exceptions and detract from the identification of the 'essence' of the phenomenon of consolidation.

Throughout the paper the authors identify limitations in their research and emphasize that findings cannot be generalized. Even so, the reader is left with the impression that the study has been unable to describe the essence of the phenomenon of school consolidation. The use of words such as 'generally', 'in contrast' and 'notable exception' (p.2) highlight that the experiences of the participants were diverse, and hence not a single phenomenon within the parameters set by the researchers for this particular study.

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Part B: Research Proposal

A. Theoretical background to the research issue.

Illeris (2007) argues that learning results from the interrelationship of three essential 'dimensions'. On one hand there is the external process of interaction between the learner and his/her environment (the interaction dimension) and on the other hand the internal psychological processes of elaboration and acquisition, in which he distinguishes between what is to be learned (the content dimension) and the mental energy deployed (the incentive dimension). The incentive dimension includes motivation, emotions and volition (will) and Illeris highlights that some of the most important findings of recent research into learning have established its crucial role in all learning processes and outcomes.

An exploratory literature search using the words 'motivation' and 'learning' shows that this has indeed become an increasingly popular research topic, particularly in the field of psychology. One influential example is the work conducted by Ryan and Deci (2000) on 'Self-determination theory' and the factors that enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and well-being. They argue that contexts supportive of autonomy, competence and relatedness can lead to more intrinsic motivation and the internalization and integration of external motivation, both of which act as powerful 'motors' of the mental energy that Illeris identifies as necessary for learning, as well as increased self regulation and well-being (which can be linked to the volition and emotion elements of the incentive dimension).

Therefore, if effective learning is to take place in our classrooms the incentive dimension needs to be considered and addressed. This, however, is not straightforward because its study requires making visible internal psychological processes. There are different ways of attempting to do so, for example, Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon and Barch (2004) chose to focus their research on student 'engagement' as a set of behaviours that could express motivation, while Del Favero, Boscolo, Vidotto and Vicentini (2007) opted for the assessment of student 'interest'.

Studies that have explored how to enhance student motivation have focused on various factors, the most frequent being teachers' motivational styles, classroom goal orientations, instructional approaches and subject curriculum content. Coverage in terms of student motivation in specific subjects varies widely and Del Favero, et al (2007) highlight that "*Research in the teaching of history has mainly investigated the effects of instructional approaches on students' comprehension of historical concepts (…) whereas the motivational aspects of learning history have received little attention.*" (p.635) A preliminary literature search in academic journals suggests that, five years later, this is still the case although a review of articles in 'Teaching History' provides evidence that teachers in the UK are addressing the issue, for example by encouraging student autonomy and choice (see for example Burham (2007), Conway (2011), Hammond (2011) and Knight (2008)).

B. Critical discussion of relevant research articles

With the title "*Pupils' enjoyment of history: what lessons can teachers learn from their pupils?*" the paper by Harris and Haydn (2006) seems a good starting point for exploring how to enhance students' motivation for the study of history. This research project explored pupils' attitudes towards this school subject "*with a view to developing a better understanding of the factors which influence disaffection or engagement…*" (p.315). The study focused on students aged 11 to 14 (KS3), from 12 secondary schools, and was based on questionnaires and

interviews. A total of 1740 questionnaires were collected and 160 students were involved in focus group interviews. The main findings relevant to my research interest are that "*how pupils are taught appears to matter more than what they are taught*" (p.315) and that there are particular teaching approaches that students find effective (e.g. 'interactive' activities such as debate and role play) and others that appear to contribute to disaffection (e.g. writing essays).

Unfortunately, a careful examination of the paper leaves the reader less certain of the strength of these findings. In terms of methodology, there is no declared formal approach for the investigation, and data is collected and analysed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods with some elements of grounded theory (e.g. codes and categories) but not explained in detail. The sample of schools was drawn from the south-east of England and attempted to be representative of the variety of environments in which history is taught: e.g. nature of the school, academic results, socio-economic data and uptake of history at GCSE. However, no details are provided about the selected schools and there are few and limited references to the similarities or differences between them when data is analysed which is surprising given that the authors mention "*The importance of school effect that is highlighted in this study*." (p.330). The sample of students was balanced in terms of gender; included participants from all year groups studied; and was selected by the teachers. The authors argue that this last decision was justified as it enabled them to get 100% questionnaire response and willing and communicative subjects for the interviews. They defend the validity of this choice indicating that "*the responses to the questionnaires showed that the classes used did present a broad range of ability and attitude towards the subject*." (p.320); and that they compensated for the possible positive bias in focus groups by interviewing some Year 9 groups who had not chosen history at GCSE and had "*potentially more negative views*" (p.320). However, there are many factors that influence subject choice at GCSE, such as timetable constraints, which are not linked to dislike of a subject. It also seems that students for the focus group interviews were drawn only from the 7 schools that were consulted in 2004-5. This left almost half of the schools out and no information was provided about the characteristics of the schools in this reduced sample. These issues with the sampling cast doubt over the validity of generalizing the findings. Overall, the amount and quality of the data presented is limited and does not support a convincing argument, too many questions arise for which there are no answers. There is little evidence of statistical analysis and few relevant extracts from the interviews. An analysis of the findings suggest that these are less 'clear-cut' than what is suggested above, for example the level of student interest was determined by "*What they are taught, how they are taught and by whom they are taught…*" (p.321), "*There does appear to be some correlation between the teaching approaches employed and the level of enjoyment pupils expressed, although there is no precise observable pattern.*" (p.322), and there was "*no discernible pattern in identifying whether any particular topic was more interesting than another*" (p.323). With regards to the teaching approaches that students found most effective, the 'clear evidence' in favour of interactive activities are 614 positive comments, 295 of them for role play or drama. But when the authors linked this data to a measure of subject enjoyment they found 'anomalies', in other words, there was no clear correlation between the reported enjoyment of history and the number of times certain approaches were mentioned. A student quote used to illustrate strong support for interactive teaching that '*was typical of many*' is arguably inconclusive (p.322). In view of the fact that similar issues are found frequently throughout the paper, it can be argued that the usefulness of this study lies more in what it suggests as possible lines of enquiry, such as the factors that could enhance or diminish engagement, than its conclusions.

The paper "*Classroom discussion and individual problem-solving in the teaching of history: Do different instructional approaches affect interest in different ways?*" by Del Favero, Boscolo,

Vidotto and Vicentini (2007) reports the findings of a quantitative study which sought to compare the effects of two teaching strategies on students' learning, interest and self-perception of competence in the subject. The study involved 100 eighth grade students and four teachers from a public school in the north of Italy. The teaching strategies were individual problem-solving and problem-solving through discussion (class-wide and in small groups) and were used to teach two topics: World War I and the Italian economic boom. The findings, which the authors do not seek to generalize to a wider population, were firstly that both approaches seemed to have a similar effect on students learning of the topics (content), although "*discussion group students seemed to understand better the nature of historical inquiry*" (p.650). Secondly, that student 'situational interest' (temporary interest) was affected both by strategies and topics. With regards to strategies, the discussion group reported higher levels of participation and enjoyment, and the topic of World War I elicited much more interest than the economic boom. However, they also point out that "*no significant interaction between teaching methods and topics were found*." (p.651). Thirdly, with regards to 'individual interest' (the more stable attitude towards the subject) they found that the World War I topic had a positive effect regardless of the strategy used. Finally, self-perception of competence did not change for either strategy but the use of "*Structural equation models showed that situational interest elicited by the use of discussion and by World War I impacted both on students' individual interest and on self-perception of competence in history*." (p.635).

Based on a literature review on the topic of motivation the authors formulated three hypotheses to be tested in a classroom setting (detailed on page 639). This was a small-scale investigation and four teachers/classes were selected. Care was taken to ensure that, as far as possible, all four groups shared similar characteristics e.g. year group, socio-economic background, kind of school, exposure to teaching styles, etc. The preliminary phase consisted of interviews with the teachers that had the aim of ensuring that they had selected people who shared similar approaches to teaching and views about history, as well as to consult them about the topics to be used. The classes were evenly split between both teaching strategies. The sampling strategy used seems sound but, as the authors themselves point out in the discussion of their findings, it might have been useful to add a 'control group' which continued to be taught in the traditional way. The research was carried out in a further two stages (at the start of the school year: World War I topic, and towards the end of the school year: economic boom) and each involved pre-test measures (e.g. prior knowledge of topic, individual interest in history and self-perception of competence), the teaching activities designed by the researchers, and post-test measures (e.g. knowledge gained, interest, self-perception of competence). A detailed description of the procedure, including the teaching activities, can be found on pages 640-643. There is detailed information about the testing measures used, their construction and validation (e.g. Principal Component Analysis and Rasch models) and justification for the choices made. For example, for the knowledge tests, scoring rules were pre-established and papers scored independently by two judges. There is also detailed information on the results and the different statistical tests applied. Throughout the paper the authors are meticulous in explaining what they have done and why, and in providing data to illustrate and back up their assertions. The discussion section brings together the findings and the literature to assess the results in relation to the hypotheses and the authors are careful in their claims, highlighting where further research is needed and the limitations of their work, for example how "*changes in emotional aspects of interest are difficult to detect by questionnaires*." (p.652). This paper is useful in several ways. The detailed literature review looks at 'interest' in relation to multiple variables and considers many theories and studies of motivation and learning such as 'self determination theory' and 'collaborative learning'. Its differentiation of 'situational interest' and 'individual interest' could also prove useful for my own analysis. Finally, its findings suggest that increasing

student motivation in history lessons requires careful consideration of both the 'what is taught' and 'how it is taught' and these are things that I should pay particular attention to in my own research.

C. Statement of interest and general approach to be adopted.

I am interested in exploring what strategies seem to enhance student engagement (visible expression of motivation) in secondary history classrooms. To do this I will need to recruit teachers who are actively attempting to increase student motivation and study student responses to their classroom strategies. Having identified the teachers and secured access, the tentative questions to guide the research process will be:

i) What strategies are secondary history teachers using in their attempt to increase student motivation? What is the rationale behind these choices?

ii) How do students respond to these strategies?

iii) What other factors seem to have an impact on student engagement in the classroom?

iv) What does reflection on these experiences suggest about how to best enhance student engagement in secondary history classrooms?

Due to the exploratory nature of the proposed research – and its limited timeframe - a small-scale qualitative study seems to be the most suitable. As explained by Creswell (2013) this involves (among other things) collecting data in the natural setting, using multiple and flexible methods of data collection and data analysis that is 'sense-making' for example by using categories or themes. As the intent is to formulate tentative suggestions for classroom practice rather than generalize findings and conclusions, quantitative elements have not been included. The selection of data collection and analysis is pragmatic and not tied to a specific approach but is probably closest to a 'case study' because it seeks to explore an issue using specific illustrations. Creswell defines the 'instrumental case study' as one in which '*the focus is on a specific issue rather than on the case itself. The case then becomes a vehicle to better understand the issue…*'(p295). So in this particular research proposal the issue is enhancing student engagement in secondary history classrooms. The cases will be the classrooms of particular teachers with a particular group of students.

D. Sampling, data collection and analysis strategies

The empirical setting will be specific secondary history classrooms in which teachers are attempting to increase the motivation of a particular group of students. This would fit in with what Creswell (2013) describes as an instrumental 'collective case study' in which the researcher selects several cases to illustrate the issue. Once suitable and willing teachers have been identified via the Institute of Education community, it will be necessary to seek permission to visit the school, observe lessons and interview students.

<u>I. Sampling:</u>
Because I am looking for teachers who are actively attempting to increase motivation in a specific context (secondary history classrooms) and the approach is exploratory, seeking to reflect on and suggest ways forward rather than to generalize or construct a theory, the sample is best described as 'opportunistic' and is likely to take on the characteristics of a 'snowball sample' as described by Dowling and Brown (2010). In line with the small-scale

nature and limited time frame of this research project, as well as the aim to explore the issue in some depth, the initial aim is to recruit a minimum of one and a maximum of three teachers.

II. Data collection:
In line with a qualitative case-study approach, data collection is from multiple sources of information.

Interviews:
Interviews will take place on site and it is proposed that they are recorded (audio only) and transcribed. As Dowling and Brown (2010) point out, it is important to consider how the interviewees view the interviewer, as this will affect what they say. Therefore, it is important that the teachers are confident that the study does not involve a judgement of their professional competencies and that students do not think that they are being asked to assess their teacher.

i) With teachers both before and after the lesson observation to find out what strategies they intend to use and why, and later their thoughts on the success of the strategy in terms of increasing engagement. Interviews could also include the teacher's observations of what has worked in other lessons with the same class.

ii) With students (possibly in pairs so the experience is less intimidating) ideally after the lesson observation.

* Semi-structured: including questions to find out their opinions and thoughts with regards to the activities in the particular lesson and also explore what captures their interest and enthusiasm in history lessons in general (and what does not).
* Sample to be taken from students who volunteer to participate. Sample to include both boys and girls (if school is co-ed) and representing a range of academic ability if possible. At this stage the number of students to interview has not been defined and will depend in part on the final number of cases studied.

Lesson observations: if possible these will precede the interviews with students. The aim of the observation is to gather information on how the strategy is being applied (what the teacher does), how the students respond to it and other factors that seem to have an impact on student engagement (what the students do). The format will be non-participant and the data collected as fieldnotes as I will not be entering the setting with pre-determined categories nor with the aim of measuring frequency. The fieldnotes will be written following the guidelines suggested by Dowling and Brown (2010, p.61) as their structure allows the recording of data (contextual information and chronology of events) as well as the observers initial ideas and thoughts, while at the same time enabling a clear distinction between the two. At this stage I am unsure of how many observations to do per class and it will depend on the number of cases.

III. Data analysis:
Although this research project is not designed to be grounded theory, and the researcher has a particular interest, the general analytical strategy used in this approach could be useful. For example, the use of memos at an early stage to begin to explore possible concepts and ideas is relevant and productive. The format of the fieldnotes described above allows this and has the advantage that preliminary analysis can begin at the observation stage and will contribute to making the interviews with students more focused. The use of coding and the gradual move to core categories as explained by Kunkwenzu and Reddy (2009, pp.139-143) could be useful for

identifying patterns in the data, for example what strategies enhance engagement, which are neutral, and other factors that influence engagement. Categories could also help differentiate between students, for example high and low attainment, girls and boys, by age, etc.

IV. Ethical issues and contingencies:
In line with BERA guidelines for ethical research in education (BERA, 2011), several issues will need to be addressed. The first is to ensure that there is voluntary informed consent from all participants. For students under the age of 16 it will be necessary to obtain consent from guardians and this will be done in accordance to school policy. It is also important that participants are aware that they can withdraw at any time and to provide clear information about the investigation so that "*all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported*" (p.5). In addition, it will be necessary to discuss observation and interview arrangements with school management so as to minimize disruption to students learning e.g. missing lessons. Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity will be a priority and this can be achieved by masking names of students, teachers and schools. Finally, the issue of reciprocity should not be ignored. The teachers who participate in the study will be offered feedback after the observations and information on the findings of the study.

The proposal contemplates working with three cases. If it is not possible to find three teachers willing to participate then a more in-depth analysis can be made of one or two of the cases, for example by increasing the number of observations and student interviews. It is also possible that some of the participants are unable to contribute to the study due to illness or withdrawal and this will need to be taken into account in the analysis.

E. Contribution to the researchers professional and/or academic development

My main motivation for conducting this research project is to develop my competencies as a teacher and further my understanding of how I can help my students to learn effectively and contribute to their well-being. I believe this research may give me valuable insights and ideas about how I can increase my students engagement and learning in my lessons.

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