

# Context and Implications Document for: Origins, methods, and advances in qualitative meta-synthesis

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## Authors' Introduction

Qualitative research aims to understand people's experiences and the meaning they attach to their perceptions or how they account for certain behaviours. Based in a number of interpretive epistemologies, researchers conducting qualitative research utilise a variety of methods as they seek to build theory and explain phenomena. Currently, the field of qualitative research lacks a collective outlook, and critiques levelled towards it have included the terms 'cottage industry' (Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997, p. 366), 'one-shot research' (Estabrooks et al., 1994, p. 510), and 'little islands of knowledge' (Glaser & Strauss, 1971, p. 181). Qualitative meta-synthesis – a research design that involves the systematic review and additional level of interpretation of primary qualitative research studies – serves as a way for the field of qualitative research to address these criticisms levelled against it. This line of research originates with educationalists Noblit and Hare (1988) and their germinal book on meta-ethnography, which is one approach to qualitative meta-synthesis. This article discusses the origins and methods of qualitative meta-synthesis and grounds this discussion in the field of education through six worked examples.

## Implications for Policy

Research and policy-making timelines often are at odds with one another, with the faster pace world of policy-making requiring quick evidence for decisions affecting large numbers of people. Rather than carrying out rushed primary qualitative studies or trying to assemble recent studies on topics each time a policy question is raised, educational policy-makers would greatly benefit from the presence of high-quality qualitative meta-syntheses on a variety of topics. For example, Aspfors and Fransson (2015) applied qualitative meta-synthesis to studies on mentors for newly qualified teachers. Their findings demonstrate that mentor education occurs within existing national and local educational structures, with policies at both of these levels being relevant to understanding how mentor education currently operates and how it should develop in the future.

When examining barriers and facilitators of programmes, having qualitative meta-syntheses at hand can provide insights into multiple stakeholders' perceptions where individual studies might separate out stakeholder groups or report on fewer outcomes. For example, Koerting et al. (2013) looked at how parents and professionals perceived the barriers and facilitators of parenting programmes for childhood behaviour problems. They found that these two groups of stakeholders highlighted different aspects of initial access/continued participation when addressing salient barriers and facilitators in their experiences. When implementing policies, the findings from this type of research study will go much further in informing and preparing any government agencies, nongovernmental organisations, or private organisations on how to best recruit and maintain attendance of various stakeholders than if processes were based on only one study.

Finally, Brown and Lan (2015) applied qualitative meta-synthesis methods to the impact of educational policies on teacher attitudes. They found that national educational policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States influence classroom teachers' expectations of students' academic readiness. Given the many sub-cultures that exist within the United States, findings from this qualitative meta-synthesis suggests a change is needed in how teachers are trained to understand the concept of 'readiness' for school to counter what they have found is a shift in this understanding that risks perpetuating only a white, middle-class perception.

## Implications for Practice

Qualitative meta-synthesis also provides an opportunity to render qualitative research especially relevant to professional standards and training. It does so by opening up new avenues for theorising practice from the ground up. Additionally, it can make qualitative findings accessible to teachers, school heads, and teacher-educators in a way that may be more readily generalisable to their context. The worked examples of qualitative meta-synthesis in this article focus on a variety of educational topics and provide many examples for how this type of research results in recommendations for improved professional practice. Because these findings are based on more than just one individual qualitative study, the authors can assert that there is some form of shared understanding across studies, which strengthens the implications we can draw from them.

For example, research by Tondeur et al. (2012) examined teacher-education practices. They found that when training pre-service teachers on ways to integrate technology into their classroom instruction, teacher-educators should seek to combine theory and practical instruction and to make sure there are opportunities for teachers to observe and practice implementing the strategies in their classrooms. Otherwise, any skills gained from the training risk remaining unused if the teachers are not able to make their own connections to how the strategies could be applied to their own unique classroom circumstances.

Jamal and colleagues (2013) applied qualitative meta-synthesis to study school-student relationships. They concluded that school heads and class teachers should be aware that students' home (i.e. family, community) and school environments are intricately linked such that their decision-making at school will be shaped by and reflect these values. Many students currently feel that their teachers do not have a good understanding of what students' day-to-day life is like. This disconnection risks perpetuating an unhealthy cycle of student action and school response that can inadvertently affect students' health decisions while at school.

Finally, Riese et al. (2012) use qualitative meta-synthesis methods to address peer learning in schools. These authors moved beyond theorising the mechanisms by which peer learning is or is not effective. They go on to directly link their findings to practitioner applications by providing guidance on ways educators should integrate peer learning in the classroom.

## Resources for Teaching & Learning in Higher Education

### Authors' Recommendations

1. Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. London: Sage.
2. Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
3. Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative inquiry*. Chicago, IL: Aldin.
4. Major, C. H. & Savin-Baden, M. (2010). *An introduction to qualitative research synthesis: Managing the information explosion in social science research*. Routledge.
5. Noblit, G. W. & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Meta-ethnography: Synthesising qualitative studies* (Vol. 11): Sage.
6. Sandelowski, M. & Barroso, J. (2007). *Handbook for synthesizing qualitative research*. Springer Publishing Company.

### Focus Questions

1. It is argued that the field of qualitative research currently resembles 'little islands of knowledge' with no collective outlook. How can qualitative meta-synthesis address this criticism?
2. Is it appropriate to conduct a qualitative meta-synthesis across interpretive epistemologies? Explain the arguments for and against, and take a position in this debate.
3. Do you think qualitative meta-syntheses should exclude studies based on a rating of 'poor quality'? Explain your reasoning.

4. What do you see as the top three benefits of having a qualitative meta-synthesis on a research topic in your area of interest? In what ways might you be unsatisfied with your meta-synthesis?
5. You have just completed a qualitative meta-synthesis on your educational area of interest. How would you present your findings to a practitioner in the field of education (e.g. class teacher, school administrator)? How would you present your findings to an educational policy-maker (on the local or national level)?