

A Critical Review of “Exploring the educational experiences of looked-after children and young people in Wales”

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Abstract: Many children in Wales who are labeled “looked-after” cannot do as well as those not in care in terms of study. Although an increasing number of studies show the educational disadvantage among children and young people in care can be a factor, some researchers intend to study the impact of being regarded as “in care” on LACYP’s educational outcomes by interpreting the feelings as well as thoughts of the participants. This essay will discuss the research paradigm of this study and its several components including ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods in detail. Besides, the strengths and weaknesses around how the research was conducted will be evaluated based on the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. These criteria proposed by Guba & Lincoln are considered to be suitable for evaluating truthfulness in qualitative research.

1. Introduction

In order to explore the impact of educational experiences and being regarded as “looked-after” on looked-after children and young people (LACYP)’s educational outcomes, Dawn Mannay et al. conducted a qualitative research with 67 LACYPY in Wales [1]. They used various methods to gather data and their findings implicate that the assignment of the “looked-after” subject position can be detrimental to the educational attainment of LACYP. This essay will review their article and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses around how it was conducted.

2. Research approach

In the first part, this essay will discuss the research paradigm of this study and its several components including ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods in detail and give an overview of the research approach. According to Thomas (2017), a paradigm is a series of assumptions about how we view and research the world [2]. In social science, there are many paradigms, such as critical, post-positivism and pragmatism, but the two paradigms, positivism and

interpretivism are dominant (Thomas, 2017). This article has many features associated with interpretivist research which criticizes the universal laws and stresses the individual perceptions (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). Interpretivist research aims to figure out how individuals interpret and experience the social world through understanding the feelings and understandings of them (Thomas, 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the reality is perceived by interpreting what participants think and how they act in their worlds[3]. About the qualitative research in this article, the researchers intend to study the effect of being viewed as “in care” on LACYP’s educational achievement by interpreting the feelings as well as thoughts of the respondents. The researchers explored the impact by analyzing and interpreting the collected data to answer the research questions. According to the purpose of the research, the ways that questions are answered, and other evidence of ontological, epistemological as well as methodological bases mentioned below, it may be appropriate to say that the research paradigm of this qualitative research is interpretivism, and the paradigm is aligned with the research aim[4].

Ontology is about the nature of reality and it studies the concepts that directly relate to reality, being and existence (Wallace & Wray, 2016). Concerning the ontological issues about the existence of social reality and the knowability of reality, interpretivist approach is that reality can be different according to different people, and it is impossible to know the social reality without looking at the understandings individuals have towards the world (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). Robson & McCartan (2016) also claims that there are as many objective realities as there are participants and researchers[5]. With regard to the factor that leads to the poor academic performance of LACYP, there are also many realities, because different people view and understand the same issue in different ways and have their own ideas about the world (Thomas, 2017). Scholars find different explanations for educational disadvantage: some researchers believe that characteristics of the care system, including inadequate monitoring and lack of communication between agencies, are the primary reasons for LACYP’s poor educational outcomes while others find that a series of factors which are not included in the care experience, such as poverty and breakdown of family, can result in their poor academic achievement. In this qualitative research, the researchers aim to explore the reason which is overlooked by other scholars from the aspect of LACYP’s educational experiences, and try to understand how the label of “in care” can exclude them from discourses of academic success. The reason needs to be interpreted according to collected data, so the ontological sense is aligned with the purpose of this research[6].

Epistemology concerns how we can know the world, and studies the nature of knowledge as well as justified belief (Howell, 2013). As for the epistemological issues about the relationship between researchers and their objects, and the form of knowledge, the assumption in interpretivism is that scholars must involve themselves in research contexts and discover the different reasons for objects to act in the world, and then they can acquire contextual knowledge in which the subjective meaning behind actions is the core (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). Therefore, in the research of this article, only when researchers immerse themselves in research by talking to LACYP in depth and listen to their feelings or descriptions about their educational experiences, the impact of being labelled as “looked-after” on the academic attainment of LACYP can be discovered. From this aspect, it can be said that the epistemological assumption is aligned with the research aim[7].

Methodology refers to the study of methods (Thomas, 2017). Methodological base is concerned with the tools and techniques that researchers adopt to generate knowledge about reality (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). It is about an overall plan including what research design will be used and how to collect and analyze data (Wallace & Wray, 2016). In this research, researchers employed case study which aims to gain a rich understanding of one case or a small number of cases in its natural context as research design (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The case to be studied is clearly determined by the research problem to be solved (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000). Therefore, 67

LACYF were chosen to be the case in this research which was conducted to find out the impact of being regarded as “in care” by teachers and other professional on LACYF’s educational outcomes. In order to understand the wholeness of the case, case study typically includes multiple data collection methods (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In this research, various types of data collection tools were used: one-to-one interviews with the visual and creative methods, focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews. In this case, the research design and data collection methods are consistent with the aim of the research[8].

The decision about the selection of samples is the center of research design and can affect the research findings, so it is important for researchers to discuss why they choose this particular sample in their research (Wallace & Wray, 2016). In this qualitative research, scholars did not explain why they chose these 67 LACYF in Wales as the participants. However, according to Vishnevsky & Beanlands (2004), in order to give an elaborated description of the phenomenon of concern, when choosing a sample, qualitative researchers tend to include only those participants who have rich experiences in the phenomena they are studying[9]. The participants selected in this research which aims to explore the impact of being labelled “in care” at school on LACYF’s educational outcomes are LACYF who had attended schools and had rich experiences in being looked after. Therefore, from this aspect, the sample selection can reflect the research purpose.

3. Criteria

According to Cope (2014), since quantitative and qualitative research are different in terms of methodological method, different criteria are used to critique each[10]. In qualitative methods, researchers concern how to describe the experiences of participants accurately, rather than how to measure variables validly (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004), so credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability proposed by Guba & Lincoln (1982) are considered to be the suitable criteria for evaluating truthfulness in qualitative research.

Credibility refers to the accuracy of the description of participants’ experiences by researchers (Polit & Beck, 2012). The credibility of a qualitative research can be attained if the interpretations of human experience are faithful enough to be immediately recognized by people having the same experience (Sandelowski, 1986). It deals with the closeness of relationship between reality and the findings. According to Cope (2014), the credibility of a qualitative research can be improved by employing some strategies, such as providing evidence to readers by describing the strategies used and using methods triangulation. By reporting the strategies and providing participant quotes, readers can analyze the credibility of the research and confirm the interpretations individually (Cope, 2014). In this research, researchers transcribed what interviewees had said literally, and presented some of these vivid quotes in this article, through which the substance of experiences can be grasped by readers and the credibility is enhanced. Besides, these researchers also employed methods triangulation, which is defined as using more than one method to collect data (Thomas, 2017). With using triangulation, more comprehensive data can be produced and the credibility can be improved (Casey & Murphy, 2009). In this research, interviews, the visual and creative methods and focus groups were involved, so the data collected may be rich and can be checked from different resources. This may result in increased credibility of research findings. In addition, the credibility of research results can also be guaranteed by using member checking, which means participants check whether the interpretations of data are accurate and give feedback to researchers (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009). However, the researchers in this qualitative research did not request feedback from interviewees after completing data analysis, which may undermine the credibility of this research to some extent.

Another criterion employed to evaluate qualitative research is confirmability. Confirmability

refers to demonstrating that data and interpretations are not the researchers' imagination or biases, but are responses of participants (Tobin & Begley, 2004). It can be authenticated by using audit trail, which is a set of notes and materials used to record the researcher's decisions, research process and end product (Cope, 2014). Besides, according to Tobin & Begley (2004, p. 392), "reflexivity is central to the audit trail, in which inquirers keep a self-critical account of the research process, including their internal and external dialogue". In this research, researchers did not write a reflexive journal to note their reflections and feelings during data collection maybe due to space restrictions, which may reduce confirmability. Nevertheless, they provided detailed description of how this research was performed and how interpretations were formed by presenting rich participant quotes that describe different emerging themes. This increases the level of confirmability to some extent.

The third criterion which is used to evaluate qualitative research is transferability. It is generally defined as generalizability in quantitative research which is concerned with the extent to which conclusions or findings from a study conducted in a context can also be applied to other contexts in the world (Wallace & Wray, 2016). Although qualitative researchers argue that generalizability is an illusion because every study actually involves its particular researcher, particular subject and particular context, they believe that transferability is possible to be attained under certain conditions. A study has met the criterion of transferability if its findings have meaning to its audience and can be applied to the readers' own experiences. In order to address this criterion, researchers should provide sufficient descriptions of the study context and the respondents to help readers evaluate the similarity between the findings and their own experiences. In this research, researchers provide sufficient information on subjects, research methods, as well as data collection and analysis, thereby enhancing the transferability. With detailed information, those who intend to apply the study results to their own contexts can judge the transferability of this research.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative research has some drawbacks, but the whole research approach is generally appropriate and consistent with the purpose of the research. To some extent, the conclusions drawn from this research are well justified with sufficient information on the research process.

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