A Case Study (Frelin, 2015; see Appendix F)

Frelin, A. (2015). Relational underpinnings and professionality—A case study of a teacher’s practices involving students with experiences of school failure. School Psychology International, 36, 589–604. doi:10.1177/0143034315607412

This qualitative case study described the practices of a teacher who negotiates educational relationships with students who have a history of school failure. The author provided a rationale for the use of a case study to “illustrate the complexities of building and sustaining educational relationships with upper secondary students who have experienced school failure” (p. 590). The author situated the need for the study within literature related to relational professionality and, more specifically, the influence of positive teacher–student relationships and challenges associated for students experiencing school failure. The case study procedures were guided by Stake (1995) and began with a detailed description of the relatively unstructured interviews and contextual observation of 11 teachers, preliminary data analysis and selection of “Gunilla,” a secondary schoolteacher working in the Swedish “Introduction Programme.” She was identified using purposeful sampling because of her ability to form positive relationships with students as well as having extensive teaching experiences of students who have not been accepted in the national upper secondary school program. The author described how the interviews were “focused on eliciting stories of practice and practical arguments whereas the observations served to highlight the context in which the teacher worked and to elicit new questions” (p. 593). The data analysis was guided by means of a cross-case analysis and constant comparisons (Charmaz, 2006); the qualitative software program, ATLAS.ti, aided the analysis.

Following a description of the teacher’s context for instruction, the results from the data analysis described Gunilla’s negotiations of relationships with students organized into three themes: trusting relationships, humane relationships, and the students’ own self-images. The case assertion related to the importance of connecting to students with experiences of school failure and the study conclusions advanced practical implications for school psychologists to support teachers in negotiating these student–teacher relationships.

This study met many of the defining features of a case study as discussed earlier in Chapter 4 by Stake (1995), Yin (2014), and Flyvbjerg (2006):

The case issue for the study was identified as one teachers’ practices of negotiating relationships with students who have a history of school failure.

The case described in this study was a bounded system, delimited by the participant (Gunilla), by time (limited to data collection), and by place (situated at an institution offering the Swedish Introduction Programme).

The intent was to report an instrumental case study. Thus, the focus was on exploring the issue of relational practices of a teacher to illustrate the complexity of negotiating educational relationships with students who have a history of school failure.

The data collection involved the use of interviews and observations to provide a detailed in-depth understanding of teacher practices. This is one area where the author could have drawn on more extensive, multiple sources of information.

Few details were provided about the data analysis other than it was guided by a constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2006).

The case context description reflected considerable effort as well as the presentation of the three themes. The authors presented some evidence of a chronology (i.e., establishing and then sustaining) to describe the negotiations of relationships with students.

The study concluded with the presentation of a cross-case assertion about the importance of connecting to students with experiences of school failure and advanced practical implications for school psychologists to support teachers in negotiating these student–teacher relationships. However, since this study presented a single case (Gunilla, the teacher) rather than multiple cases, an actual cross-case analysis of several teachers was not presented by the author.

Differences Among the Approaches

A useful perspective to begin the process of differentiating among the five approaches is to assess the central purpose or focus of each approach. As shown in Figure 5.1, the focus of a narrative is on the life of an individual, and the focus of a phenomenology is on a concept or phenomenon and the essence of the lived experiences of persons about that phenomenon. In grounded theory, the aim is to develop a theory, whereas in ethnography, it is to describe a culture-sharing group. In a case study, a specific case is examined, often with the intent of examining an issue with the case illustrating the complexity of the issue. Turning to the five studies, the foci of the approaches to qualitative research become more evident.

Figure 5.1 Differentiating Approaches by Foci



Central Features of Each Approach

The story of Ai Mei Zhang, the Chinese immigrant student in a Canadian middle school, is a case in point—one decides to write a narrative when a single individual needs to be studied as the research focus, and that individual can illustrate with experiences the issue of being an immigrant student and the conflicting concerns that she faced (Chan, 2010). Furthermore, the researcher needs to make a case for the need to study this particular individual—someone who illustrates a problem, someone who has had a distinguished career, someone in the national spotlight, or someone who lives an ordinary life (Clandinin, 2013). The process of data collection and analysis involves gathering material about the person, such as from conversations or observations to stories of individual experiences.

The phenomenological study, on the other hand, focuses not on the life of an individual but rather on understanding the lived experiences of individuals around a phenomenon, such as how individuals represent their illnesses (Anderson & Spencer, 2002). Furthermore, individuals are selected who have experienced the phenomenon, and they are asked to provide data, often through interviews (van Manen, 2014). The researcher takes these data and, through several steps of reducing the data, ultimately develops a description of the experiences about the phenomenon that all individuals have in common—the essence of the lived experience.

Whereas the phenomenological project focuses on the meaning of people’s experience toward a phenomenon, researchers in grounded theory have a different objective—to generate a substantive theory, such as the theory about how African American women integrate physical activity into their lifestyles (Harley et al., 2009). Thus, grounded theorists undertake research to develop theory about a process or action. The data collection method involves primarily interviewing and the collecting and analyzing processes are considered to be undertaken simultaneously and iteratively. Researchers use systematic procedures for analyzing and developing this theory, procedures such as generating categories of data, relating the categories in a theoretical model, and specifying the context and conditions under which the theory operated (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The theory is then presented as a discussion or model generating an overall tone of a grounded theory study as one of rigor and scientific credibility.

An ethnographic design is chosen when one wants to study the behaviors of a culture-sharing group, such as the British-born, working-class Pakistani and Bangladeshi young Muslim men (Mac an Ghaill& Haywood, 2015). In an ethnography, the researcher studies an intact culture-sharing group that has been interacting long enough to have shared or regular patterns of language and behavior (Fetterman, 2010). A detailed description of the culture-sharing group is essential at the beginning, and then the author may turn to identifying patterns of the group around some cultural concept such as acculturation, politics, or economy and the like. The ethnography ends with summary statements about how the group functions and works in everyday life. In this way, a reader understands a group that may be unfamiliar, such as the young Muslim men that Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2015) studied.

Finally, a case study is chosen to study a case with clear boundaries, such as the relational practices of a teacher who negotiates educational relationships with students who have a history of school failure (Frelin, 2015). In this type of instrumental case study, the researcher explores an issue, and a detailed understanding emerges from examining a case or several cases. It is important, too, for the researcher to have contextual material available to describe the setting for the case and draw upon multiple sources of information about the case to provide an in-depth picture of it. Central to writing a case study, the researcher describes the case in detail, and mentions several issues or focuses on a single issue that emerged when examining the case (Stake, 1995). Explanations that can be learned from studying this case or cases end a case study report.