

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN IN EDUCATION: TOOLS, CHALLENGES, AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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**Abstract:** The main aim of this paper is to present the benefits of a qualitative research design. This design is based on the interconnected use of research tools and methods, such as interviews, observations, case studies, grounded theory, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The presented research design has been employed in numerous research projects and has proven highly effective. In this paper, we highlight the advantages of the proposed research design and address its challenges. We consider qualitative research design to be a vital tool in the field of educational sciences.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Research Design, Educational Sciences, Grounded Theory, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Pedagogical Practice

### 1 Introduction

Research and research methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, are integral to pedagogical practice and have long since transcended the confines of an exclusively academic environment. In today's dynamic and rapidly changing education system, educators are increasingly faced with the need to reflect on their practice, analyse the results and seek effective intervention strategies based on the information gained. Thus, research is becoming a tool that enables a deeper understanding of pedagogical processes and social phenomena and supports innovative educational approaches. The ability to apply research methods in practice strengthens the professionalism of educational staff. It opens the way to practical solutions to current educational problems related to risky behaviour, children's educational needs and other complex phenomena related to education. Research is not only the domain of academics but is a practical and effective tool for everyday educational practice.

The main aim of this paper will be to present a qualitative research design that has proven successful in our previous research projects. Our paper will focus on a few essential research tools and methods. Our findings are based on several previous research projects. We were led to choose a qualitative design because we needed to gain a deeper and more detailed insight into pedagogical practice. These fine details can be omitted in purely quantitative methodological design. This approach allowed us to understand better the current educational needs of the participants in the educational realities we examined. The choice of a qualitative design was motivated by the need to gain deeper insights into specific educational situations and contexts of pedagogical practice that often escape attention in purely quantitative measurement. This approach allowed us to understand the real needs of educators and their students and identify the strengths and pitfalls of existing methodological practices.

Our research has taken place in various educational realities - from primary school settings to art schools, orchestral ensembles, and the specific environments of children's homes. This diversity of settings allowed us to understand better how different research tools contribute to reflection and improve educational processes. Based on the positive feedback from the educational staff who participated in our research and from the professional community to whom we presented our research design, we gradually built a research model that has proven itself in research projects covering a wide range of educational realities from music schools, to residential care facilities, to standard school settings. We have explored issues of special educational needs, exceptional giftedness, and risky behaviour.

Our qualitative research design has considerable potential in academia, especially as a practical tool that can significantly enrich everyday educational practice.

In the first part of the article, we will present educational realities in which we have carried out research activities in the past. We describe the time frame of the research, and immediately, in this introductory section, we highlight the ethical aspects of the research conducted. In the second part of our paper, we will examine the different research tools and methods we have applied during our projects. Special emphasis will be placed on qualitative methods that have proven highly effective in pedagogical practice. In particular, we will discuss interviews, observations, and case studies. This part of the paper will conclude with an introduction to Grounded theory and Interpretive phenomenological analysis. Both methods have proven to be practical research methods capable of mapping the phenomena in detail and also allowing us to look for new connections. In the third part of the article, we will explore the limits of our research design. Despite the considerable advantages of qualitative methods, their limitations, such as time, subjective interpretation of data or difficulty in generalising results, cannot be overlooked. We will also discuss the need to complement the qualitative approach with quantitative methods to provide a broader scale for interpreting the results and confirming key trends identified during qualitative research. Particular attention will be paid to the possibilities of data triangulation and modifications to the research design to ensure the highest possible validity and reliability of our results. In the paper's final part, we will reflect on the critical need for intensive integration of pedagogical practice with current trends in educational research.

### 2 Research background

We have been conducting research activities in various educational settings since 2015. First, we explored the possibilities of music activities for children in residential childcare settings. This research took place not only in these particular environments but also during the actual implementation of the research musical activities, which were carried out in a leisure music ensemble. This orchestra operated in a standard primary school setting, and its members were not only children from the researched residential childcare setting but also children from the intact population. Later, we extended our research scope to the Czech music education system. In primary art schools, we investigated the readiness of the music education environment to work with pupils with special educational needs. In 2020, we focused our research mainly on residential childcare institutions. Here, we directed our research to different types of school facilities for the execution of institutional education, extended the scope of our research to the international level, and started research activities in Slovakia.

We are now penetrating more profound levels of the issue of residential institutions and are currently researching gender and environmental issues in children's homes. We participate in the educational process in all the projects we implement. We have developed a composite research design that combines different methods and research tools for this rich spectrum of topics, educational settings, and realities under investigation. We continuously refine and critically revise this research design. We continuously enrich it with appropriate research tools and adapt it to the fluid educational realities of today's changing society. Yes, as society changes, so must the approach to educational research. Especially for the inclusive paradigm, pedagogical research is an absolute critical necessity. A heterogeneous society requires flexible and comprehensive research approaches. Our research design is based on a synergistic combination of qualitative research tools and methods. Because our research projects are conducted in settings where children are present, we strictly adhere to privacy principles in all

research. We are aware of the ethical considerations associated with similar educational settings. A particularly sensitive research approach is needed in educational realities where we may encounter vulnerable individuals, such as the environment of a children's home.

### 3 Interviews

In qualitative research, interviews are one of the most commonly used methods of collecting information (Atkins and Wallace 2012; Švaříček and Šed'ová 2014). Interviews can benefit qualitative research by allowing for rich and in-depth data collection (Brinkman 2023). The purpose of the interview in educational research is to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of interviewees and to identify patterns, themes and insights that can inform educational policy and practice. We can observe a significant change in the researcher's view of the interview process. Previously, the emphasis was on the researcher's professional distance from the interviewees. However, Schulman (2006) argues that, in contrast to this grasp of interviews, it is necessary to allow the researcher to reconcile the personal component with the professional position. For the settings we studied, it was imperative to reconcile the research and personal levels as sensitively as possible, as we observed a range of negative experiences gained during the interviewees' life journeys, particularly for interviewees in institutional settings. We had to be aware that many of our respondents had been involved in interviews in the past, during which sensitive topics were handled. These topics can be uncomfortable for respondents during interviews (Indah 2022). Thus, it was necessary to balance the personal and research levels (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019).

The researcher seeks to obtain information about the respondents' experiences, perceptions and attitudes regarding a particular educational topic or issue by interviewing them. These interviews can take many forms: from structured interviews with a set list of questions to semistructured interviews to the most relaxed, i.e. unstructured, interviews with more general and open-ended questions (Georgescu and Anastasiu 2022). In our research projects, unstructured interviews have been the most successful. In the literature, the unstructured interview is the most challenging (Gavora 2010). A well-conducted interview creates a confidential atmosphere between the respondent and the interviewer, which leads to greater openness (Váňová and Skopal 2002). When this openness is linked to a trusting relationship between respondent and interviewer, the interview is an invaluable research tool. Skill, sensitivity, concentration, interpersonal understanding, and discipline are required of the researcher (Hendl 2016; Powney and Watts 2018). Interviews are a key research tool in educational research. However, conducting interviews is time-consuming and requires thorough preparation and professional execution. Even so, interviews remain indispensable in qualitative research and provide rich data that enrich pedagogical practice and contribute to a deeper understanding of pedagogical phenomena.

### 4 Observations

Observation is among the most challenging qualitative research methods (Papatheodorou et al. 2013; O'Leary 2013). Although they are demanding in terms of preparation, observations enable the acquisition of complex data through other research techniques (Maněnová and Skutil 2012). We believe a passive researcher cannot achieve better results than one actively involved in the research setting (Charmaz 2006). We benefit significantly from being actively involved in the educational realities or activities under investigation during the research conducted. We try to make the researcher himself a research instrument (Zháněl et al. 2014). In our qualitative research, we are in constant contact with the researched group, which is seen as a significant benefit in the literature (Creswell 2009). Being involved in the researched environment allows us to make long-term observations. Due to the researcher's involvement, we can spend much time in the research setting, which is of considerable importance for pedagogical research (Toušek 2015). It also

removes the distrust of respondents we sometimes encounter when the research setting is a very closed community. However, we need to be constantly aware of possible attempts by the observed to modify their behaviour because they are aware that they are research subjects. We speak of the *guinea pig effect*, whereby research subjects know they are being observed and modify their behaviour according to the researcher's expectations (Disman 1998). We have been able to eliminate this danger precisely by the aforementioned long-term presence of the researcher in the research setting. Pedagogical observation is a demanding research method that requires detailed knowledge of the environment under investigation and meticulous preparation (Fix et al. 2022). Observation is a valuable educational research method that captures spontaneous behaviour and interactions in the environment under study. Observation can be very effective in closed communities, such as special schools or educational institutions. However, observation requires considerable preparation, execution, and data analysis. The presence of a researcher can change the behaviour of respondents. Observation provides qualitative research with a deep insight into the reality of the researched educational system.

### 6 Case studies and working with pedagogical documentation

Interviews and observations should be informed by knowledge of the individual or group that is the subject of our research activities. Pedagogical documentation can provide us with this critically important information. If we conduct research in a residential childcare setting, we have access to the complete educational records that the residential childcare setting maintains on each child and young adult. These include social worker reports, court decisions, records of case conferences, medical reports, and more. This documentation is entirely inaccessible to the standard researcher because it is subject to the regulations of the children's home. If we conduct research in other educational realities, we should obtain the consent of the statutory representatives to inspect the educational documentation. The information obtained from the available documentation can be summarised in a case study.

In the Czech pedagogical environment, we encounter a rather loose understanding of case studies as a research tool. Case studies are often the subject of professional conjecture about how much of a research tool they are (Takahashi and Araujo 2019). Case studies have significant potential to help researchers delve into deeper levels of the phenomena under investigation, especially in the social sciences (Byrne and Ragin 2013). When working with case studies, the researcher needs to be familiar with the specificities of the target group (Patten and Newhart 2023). Case studies are very important for qualitative research (Hendl 2005). They are not mere information summaries; case studies are full-fledged research tools (Chrastina 2021). Case studies are a very effective way of finding detailed facts (VanWynsberghe and Khan 2007). A case study seeks to offer understanding to a much larger group of individuals through the information contained within it (Gerring 2004). Case studies provide a deep understanding of individual cases and contexts, offering a holistic view of how environments, experiences, and behaviours are interconnected. Their flexibility allows researchers to adapt to emerging problems. However, case studies are time-consuming and involve complex data analysis, which can lead to subjective bias. Their primary limitation is their low generalizability. Case-based studies are valuable, bring practical knowledge, and serve to provide a comprehensive understanding of the researched educational realities.

### 8 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that dates back to the 1960s. It was developed by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser (Strauss and Corbin 1999). Grounded theory is a theory inductively derived from the phenomenon under study. It uses the simile of feet firmly anchored in the phenomenon under study and heads in the clouds where the researcher seeks inspiration. It is not simply data analysis. Some scholars argue that grounded theory is a qualitative research method that some

experts consider the most comprehensive qualitative method available to create a theory or model of a phenomenon (Eger and Egerová 2017). Grounded theory allows us to understand the phenomenon under study comprehensively. The researcher seeks to obtain respondents' perspectives on the area under study (Saliya 2022). Theories are not formulated at the beginning of the research to be further confirmed or sought. The researcher approaches the problem under study with an open mind and must discard possible confirmation biases. The findings are continuously analysed and supplemented. The theory is then inductively inferred from the emergent facts (Briks et al. 2009). The researcher continues to collect and analyse information until theoretical saturation occurs (Hendl 2016). Theoretical saturation is when new facts no longer emerge, and the data collected are repetitive. The essential tool of grounded theory is coding what is being investigated.

Grounded theory works with open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz and Thornberg 2021). Grounded theory is suitable for domains where it is difficult to quantify results (Chun Tie et al. 2019). The research process is controlled only by emerging theories, and we continuously generate preliminary concepts and analytical hypotheses (Disman, 1998). A significant benefit to the research design was the freedom to gain new insights into areas that we had not considered relatively marginal at the beginning of the research. However, new research challenges emerged during the investigation. Grounded theory works using an inductive approach that reveals new perspectives and connections throughout the research process. Its flexibility allows for a deep understanding of the phenomenon under study and draws attention to previously unrecognised areas. This method is particularly effective in examining complex social and pedagogical problems. However, the grounded theory is time-consuming and methodologically demanding. Grounded theory is a valuable tool for in-depth qualitative research, offering new perspectives and enriching both theoretical and practical aspects of educational practice.

### 9 Interpretive phenomenological analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a modern qualitative research method. The main aim of this not-often-used method is to explore an individual's world in detail, to find out how that individual perceives the world and to capture how he or she explains life situations (Smith et al. 2009). Interpretive phenomenological analysis was initially used primarily in psychology. Like grounded theory, this method seeks the essence of an agency, a phenomenon, or an experience. By its very name, this research method is theoretically based on phenomenology. Phenomenology analyses facts so that the essential facts stand out above all. Like all philosophy, phenomenology asks about the very essence of things. Interpretive phenomenological analysis wants to be part of the process being analysed. It argues that subjective experience is necessary for an objective outcome (Smith 2015). It is always influenced by the person of the researcher (Řiháček et al. 2013). It emphasises the insider perspective; we talk about the so-called *insider* perspective. This method works on the principle of two-stage analysis: the participant indicates an understanding of his/her experience, and the researcher tries to understand the participant. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is an inductive and idiographic method. It is described as ideal for areas where theory is lacking (Nizza 2021). A design incorporating interpretive phenomenological analysis allows for the interpretation of 'lived experience' (Alase 2017). Interpretive phenomenological analysis is qualitative and inductive, favouring the absence of a single truth with an emphasis on the subjective interpretation of individual respondents (Gulova and Šíp 2013).

Since our research designs are heavily directed at the respondents' living space and work with intimate information, interpretive phenomenological analysis is an ideal research method (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008). For a more profound acceptance of this not-so-common research method, we have paraphrased the adage "the *full does not believe the hungry*" to

"the *researched does not believe the researcher*". We had to accept wholeheartedly that our perceptions of the environment and the educational realities under investigation must differ from those of the children and young adults who inhabit these realities. Aware of this reality and supported by our long-standing presence in the environments under study, we have opened the way to a richer use of the possibilities of interpretive phenomenological analysis, which has recently gained increasing support across disciplines (Rajasinghe et al. 2024). Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative method that deeply examines individuals' subjective perceptions and inner experiences. It captures how respondents interpret life situations, with the researcher actively trying to understand these experiences through their perspective. A two-step process, where participants reflect on their experiences and researchers interpret these reflections, provides a meaningful connection between data and insight. Focusing on unique individual experiences significantly limits generalizability. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is an effective tool for understanding lived experiences and offers authentic insights into the examined realities that enrich educational theory and practice.

### 10 Discussion

The qualitative research design presented in this paper allows for a deep dive into the issues under investigation. With the methodological design presented, we have demonstrated in our earlier research projects that exceptional giftedness in the residential childcare setting can be hidden under layers of special educational needs (Daněk 2024). With the help of this research design, we have highlighted the significant differences between different national grasps of institutional childcare (Daněk et al. 2023). In other project, we have identified the impact of alcohol on relational patterns, confirming the destructive role of alcohol in accelerating a range of serious social problems (Daněk et al. 2024). The theme of objectivity was present across all the research projects undertaken. A key requirement of any research is the objectivity of the results. In the case of a qualitative design based on the researcher's presence in the research setting, there is a risk that the results could be biased precisely by too much contact with the research setting. For this reason, we place considerable emphasis on the objectivity of the research. We use the principle of triangulation as a tool to enhance the objectivity of our research projects. Triangulation is a research method in which we subject our findings to the critical perspective of other research methods or researchers (Flick 2009). The term triangulation refers to the combination of different methods (Hendl 2016). We strive to use a wide range of research methods. We support interviews with observations and confront partial results with the outcomes of the analysis of pedagogical documentation.

Triangulation helps establish credibility by providing multiple forms of evidence to support conclusions. It can also help identify and resolve inconsistencies or conflicting information using a single method or data source. Triangulation is intended to ensure that research, especially qualitative research, is an objective tool of modern science. We gathered information using various methods while reflecting on the results observed by other experts working on the subject (Gavora 2010). Confronting our partial results with a plenum of experts proved to be a very effective triangulation tool. We offer our results to other colleagues for comment and critical review. We only publish outputs relevant to the educational realities we have studied and to other colleagues' home environments. With this critical feedback, we avoid a subjective grasp of the issues under investigation.

It can be said that virtually every research has to address specific ethical issues (Švaříček and Šed'ová 2014). In qualitative research, ethical aspects can reach the edge of legal requirements, especially regarding personal data protection (Eger and Egerová 2017). Ethical issues are crucial for our research conducted in educational realities. It is important to remember that the researcher is working with sensitive information, the misuse of which could harm the research participants. Failure to

follow privacy rules could result in the subsequent identification of research participants.

It is a matter of course for our research that we obtain consent to conduct the research from the statutory representative of the school environment under investigation. It is also necessary to obtain consent from the research participants themselves. Providing informed consent and the ability to refuse to participate in research are among the fundamental ethical obligations of the researcher. While implementing the research activities, we informed the participants that the research activities were ongoing. We presented the results, such as published articles, to the respondents for evaluation and regularly discussed our findings. We knew that if the research participants were under the impression that they had become mere objects of research, the trust built up over a long period would be undermined. Critically, we see the major limitation of methodological design as its considerable entanglement with the environments under study. Our results are complicated to generalise. Nevertheless, the results obtained by the qualitative design presented here have the potential to inspire other social settings.

## 11 Conclusion

Qualitative research design provides the opportunity to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomena investigated in various educational settings. A significant benefit of this approach is its ability to capture nuances, details and hidden connections that are very difficult to capture by quantitative methods. Qualitative methods have proven particularly effective in examining dynamic and sensitive phenomena such as risk behaviour, inclusion or specific educational needs. Using qualitative research methods allows the creation of a comprehensive picture of educational reality and then identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing pedagogical practices. The qualitative approach allows educators to better reflect on their practice, identify specific educational problems, and design effective intervention strategies. Despite its many advantages, it is necessary to think critically about the limitations of the qualitative research design presented. The subjective nature of qualitative research requires a high degree of reflexivity and discipline on the researcher's part to minimise the risk of data bias. Generalisation of results in this context is limited, but the knowledge gained has the potential to enrich specific environments and offer valuable insights that can inspire broader educational practice. Our experience and results show that qualitative research design is a flexible and effective tool for exploring various pedagogical phenomena. Qualitative research design undoubtedly has a firm place in today's dynamic society.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

**Secondary Paper Section: AM**