

Chapter 3: Research Method

The main purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to investigate the phenomenon associated with foster children in Indiana and their experiences working toward achieving a high school diploma. This study includes using a semi-structured interview protocol and a structured debriefing protocol process to identify perceptions and explore the insights and beliefs of the participants. The study further aims to answer the research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of foster children in the state of Indiana seeking to complete the requirements of a high school diploma?
2. What are the primary perceived barriers to achieving positive educational outcomes in the experience of foster children in the state of Indiana?
3. What programs, services and supports are perceived by the interviewed foster children as having been helpful in improving their academic experience and achievement?
4. How can the systemic barriers identified by the respondents be more effectively addressed in order to improve the overall educational experience of foster children of the state of Indiana?

This chapter will include the discussion of the chosen research methodology and design, the selection process of participants, and the materials and instruments to be used in the experiment. Further data collection procedures, limitations and assumptions, and ethical assurances will be presented. A summary of the research methodology will conclude this chapter.

Research Methods and Design

This study attempts to identify an understanding of the experiences of foster children concerning the extent to which the current system contributes to an educational achievement gap

for foster children. The construct of the research study is that of a phenomenological qualitative design. As defined by Creswell (2009), “phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13).

As described by Moustakas (1994), “Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts judgments, and understandings” (p. 58). As such, the focus of this phenomenological research study will be to understand the extent to which the current system contributes to an educational achievement gap for foster children through the experiences of these foster children.

A phenomenological research design provides an understanding of the themes and patterns portrayed by the study’s participants. The participants in the study will be asked open-ended interview questions, such that their specific experiences can be identified. Moustakas (1994) stated, “The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13).

According to Groenewald (2004), “The operative word in phenomenological research is described. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts. The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (p. 5). A variety of methods can be used in phenomenological research that includes interviews and focus group meetings. This research will use these methods to address the research questions.

For this research study, the researcher plans to conduct focus group discussion with foster children in Indiana. The interview questions will be directed to the participant's experiences and feelings. At the root of phenomenology, "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person allowing the essence to emerge" (Cameron, Schaffer, & Hyeon-Ae, 2001, p. 34). This research method correlates well with the intent of the study to understand the experiences of foster children in Indiana working toward achieving a high school diploma.

Though small qualitative studies are not generalized in the traditional sense, some have redeeming qualities that set them above the requirement (Myers, 2000). The research value of qualitative studies is based on the participant's responses in context to the research questions, as such, the issue of generalization of the research finding needs to be explored. According to Yin (2003),

"Qualitative research can be generalized. Analytic data can be generalized to some defined population that has been sampled, but to a theory of the phenomenon being studied, a theory that may have much wider applicability than the particular case studied. In this, it resembles experiments in the physical sciences, which make no claim to statistical representativeness, but instead assumes that their results contribute to a general theory of the phenomenon" (p. 32).

As the construct of the research study would be that of a qualitative phenomenology design, the focus of this research will be to understand how effective current practice helps foster children in the state complete their education successfully, and more generally the nature of the experience of foster children in care in Indiana. The rationale behind the choice of phenomenological research is that it will help identify how foster children perceives through

their experiences the effectiveness of current practice on successful completion of academic requirement. This information will be identified through inductive, qualitative methods such as focus group discussions.

It is the intended goal of qualitative research to offer a perspective of issues and provide reports that reflect the researcher's ability to document the resulting phenomenon. To analyze the data collected, focus group discussion will be conducted to foster children in a selected location in Indiana. Detailed notes will be taken to collect the participants' responses. To compile and analyze the data, all of the responses will need to be appropriately coded. Though the responses will be qualitative, a classification coding system will be developed that represents a theme for the responses, thus offering the ability to create a coding table allowing for data aggregation and analysis.

Phenomenological research methods will facilitate the study of foster children's experiences and perceptions towards the effectiveness of current practice in the educational attainment of foster children. It will measure the participant's experience and the contexts or situations in which they experience it (Creswell, 2009, p. 130). This research will illustrate both the understanding and experiences the children have with the current practices and how these experiences affect foster child school outcomes.

The research data will be identified from various data collection methods. Open-ended questions and written comments will be solicited from the above-mentioned participants as well as testimonials through focus group discussion to produce data elements. Comprehensive data journals will be kept such that all raw data can be identified and used for coding and data aggregation.

Alternative research methods such as quantitative research would not completely address the size and scope of the proposed research questions. Other methods would not offer a comprehensive review of the issues or offer the level of understanding of foster children's experiences regarding the current practice as it affect the former's school achievement. According to Trochim and Donnelly (2008), "Quantitative research is confirmatory and deductive in nature, while qualitative research is exploratory and inductive in nature" (p. 146). The value of the selected qualitative method is that the issues and phenomenon are viewed in its context, while a quantitative study is viewed through a narrow hypothesis employing closed end questions while verifying theories, it is evident that a qualitative study is best suited for this research.

Participants

The study population consists of foster and former foster youth in Northern, Central and Southern Indiana between 18 and 24 years of age. These set of participants were chosen because of their shared experience of being in foster care while working toward achieving their high school diploma. Specifically, the study's participants will be a homogeneous sample of 25-30 young men and women who self indentify with being in foster care while in high school and had the experience of working to achieve their high school diploma amidst the challenges of foster care and being part of the Indiana educational system. These young adults located in Northern, Central and Southern Indiana will be gathered through foster care agencies, social networks (facebook), referrals from participants and professional contacts. Participation in the study will be voluntary and the participants may end their participation in the study at any time without risk or harm. There will not be any compensation for participating in the study. Demographics will not be identified nor recorded to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Materials/Instruments

This study is based on 20 primary interview questions that will assist in identifying and understanding the effectiveness of current practices in academic achievement through the experiences of foster children. According to Opdenakker (2006), “The focus group discussion, offering synchronous communication, can take advantage of social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language of the interviewee can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee on a question” (p. 3).

Each participant’s informed consent (see Appendix A) will be obtained as well as a detailed explanation of the study will be distributed. The participants will also be informed that the study is voluntary, and withdrawal from the study can be done at anytime without risk to the participant. Ample opportunity will be given to the participants to ask questions related to the construct and procedures of the research study. All of the participants will receive the identical set of open-ended questions, allowing them to expand their responses as appropriate. All of the participant’s responses will be coded to ensure confidentiality, appropriate reporting and data analysis.

The semi-structured interview will be conducted based upon an interview guide that will be developed. “As interview guides are developed iteratively, questions are developed, tested, and then refined based on what one learns from asking people these questions” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, n.d.). The interview questions will be developed such that the interview questions will address phenomenological lived experiences.

According to van Manen (1990), “At the most general level of the lifeworld we may find that this grounding level of human existence may also be studied in its fundamental thematic structure” (p. 101). van Manen goes on to reflect that “there are four existential concepts that

may prove especially helpful as guides for reflection in the research process. They are; lived space, lived body, lived time and lived human relations” (p. 101). These concepts will be considered when developing the phenomenological lifeworld experience questions.

Data Collection, Processing and Analysis

Informed consent. The respondents received a complete overview of the research endeavor so that they can be as objective as possible, though no certain method exists to control objectivity. The informed consent document communicated to the prospective research subject the purpose, procedures including time commitment of the subject, risks and benefits of the study, and the confidentiality of their information. The participants had the right to participate in the research, and the freedom to decline at any time.

The participants will be informed via email about the interview date. Data collection will be conducted during the interview through tape recorder. Data will be reviewed after each interview, analyzed, and interpreted into themes and meanings to lay the foundation of codification with the aid of Nvivo software.

The respondents need to sign an informed consent form before the interview, which will give full assurance of the confidentiality of their responses. In this scenario, the respondents who are willing to provide their views and insights about the topic of the study. The signed informed consent forms will be retained for a maximum of 3 years.

The collected information will be stored in an Excel file maintained on a password protected flash memory data storage device. The hardcopies of the transcripts including the signed consent form and instrument paper which include the participant feedback on will be kept in sealed envelope and stored in a locked cabinet, which only the researcher will have the access

to it. After 3 year have elapsed, these hard copies will be shredded using the shredding machine and thrown away to protect the participants' identity information.

The participants received instructions on the nature and purpose of the research under study through the consent agreement form (see Appendix A). The participants also received an assurance of confidentiality to make them more comfortable in sharing and explaining their personal views (Cobb & Forbes, 2002). The study will use 20 interview questions with the objective of investigating and understanding the lived experiences of foster children on the effectiveness of current practices as it relates to their academic achievement. Interview questions can be seen in Appendix B.

The participants will be given the opportunity to obtain further information and answers to questions related to the study before, during, or even after the study. The researcher will provide his phone number and email to the participant. The participants may contact the researcher for any concerns about the study.

Confidentiality. The focus group discussions will be conducted with the selected participants. The first point of contact with the participants was through telephone calls to confirm the attendance on the focus group discussion. The researcher will inform the participants that records of the subjects will be kept years in a secure location for at least 3 years after the completion of the research and then shredded. Each participant should be aware that participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. The identity of the participants will remain confidential and will not be directly associated with any data.

In ensuring that ethical standards will be maintained during the course of this study, the participants will be informed about the purpose of the study so that their informed consent can be obtained before pursuing the study. Secondly, the privacy and confidentiality of the participants

will be ensured by (a) not requiring them to reveal their names or department in order to ensure anonymity of their responses and protect them from any retributive action, and (b) ensuring that the data collected are not disclosed to unauthorized persons. Care will be taken to minimize any harm caused to the respondents, by ascertaining at the outset whether they have any objections to participating in the study or whether they foresee any negative impact being caused to them by participating in it.

The raw data will be stored in an Excel file maintained on a password protected memory data storage device. Data will be coded to protect confidentiality. Following acceptance of the completed dissertation and after the 3 years is over; the Excel file will be erased from the memory data storage device. The transcripts including consent form and the instrument paper were kept in a sealed envelope and stored in a locked cabinet, and after 3 years have elapsed, these hard copies will be shredded as well to protect the participants' identity information.

Data collection method. The pilot study will involve sending the survey questionnaire to 5 participants by email and getting their feedback on these questionnaires, then arranging for an initial interview with some of the faculty. The data gathered through the pilot study will provide related information about the challenges and factors that may influence experiences of foster children. Furthermore, such data will be utilized to develop the actual open-ended questions for the interview and the questionnaires. This proposed research will use focus group discussion to gather information from the respondents (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). For our qualitative research purposes, focus group discussion from the selected sample group will be conducted to gather perceptions, expectations, and beliefs of the target samples (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

Open-ended questionnaires will offer flexibility and opportunities for respondents to bring to light the other factors that were not mentioned in the surveys (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). The researcher will conduct focus group discussion to capture the perspectives of 30 participants, 5 of which are used for the pilot study. The researcher will take down notes, listen, and ask questions in order to achieve a better understanding of the situation, and the participant's thoughts about their experiences. Narrative interview text will be analyzed to identify the participants' points of view on the effectiveness of current practices as it relates to the children's academic achievement.

Once the focus group discussion is complete and the 20 interview questions have been answered, a structured debriefing protocol will be put in place. As illustrated by Cozby (2009), "Debriefing occurs after the completion of the study. It is an opportunity for the researcher to deal with issues of withholding information, deception, and potential harmful effects of participation" (p. 47). The intent of the debriefing is to ensure that "if the research altered the participants physicals or psychological state in any way, as in a study that produces stress, the researcher makes sure that the participants are comfortable about having participated" (Cozby, 2009, p. 47). It is at this time that the research can inform the participants the purpose of the study and avail them of practical implications of the research study.

Once the data is collected, the next step will be to categorize the information. The objective will be to identify any patterns representing concepts the participants represented during the data collection phase. Data will then be organized into logical categories that summarize and bring meaning to the manuscript of notes.

Specific codes will be developed allowing the author to categorize the responses into the above-mentioned construct, while identifying emergent themes. During this data aggregation

phase, subcategories may be identified, which were not identified during the initial development of the research project. These subcategories will need to be identified and coded, such that this new information can be assimilated into the research's findings.

Though preset categories will be defined in the initial phase of the research, setting the initial direction of the study, emergent categories may be identified. The projected process will be to begin the study with preset categories adding emergent categories as they become defined. The inclusion of these additional categories will offer greater identification of the issues being investigated.

Data analysis. Data analysis process is a way to discover “patterns, coherent themes, meaningful categories, and new ideas and in general uncovers better understanding of a phenomenon or process” (Suter, 2006, p. 327). “The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind... We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Data will be reviewed after the focus group discussion, analyzed, and interpreted into themes and meanings to lay the foundation of codification. Creswell (2005) suggested that content analysis categorizes, synthesizes and interprets qualitative text data by describing.

Neuman (2003) described the process of data analysis as a means for looking for patterns to explain the goal of the studied phenomena. The analysis of data used responses from the focus group discussion. From these sources, the emerging themes will be categorized and coded. Once the categorization is completed, the data will be coded according to the indicators from the literature. This study used an open-coding system to analyze participants’ narrative responses line-by-line, phrase-by-phrase and word-by-word (Creswell, 2003; Suter, 2006)

The study used NVivo 8 (QSR International) qualitative data analysis software to evaluate the focus group transcripts. The software provided a systematic analysis of the collected qualitative data. As Patton (2002) stated in his book *Qualitative Research and Evaluation*

Methods:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in the setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding.

(p. 49)

NVivo 8 (QSR International) software will be used to analyze the content of the collected data. The analysis will identify patterns or similar ideas relevant to the participants' experiences and perspectives about the effectiveness of the current practice as it relates to the children's academic achievement. The final analysis will lead to the development of a report presenting the interpretation of results, limitations, individual and independent insights, and generalizations of the study.

Validity and Reliability

Rigor in a study comes from the validity of the research, the reliability of the findings, and the use of triangulation in data collection (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). A valid work must be supported, acceptable, and convincing. Each piece of research adds to their particular discipline and often does so by adhering to the guidelines for proper research.

According to Trochim and Donnelly (2006), validity refers to the best estimate of the truth of any proposition or conclusion or inference described in the research. Validity will be

used to assess the quality of the research conclusions. The internal and external validity of the research will be evaluated to determine the cause and effect relationship between the variables identified in the hypotheses.

According to Creswell (2003), validity plays a significant role in a qualitative study in that it is a powerful source used to determine the accuracy of the study's findings. To increase the validity of this study, triangulation will be used. Triangulation is the method of using multiple research approaches and methods. Such a technique can help in overcoming the bias and unproductiveness of a single method. It can be applied to both quantitative validation and qualitative validation (Yin, 2003).

Validity and reliability involve checking the status of the data collected to determine if they are valid and reliable (Struwig & Stead, 2004). Internal validity calculates the extent to which the responses from the respondents reflect the same attributes (Fink, 2008). The triangulation technique will ensure the validity and reliability of the data gathered through the questionnaire, which asked multiple questions of the target sample to determine the integrity of the answers (Fink, 2008). The sources for the historical qualitative research taken from official company websites and peer-reviewed journals ensured that the information used in the literature review was accurate and valid (Creswell, 2003; Trochim & Donnelly, 2006).

Valid research instruments are paramount to collection of reliable data (Polit & Benk, 2004).

The researcher will validate the questions in the survey instrument before the commencement of data collection.

Preliminary interviews will be conducted among five respondents to identify any difficulties that may affect the respondents' feedbacks. The validation exercise will also identify

unreliable questions which the respondents did have answers for. These questions will change to suppress the difficulties in the ultimate questionnaire.

Reliability refers to the measurement of the quality of the data collected in any research (Behling & Law, 2006). Reliability is a measurement of the consistency of the data with the research background, and is also a measurement of the suitability of the data for analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This qualitative study will focus on the perspectives of a group of individuals, as Merriam (1988) suggested, “Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities; that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception” (p. 17). Polkinghorne (2005) proposed that in qualitative research, the collection of data must provide evidence for the perspective under investigation, which provides an opportunity to explore the themes arising throughout the data.

Methodological Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This study will involve only foster and former foster youth in Northern, Central and Southern Indiana between 18 and 24 years of age. Moreover, only those youths who are willing to participate in the experiment will be selected in the study. This will prevent participants from declining in the middle of the experiment and resulting to unfinished and unusable data for analysis.

Ethical Assurances

Each participating youth will be contacted by the researcher to discuss the proposed study; the requirements of the participants during the study, the knowledge that participation in the study is voluntary, and participants can withdraw from the study at anytime. Confidentiality of all information and the knowledge that results of the study will be stored for a period of time

and will be shared with the Walden University community. Each participating teacher was asked to sign “Permission to Participate letter”.

The data will be anonymous to protect the teachers participating in the project. Data will be kept in a password-protected file and eventually deleted after a period of time. Any physical copy of the data was suitably secured in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office.

Summary

Chapter 3 discussed the research methodology that will be employed in the qualitative study, which is that of a phenomenological research design. Also included in Chapter 3 was information on the data collection process as well as data analyses, which include identifying themes from the answers of the participating foster children in the focus group discussion. Finally, this chapter discussed the appropriateness of the research design, the population, assumptions and limitations, and ethical assurances. The following chapter presents the results for this study, where they will be examined and assessed.

