



# Education Quarterly Reviews

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**Alnaim, Mariam. (2018), Qualitative Research and Special Education. In: *Education Quarterly Reviews*, Vol.1, No.2, 301-308.**

ISSN 2621-5799

DOI: 10.31014/aor.1993.01.01.31

The online version of this article can be found at:

**<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>**

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Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# Qualitative Research and Special Education

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## Abstract

Qualitative research methods constitute the bulk of scientific design in the special education field because of their flexibility, open-ended nature, and the delivered ability to explore a complex reality with more insights and greater detail. To add, the qualitative design has been gaining even more attention in the recent decades, becoming a whole trend in special education literature. Based on the latter, the purpose of this research paper is to trace the usefulness and limitations of the qualitative methodology used in special education research in order to single out those methods which will appear the most applicable and practical in the field. Hence, the study design involves a literature review of five scientific articles devoted to qualitative research methods in special education research. The findings prove qualitative research methods as those which provide coherent, descriptive knowledge, help the researchers to get to the causes of the studied phenomena, structure the received data, and plan their further actions. The research paper also succeeds in defining three major qualitative methods, namely case studies in general, collective case studies, and ethnography, which seem the most hopeful in the special education field. The use of each depends on the specificity of data required, along with the challenges of the participants. At the same time, the study happens to reveal a number of challenges, which a scholar should be aware of in case of employing the qualitative design in special education research. Specifically, the research paper emphasizes various ethical issues that arise when one deals with the participants having special needs. In this case, a researcher should assure the safety and privacy of his or her target population; effective communication strategies are also to be set.

## Introduction

A significant complexity in research exists as far as special needs education is concerned, leading to specific demands on the use of appropriate methodology. Various researchers involved with qualitative research in the past few decades and have written various special education journals in that respect. However, much of this work falls within the parameters of producing useful technical information that can be applied to the contexts where children and adults with disabilities learn, work, and live (Brantlinger et al., 2015). Experimental and qualitative studies that rely on postmodern or post-structural analyses, critical theory, and narrative research with subjective personal stories seem may be considered too radical, ideological, and theoretical to make it into many special education scholarly outlets (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). Therefore, for the final project, I will do a literature review for five articles related to qualitative research in the special education field.

## Research Questions

1. What is the usefulness of qualitative methods in special education research?
2. What are the challenges of employing qualitative methods in the field of special education?

### 3. How can qualitative methods be implemented in special education research?

#### **Purpose of the Review**

Experimental and qualitative designs can contribute immensely to the fields of special education and disability studies and, hence, should reach those who receive or provide services to people with disabilities.

#### **Effect of Qualitative Methods in Special Education Research**

Qualitative research plays a significant role in the development of special education and the various programs involved (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). This method is a systematic approach that enables the understanding of qualities and relevant aspects within a certain context. Special education comes with a variety of needs and requirements that should be guaranteed if the desired educational objectives were to be realized. Qualitative design produces evidence based on science, which is then used to back up the decisions intended to transform the education of the people with special needs (Brantlinger et al., 2015).

Various scholars have indicated that qualitative research in special education is a positive motivation towards the development of the education sector. Empirical research provides information derived from a experience and critical observation of different prevailing situations (Brantlinger et al., 2015). Making the decision based on scientific evidence aids in ensuring the responsible authority derives the designated institution to success (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). Qualitative research leads to knowledge production in special education on the involved perspectives, the relevant settings, and the fitting techniques, which can be applied in certain conditions that require special attention. For example, people with learning disabilities suffer significantly in their desire to learn due to the lack of knowledge on the most appropriate methods that can be used to enhance their learning process. Through qualitative research, talking mats have been identified as devices and techniques relatively influence the communication with the students with learning disabilities (Mertens, 2014).

There is a given level of coherence in qualitative research involving special needs. The results findings are articulated coherently to form the basis of future research of the same caliber (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). Qualitative research answers the question on the changes occurring the special education, why they are occurring, and the how they are occurring, thus, informing responsible individuals the relevant actions to take to improve the quality or level of education. The main factor derailing the efforts to improve any process is the lack of information about the major factors influencing the self-sufficiency of the system (Mertens, 2014).

Through qualitative studies, researchers have developed descriptive information to help understand the people affected by disabilities. Other categories of information that have been established include understanding the nature of their families and those that provide care for them (Mertens, 2014). Through these attributes of descriptive studies, the design has proven significantly useful to scientific researchers whose objective is to improve the learning process for those that require special education. The composition of populations across the world has increased in diversity, and the number of people with disabilities continues to become clear. As the numbers increase, the necessity to develop an effective learning process for the affected becomes is significantly necessary (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

Qualitative research examines the attitude of the individuals involved in special education, owing to the importance a learner's attitude bears in his or her propensity to learn (Mertens, 2014). Their opinions regarding special education are also put into context and professionally analyzed to identify the order of importance of the factors they are to learn. The thoughts and attitudes of the public are also established through qualitative research. Various teaching strategies tested during the research process, and the reaction of the learners is established to inform the best strategy to adopt in the special education sector (Mertens, 2014).

Qualitative research equips the researchers with the ability to plan their research effectively and meet the standards required by scholarly standards (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). The results established

through a qualitative research design are valid, reliable, and credible enough to be used in the implementation of programs aimed at improving the special education requirements. Qualitative results in special education can be reported in different ways, depending on the methodology adopted by the researchers in a given situation (Brantlinger et al., 2015). Despite the close resemblance with quantitative research design, the qualitative methods have proven productive in producing information considered significantly trustworthy (Mertens, 2014).

It is important to take note of the fact that the purpose of qualitative research in special education is to develop and validate systems and inspire intervention mechanisms that would ensure improvement (Mertens, 2014). Scholarly creativity is limited by certain characteristics of quantitative research, unlike qualitative ones. Unlike other types of research, the qualitative design leads to the development of an immediate practical application of the research findings (Nind, 2008). This applicability of the results makes the qualitative research most appropriate for special education where the need for change is required almost immediately. This is due to the increasing number of people with the disability that are in demand for the most effective teaching strategies from which they can benefit (Brantlinger et al., 2015).

Qualitative research in special education establishes a much-needed connection between the researchers and the research results established (Nind, 2008). The majority of the research carried out through qualitative research design involves professors and teachers. This makes it easy to implement the recommendations provided by the researchers because of the personal experience in teaching the children or students with disabilities. In most institutions, the special education personnel act as classroom teachers and thus, have first-hand information regarding the level of challenges faced by those with disabilities (Brantlinger et al., 2015).

Researchers favor qualitative research because it can trace and influence the documentation of particular learning and teaching effects (Nind, 2008). The determination of the effects of a given range of teaching and learning methods improves the teachers' ability to impact positively on the students' learning curve. However, this has to be based on empirical and scientific evidence to guarantee the highest level of accuracy that it desired. If a learning outcome is untraceable, it becomes significant that the success of that method be replicated in other settings with similar circumstances (Mertens, 2014). Therefore, the qualitative research design is a critical tool in qualitative research that has ensured the development of the systems used in special education.

The most important activity in improving the learning ability of the students with disabilities or that requires special education is to identify the specific needs and then plan for it. Handling children with learning disability, for example, requires the implementation of different strategies, which must be identified through the effectiveness. The effectiveness of a trend in special education can easily be established using qualitative research design (Brantlinger et al., 2015).

Qualitative research is gaining increasing acceptance on the use of analyzing complex questions. It is also applicable in understating emerging issues in learning disability, which are the major threats to education among parties with learning disabilities (Gersten et al., 2005). Qualitative research in special education focuses on the meaning of various activities, and thus, aids in understanding simple details involved in a process. Just like any other person within the society, the people with various disabilities have the rights to better or higher level of education, which should be offered after careful consideration of the difficulties or the limitations faced by people with disabilities (Nind, 2008).

### **Challenges of Carrying out Qualitative Research Methods in the Field of Special Education**

Carrying out research activities in special education is not the same as the research activities in other subject areas. In the special education category, the researchers have to consider many logical, operational, and ethical issues involved in the process of research. This calls for the development of an ethical protocol that would guide the approaches implemented in different activities. Ethics protocol has to be developed before the research activities ensue and this takes a significant level of professional consideration (Brantlinger et al., 2015).

Ensuring the safety of the participants is also an ethical consideration that imposes some challenges to the qualitative researcher in special education. The vulnerable participants or groups need to be protected during the survey process while ensuring that their demands are met during the process (Nind, 2008). The people with disabilities are of different situations and are thus, exposed to different levels of threat during the research. For example, children with learning disabilities may dislike being spoken to by strangers. This would be a momentous level of the challenge given that the researchers may not have the luxury of time to bond with and establish familiarity with the participants. In such situations, preparation for the research activity would require careful time management and psychological preparation of the participants (Gersten et al., 2005).

The research team has to implement workable strategies in order to protect the patients with learning difficulties and the people as well as finding suitable individuals to implement the identified method. Having the participants involved in the research process throughout reduces their level of vulnerability during the designated activities. The participation of the target population would be increased if the research chose people from the locality within the locality in which they live. This is attributed to the possibility of increasing their passion regarding the research process because they are familiar with the people involved (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

Deciding on who to include in the research study as the target population is also a challenge in qualitative research. The classification of people with disability can be severe, more severe, or relatively normal. The researchers have a relative concern when including the prospective participants deemed to have more severe conditions compared to the rest. The failure to include the people with more severe disabilities is considered unethical (Brantlinger et al., 2015). Equally, their inclusion in the research can provide the researchers with the ability to develop an important perspective about the conditions in which they are. The experiences of each of the people with disabilities, such as the learning difficulties should be focused on and a trend established to inform future actions (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

People with learning disabilities have a communication problem and are thus, deemed incapable of understanding and talking to the researchers. Therefore, the academic experts have the role of developing a communication strategy that would facilitate communication with the parties involved. The research in special education needs to be inclusive of the public, and this calls for the need to have alternative ways of communicating with people with severe disabilities that limit their ability to talk to the researchers. The ethical dilemma involved in the selection of an inclusive target population is a challenge that must be dealt with by the professionals in the education of the people with disability, the psychologists, and the family members of the people with disability (Mertens, 2014).

Ethics protocols also include the relationship that exists between the researcher and the target population. The negotiation of the terms of operation needs to involve every participant in the research process. There is the necessity to build a rapport between the two involved parties, and the necessity to maintain boundaries to ensure professionalism is guaranteed, and the research objectives met (Gersten et al., 2005). Building rapport between the researcher and the participant requires the use of certain skills. The professionals involved in the research study may have the required skills, but the participants would need relative motivation to be able to associate with the researchers (Mertens, 2014).

The challenge in this aspect exists in two perspectives. The first perspective is the limited nature of time and the scarcity of the resources that can be used to match the researchers and the participants. Qualitative research in special education is in most cases, motivated by the need to inspire certain change and thus, may require some time unethical (Brantlinger et al., 2015). Equally, assembling the research team that has the capability to form a rapport with the participants also requires a process of consideration of various professionals. These professionals could be drawn from the education sectors, psychology, or professional research institutions. Having a competent research team would be costly, and this cost has to be managed properly. The parties involved are bound to have their social network extended and thus, their personal and professional growth (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

The researchers in qualitative design in special education require informed consent from the target population or the participants. The need for informed consent is a policy requirement in the research process that cannot be ignored by the involved parties (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Sutton, 2006). The rights of the individuals participating in the research need to be preserved by all means, and this involves the right to privacy. Informed consent before a research activity has become both a moral obligation and a legal requirement. This has complicated further, the research process and constrains the time that researchers have in developing different theories in a bid to improve special education (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

One of the critical issues in gaining the informed consent is the competence of the target population to give consent. The party must have the psychological competence prescribed by law to be able to give consent in a proposed research. This implies that the researcher must be of a sound mind, because it is only then that they can provide the relevant information required for the research (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Sutton, 2006). Secondly, the extent to which the proposed research suits the interest of the participant also needs to be analyzed. If the research is not in an individual's interest, they are likely not to be productive in the fact-finding process in the research (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). Finally, it is necessary to measure the balance of the research and the public interest. Public interest is critical because the objective or qualitative research in special education is to improve the living standards of the public or community (Mertens, 2014).

The person identified for the research must be a good decision-maker and should also have sufficient information regarding the subject of study. The decision to participate in the research should be voluntary, and the target population need not be coerced into taking part. The communication process will be inefficient if they are forced and combined with such problems as learning disabilities or autism, the researcher may not be able to establish the required information (Nind, 2008).

The ability to offer the informed consent may be limited by cognitive challenges such as the loss of memory or the inability to solve certain basic problems. This leads to severe communication difficulties for participants when promoted to do so by the researchers. The challenge therefore, is to develop a measure through which they can determine the ability of the target participants to give informed consent. Permanent impairment poses a significant challenge and a danger to the researcher in special education because it reduces the chances of retrieving the necessary information from the participants (Mertens, 2014).

The need to remain anonymous is also an ethical requirement that must be guaranteed by the researchers in special education. This is a fundamental requirement in qualitative research meant to protect the privacy of the respondent due to the different experiences one may be undergoing and that one would like to keep private. The management of the respondents' requirement for anonymity is not straightforward in most of occasions, and that is why it poses a significant challenge to the researcher (Lichtman, 2010). It is also not clear to whose interest the need for privacy and anonymity is needed, but it serves to boost the confidence of the participants while giving the information sought by the researcher. However, while this has been established as a policy requirement, there is a section of the people with the disability that would wish to share their story without having to maintain appearance in the face of the public. The contrast in this situation leads to a significant confusion for the researchers on how to act when faced with such challenges (Collins, Onwuegbuzie & Sutton, 2006).

### **Implementation of Qualitative Methods in Special Education**

The application or implementation of qualitative research methods in special education uses different methods to achieve the desired results from the set objectives. The chosen method of implementation depends on the type of data targeted by the researcher and the ease with which the participants can be accessed. The researchers also consider the number of resources that may be used for each of the available implementation alternatives and may settle on the affordable and cost-effective (Lichtman, 2010).

One of the methods used to implement qualitative research in special education is the use of case studies. A case study refers to an investigation of a bounded group of people, a single individual, a process, setting, or a particular phenomenon (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008). A case study focuses on one phenomenon or system and

uses the situation involved to influence better practice in similar situations in the future. In most cases, a case study is used when a particular problem has been noticed to affect a huge number of people in a nearly similar way. For example, the case of a child with autism and going through education well can be used to inspire parents with such children to follow the highlighted case and the cited methods of success for their children (Mertens, 2014).

The second implementation method that can be used in the qualitative research for special education is the collective case study (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). This is applied in different situations with a similar kind of problem. A collective case study is composed of distinctive individual cases that aim to solve a single problem. Unlike the case study where there is a single unit of study, a collective case study attributes to several situations that suffer from nearly the same problem. Qualitative research in special education can be used to save time during a research process or to ensure the correct number of study units can be applied to the research. The research design enables the researcher in special education to determine and implement the strategy they believe is sufficient (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

The third method in this consideration is ethnography. This implies an interpretation or description of a cultural group system meant to develop a system of learning in a given community (Odom et al., 2005). Ethnography can be approached through a critical observation of a situation, carrying out an interview of the people living within the same social or cultural context, or through the analysis of a given document. The main objective of an ethnography is to influence the understanding of the social context of a particular community. Such establishments in the way of a community's operation lead to the understanding of the kind of systems used to guarantee special education to the vulnerable communities in the designated locality (Odom et al., 2005).

Special education research requires an objective research methodology that enhances the process of improving the condition of the people living with the disability within the locality concerning their access to education (Lichtman, 2010). Through qualitative research criteria, a researcher can adopt the action research mechanism to influence the quality of special education in a particular locality. Action research involves the introduction of new ideas by the researchers that may have a positive impact on the target population during the data collection process. The qualitative methods or designs have the overall objective of ensuring an improvement in the various fields of research in which it is involved. The application of this system in special education has ensured a relative improvement in the processes through which the people with disabilities have access to education (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

The process of improving the special education standards within the country and across various nations requires the availability of evidence to support the major decisions made in the education sector (Odom et al., 2005). Over the world, educational stakeholders are committed to ensuring the achievement of an inclusive education system that suits both the abled and the people living with disabilities. An innovative strategy is more than necessary and is urgently required to inspire the transformation of the education sector. There is a range of factors that determine the level of innovation and the strategies to follow to ensure an improvement in the education sector. Data from research activities are necessary to prove the best path to success for various schools and special needs education (Gersten et al., 2005). Qualitative research design has been instrumental in the establishment of statistics used to back up decisions to improve the learning system of institutions offering special needs education services.

Teachers are expected to reorganize their classroom activities and become more inclusive in their approaches to education. Special education is lagging behind in a range of communities due to the lack of priorities with respect to the needs of the students with disabilities. Through qualitative research, the trends in special education have been developed and compared to the available government policies and regulations (Ghesquière, Maes & Vandenberghe, 2004). The available research results indicate that the external factors like the educational policies that affect the level of success in the desire to improve the quality of education among the people living with a disability. Through scientific findings and the available empirical data established through qualitative research, the people involved with improvement in the special education sector can positively inspire educational development for those living with a disability (Nind, 2008).

The most important thing is to determine the type of complications the students within a special education environment have. The needs of a student with the learning disability and those of the children with autism are structurally different. The needs of those suffering from impaired vision or blindness would also be different from the physically challenged and those that cannot walk due amputation. In all these situations, there are approaches used to identify the best intervention mechanisms for the affected population. Results from different case study groups can be used to decide best course of action to be implemented in each of the unique cases of disability (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017).

Through collaborative action research, the researcher and the respondent can share their ideas regarding a subject of study. The sharing of ideas can be geared towards finding ways and methods of changing practices implemented at work while offering special education to the people living with disabilities and thus, collect the relevant information for a study (Gersten et al., 2005). This technique in qualitative research can inspire the ability of the involved parties to transform the level of education for those with special needs. The deliberation can take place between the professionals in different categories in the education sector such as the teachers and the policymakers.

Qualitative methods can be used in special education by developing the most suitable research tools and equipment that would aid substantial data collection. The research questions used in fact-finding during the research process should have a vivid description of the phenomenon in which the researcher is interested. The methodologies would then help in elucidating about the multiple approaches that the identified area of research can be given. Through this process, the researcher would understand the participant and the interaction would lead to the establishment of the required sets of data (Brantlinger et al., 2015)..

## Conclusion

Qualitative methods can be implemented in special education using different strategies that would enhance the quality of education (Brantlinger et al., 2015). These methods are dependent on the type of research information required and the unique challenges of the participants. Among the qualitative methods that would yield results, include case studies, collective case studies, ethnography. Case study method is used if a particular phenomenon is thought or has been observed to affect a population in a similar manner (McDuffie & Scruggs, 2008). Unlike case study, where a single unit is studied, collective case study attributes to different phenomena in the study (Friedensen, McCrae & Kimball, 2017). Ethnography on the other hand studies the cultures of disabled persons by observing and recording their daily activities (Odom et al., 2005). Other than the strategies discussed above, the researchers could implement the grounded theory design, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, narrative research, and many other techniques that would enhance the success of the special needs education (Gersten et al., 2005). The bulk of challenges faced during the research activities surround ethical issues in the field and the number of resources that can be invested in research activities. The ethical requirements are regulatory and legal demands be adhered to, to avoid legal charges during or after a research completion. The research professionals need to carry out a sufficient feasibility study before indulging in research activity and ensure the participants are qualified and ready to give the information that may be required of them (Nind, 2008).

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