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Investigating Research

An interpretative phenomenological analysis of setting up Free Schools in England

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Statement of Research Interest

Free Schools were set up in England in 2010 to provide communities with the opportunity to 'improve our education system so that all children thrive and prosper, regardless of their background' (DfE, 2014). As this is a recent policy change there is a scarcity of research on them. This is reflected by the extensive research needs and priorities written by the DfE (2014). This proposed study will investigate and describe the experiences of people setting up, or who have set up, Free Schools in the United Kingdom. Listening to participant's stories may contribute to developing ideas of what a more successful educations system might look like, or could at least be an 'invitation to problem finding' (Bruner, 2002, p.20, in Kim, 2011, p.90).

Literature Review

In recent years the focus on improving our education system can be seen from the abundance of government documents published (DfE) and increased educational research on curriculum and pedagogy in the past few years. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) have provided evidence showing clear links between 'autonomy, accountability and high standards' (DfE, 2014, p.4), supporting the development of more autonomous Free Schools.

There are many areas of the education system under debate with curriculum (see Apple, 2013; Young, 2013) being of particular interest to me. This is because what we teach is a prerequisite to how we teach effectively. Critically, the forthcoming National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) has shown that despite wide concerns that learners are not being prepared for the unpredictable social, economic and environmental conditions that lay head (Moore, unpublished:1), our education system is fundamentally stagnant. As Free Schools are educational organisations given freedoms from the National Curriculum, hearing the experiences of people setting them up may provide insights into more effective, innovative curriculum designs. This echoes the ideas of the 1960's Swedish social democratic government who thought that free schools could 'serve as experimental laboratories' (Bunar, 2008, pp. 426). Encouragingly, the Department for Education's 2014 publication, Free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools: Research priorities and questions, states that they want to find out how the greater freedoms over the curriculum that Free Schools are given are used to promote innovation. I hope that this signals the government's willingness to consider other curriculum models.

The DfE (2014) are still some years away from collecting all the data they need to conclude whether Free Schools have raised standards in England, therefore, it is important to look at studies from other countries that have introduced Free Schools or other similar systems. There is some evidence of their positive impact on educational outcomes (see Hoxby, Murarka & Kang, 2009; Bohlmark & Lindahl, 2012). In terms of innovation, Lubienski (2003), analysed findings from several reports on Charter Schools (the American equivalent of Free

Schools) and found that organizational innovations were evident but educational ones, such as in relation to the curriculum, were not.

Despite extensive reports being published on alternative schools abroad, there are few empirical studies. I have found two, and although not directly related to my research, bring up interesting questions regarding the methodology of it.   First, a narrative inquiry focusing on a child attending an alternative school in America will be discussed. Then an empirical study that compares teachers in charter and traditional schools in America will be examined. I will identify the claims they make and whether they are justified in terms of their data collection and analysis. I will also explain their relevance to the research I propose to do.

Kim's (2011) narrative inquiry into a student's experiences at an alternative school in America is relevant to my research for two main reasons. Firstly, it shows that there is a need to improve the education system to provide positive experiences for all and secondly, it allows me to review a qualitative methodology that is being used more frequently (Kim, 2011). The author's aim was to explore the experiences of an individual's education at an alternative school in the hope to raise questions about current educational practice and provide ideas on improving educational experiences for all, the key idea in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Kim wants to change the perceptions of alternative schools through this study, as she feels that they can provide a positive experience for children struggling in the public education system.

The author explains that she chose the participant because of his 'mature and articulate nature' (Kim, 2011, p.85) and that his 'career goals were totally different from others in that class' (Kim, 2011, p.85). These reasons highlight that he was not necessarily representative of students in the same position as him. This makes it even more difficult than it would already be to generalise findings from a qualitative study.

Kim chose to use narrative inquiry in the form of a biographical journal. In a footnote the author explains that the biographical journal is constructed by the researcher and that she uses the pronoun 'I' to 'provoke a virtual reality' (p. 93). This is meant to provide a 'metaphoric loft' (Kim, 2011, p. 77) to help imagine the experiences of other students attending alternative schools. This literary form can be very personal and emotive. Munro (1998) suggests that narrative research in the educational field challenges that knowledge is objective. This echoes the ideas behind phenomenological studies. This reduces the reliability of the study as there is no clear explanation as to how the journals are constructed.

Kim (2011) collected data through a variety of means; observation, participant observation, informal conversations, school documents, drawings and poetry. The data collected was over a 5 month period on nearly a daily basis and she had the trust of the alternative school community because of the time she spent there and the relationships that she formed. This allowed the author to 'collect extensive information about the participant and ... have a clear understanding of the context of the individual's life' (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). However, questions that will always arise from this methodology is 'What is the effect of restorying the account?' (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Kim's findings are that there should be a more child-centred approach, the image of alternative schools needs to improve as it has an impact on the students' images of themselves, and that relational pedagogy should be developed. These findings are not all in the data that the author presents to the reader but are more solutions to the problems she found.

The second piece of empirical research is Bomotti, Ginsberg and Cobb's (1999) comparative study, which used both quantitative and qualitative data. Their aim was to examine whether charter schools offered teachers opportunities to enhance their professional lives more than traditional public school teachers. This is relevant to my research because the authors decided to measure professional lives in terms of empowerment issues, school climate and working conditions. Critically, empowerment was looked at in terms of the school-wide arena, being in classrooms with students and of particular interest to me, curriculum content.

The authors create a simple dialogue between the empirical and theoretical field, which Dowling and Brown (2010) suggest should exist in any research. For example, they linked their empirical finding that teachers in Charter schools felt like professionals (despite any data showing concrete examples of why) to the theoretical idea of 'espirit de corps effect' (Wells and Associates, 1998).

The way in which the samples that were being compared were selected, namely teachers from charter schools and those from traditional public schools, is clearly explained. The authors make clear that they tried to match charter schools to public schools in terms of location and grades but this with difficult due to school configuration. This led them to match two or three charter schools to one traditional public school because charter schools were smaller. As all results were presented as percentages or means, this seems to have been an unnecessary methodological step.

Response rates were 46% and 47% for the two teaching groups. The authors do not acknowledge that here is the possibility that the type of teacher responding to surveys may be different to those who do not in terms of the dependent variable of this study, professionalism, but I think this is an important point to highlight. Non-response to surveys can bias statistical results (Groves, Dillman, Eltinge & Little, 2002). The way in which the authors created the survey consisted of a majority of questions producing quantitative data with just a few producing qualitative. The questions in the survey were not created by the authors themselves and there is no evidence that they conducted a pilot study to identify any questions that did not disseminate and exclude them from the actual study (Dowling, unpublished lecture, 2014). It is possible that they do not really test what this study is aiming to find, raising reliability as an issue, but I cannot draw conclusions as the questions are not available to the reader.

The study used factor analysis. Dowling (unpublished lecture, 2014) raises the point that it can raise validity issues because it could be argued that it can be employed in a variety of ways to create differing results. The correct statistical analysis was completed, analysis of variance (ANOVA), as there were three variables to compare (Brysbaert, 2011).

The authors provide a table with percentages of demographic characteristics, pointing out differences between charter and public school teachers. They relate this back to previous research and confirm previous findings. The analysis of results are clearly laid out. Each research question is responded to with an ANOVA table and a descriptive statistics table so that it is clear which group of teachers felt more or less professional. Of particular interest to my research, no statistical significant difference was found between free and public school teachers perceptions of empowerment over the curriculum.

The main analysis was based on the questions leading to quantitative data, but in the discussion the authors pull in some qualitative data collected from open-ended questions in the survey. One comment provided by a teacher was 'I have the freedom to be creative and innovative while expanding and elaborating on the global core curriculum' *(p. 14)*. There is no more information on this showing the clear disadvantage of having people filling in surveys. Conducting a semi-structured interview with participants would allow the researcher to probe into a comment like this.

The authors conclude from the qualitative data, which is not provided to the reader, that both groups of teachers generally felt happy with the level of flexibility they felt they had over curriculum decisions. They link these findings to expressed concerns from a variety of professional educational organizations that 'charter schools have not, as yet, established themselves as labs of innovation or experimentation' (Colorado Department of Education, 1999). These claims may be fair but must be questioned as there is no evidence of this in the data published in the study.

The authors suggest directions for future research, highlighting that they did not control for any measure of school effectiveness. This study did collect a large amount of data so findings can be generalised with caution.

Research design and general approach

The idea of Free Schools has created much debate over the past few years in the UK and is seen as a contentious change in educational policy. This debate goes beyond this research. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of people involved (Maypole & Davies, 2001) in setting up Free Schools in the United Kingdom. Using a phenomenological approach requires acknowledgement that individuals have subjective experiences of a phenomenon as well as objective experiences of something in common with other people (Creswell, p. 78) (Figure 1).

I will be using an interpretive phenomenological approach, which stems from the ideas of Heidegger. These differ from Husserl's as description and understanding are both considered important (Dowling, 2007).   I will be writing a description of the phenomenon maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry and then interpreting the meanings found (Creswell, 2013). I will not be using bracketing, the process of discussing experiences with the phenomenon and setting them aside. This is because I agree van Manen's (1990)
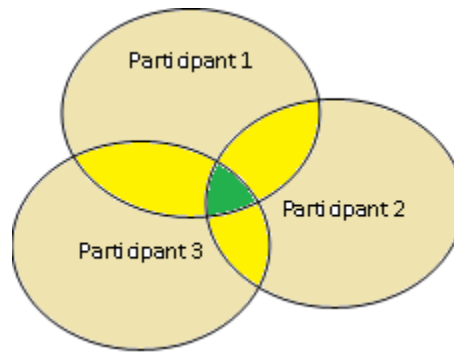
Key
🟩 objective experience 🟨 partly objective, partly subjective experiences ⬜ subjective experiences

Figure 1. The objective and subjective experiences of a phenomenon.

query that 'If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already know, we might find that the presupposition persistently creep back into our reflections' (p.47).

Empirical setting

Access

I have a contact at the New Schools Network (NSN) which works with proposer groups looking to set up Free Schools in the United Kingdom. They give advice on applications, the process, facilitate meetings with education specialists and help with mock interviews. I will use them as an intermediary contact for people wanting to, or who have, set up Free Schools.

Sampling

As I will be looking particularly at one phenomenon I will be using 'purposeful sampling' (Creswell, 2013, p. 156) with participants who meet the criterion of being involved in setting up a Free School, to ensure that 'all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied' (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Elements of this sampling will include it being opportunistic and snowballing (Wengraf, 2004) because, as can be seen from the access section, it may be difficult to find participants and I will need to rely on following new leads (Dowling & Brown, 2008). I hope to generate a sample of at least seven participants who have been, or who are, involved in setting up Free Schools, taking advice from Creswell (2013) who recommends studying 3 to 10 participants. Participants will ideally be from more than one school as it is the experience of Free Schools in general that I am interested in, rather than the experience in one particular school (Dowling, unpublished email, 2014).

Data collection

The process of collecting data will involve solely in-depth interviews. The interviews I plan to conduct will be semi-structured. I will start with the main question, 'Tell me about your experience of setting up a Free School.'   I feel that this statement does the same as the vignette used by Denovan & Macaskill (2013) study using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which 'provided enough contextual information but was ambiguous enough to be open to interpretation based on the participants' perceptions and experience' (p. 9). There

will then be unplanned follow-up questions and probes to make sure that I get the 'depth, detail, vividness, richness and nuances' (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p.129) that qualitative data can provide. However, I must bear in mind Dowling and Brown's (2010) advice that probes and prompts can interrupt 'the spontaneity of the response' (p. 68) and much thought should be given to them in advance. I will also make sure to start with questions which promote narrative responses first, leading on to more a more detailed discussion (Dowling & Brown, 2010). I will also be writing field notes straight after the interviews. These will take on observational, theoretical, methodological and analytical forms and I am aware that these are part of the data analysis as they involve my interpretation of events (Groenewald, 2004).

Dowling and Brown (2010) stress the importance of the location of interviews. I will give participants the opportunity to be interviewed on-site at a school or completely off-site; whichever would make them more comfortable. Groenewald (2004) reminds researchers that equipment failure and environmental conditions could ruin research so I will ensure that my sound recording equipment is working properly and that we are in a room free of background noise.

Data analysis

Following Dowling & Brown's (2010) recommendation I will transcribe the interviews myself, but not before having read each transcript several times to encourage familiarity, which is what Denovan & Macaskill (2013) and Douglas & Carless (2009) did.

The data analysis will follow a set of systematic procedures for each transcript in turn. After the first participant interview I will focus on identifying broad concepts and themes (Douglas & Carless, 2009).   Preliminary themes will be noted and will then be grouped into broader units of meaning. As recommended by Denovan & Macaskill (2013) these broader units of meaning will be validated by checking with the transcript. Quotes from the transcripts will then be used as examples of these broader units of meaning so that it is clear they are representative of the data. Any broader units of meaning without supportive quotes will be removed (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). This will then be done for each transcript and the broader units of meaning compared. Overlapping ones will then become main themes (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013) eventually leading to identifying key properties of these (Johnston, 2008). Having my research supervisor check the coding system will make the data more reliable. These main themes will clarify the importance of 'what the interviewee says and how they say it' (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p.78) creating a detailed description of the lived experiences of setting up a Free School. An example of capturing how participants say things comes from Kalthoff's (2013) research; 'They sighed and, sometimes with a distant look in their eyes, they often showed a lack of understanding regarding that which they were reading' (p. 94).

The above procedures contain aspects of Glaser's grounded theory (Dowling & Brown, 2010), particularly constant comparison. This entails 'the constant comparison of emerging categories and their theoretical description with the data that has been collected' (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 86). As I will be conducting more than one interview I will be able to

briefly form a dialogic relation between data collection and data analysis, with one informing the other (Dowling & Brown, 2010).

Due to time constraints I will not be following Colaizzi's (1978) method in which the final step is to ask the participants how the descriptive results compare with their experiences (Dowling, 2007).

I will not have developed relationships with the participants because they work in different schools to me and I have not previously met them. I do need to be aware of the possibility of the Hawthorne effect which describes the effects of being studied on behaviour (Dowling & Brown, 2008).

Contingencies

The initial concern in this study is getting participants. The sampling techniques I will be using of opportunistic and snowballing will make it less difficult to get participants. If I am unable to do this I will need to change the focus of my study to describing and understanding the lived experiences of teachers in Free Schools as there are more potential participants that fit the criteria.

Ethical Issues

I will be following the ethical guidance outlined by the British Sociological Association (BSA). I need to be aware of the issues which Whiteman (2010) emphasises, that ethics is unstable and guidelines are broad and need to be adapted to specific research contexts. As my research will be conducted with participants who may be based in a school setting I need to be ready to divulge any information that raises concerns about child protection.

I will get written informed consent from the participants. This means that they need be knowledgeable about the study. In other words I need to 'disclose whatever information potential subjects would need to make an intelligent decision about participating in a study' (Thorne, 1980, p.286). It must be done by voluntary choice so I need to make sure I do not act in a forceful, fraudulent or deceitful manner (Thorne, 1980). I will not be providing a reward and there are no implications for the participants if they choose to not take part in my research. I do not anticipate having to renew the informed consent, as highlighted by Thorne (1980), because I will be collecting data through interviews which are 'bounded events of short duration' (Thorne, 1980, p. 290), so the likelihood of a situation changing is minimal.

I need to make sure that my research is worthwhile and techniques are appropriate.   I will do this through this dissertation proposal and by submitting the research to the Institute of Educations (IOE) ethical department for approval before commencing research.

I will provide participants with the following information. The research is about finding describing and understanding the experiences of setting up Free Schools, I am conducting the research for my Masters programme, it is being undertaken to allow for opportunities to spot problems with the current state educations system and potentially suggest ways of improving it and I will be submitting my final research to the IOE (BSA, 2002).

Participants will also be made aware that they can refuse to participate 'whenever and for whatever reason they wish' (BSA, 2002, p.21). I will make clear from the outset that I will be recording the interviews for the purpose of data analysis but that pseudonyms will be used for the participant and any school establishments, for anonymity and confidentiality reasons. Digital recordings will be kept in files with passwords and not shared with anyone else. Participants will be given read only access to the final research that I submit to the IOE. I will also clarify with participants that I have the right to publish and disseminate the results of my research (BSA, 2002).

Finally, I need to make sure that my research provides information or explanations and that I do not reach pre-decided conclusions (BSA, 2002).

Professional development

I hope that this research will contribute to my professional development in terms of helping to identify problems that the education system I work in has, and provide opportunities to begin to consider how to tackle them.

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