

Critical Review

Using grounded theory to understand teacher socialisation: A research experience. Kunkwenzu & Reddy, 2008.

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Introduction

In this paper (Kunkwenzu & Reddy 2008) the authors state four aims; to reflect on the experience of using grounded theory, to reflect on the process of coding and the development of categories, to show how the research literature informed the decision making process during data analysis and finally to present a theoretical framework to help understand beginning teacher socialisation in Malawi. The paper can be viewed as dual purpose, to aid understanding of the application of grounded theory and to develop a substantive theory. This review will offer an analysis of the rationale for the study, the methodology including sampling and data collection, data analysis and theoretical development, in an effort to assess how well the study met its aims.

Rationale

Kunkwenzu, a home economics teacher educator and the main researcher, sought to understand how beginning home economics teachers in Malawi experienced the transition from trainee teacher to actual teaching, in particular the challenges and problems they faced. This paper was part of the main researcher's PhD. Reddy was her supervisor. Part of the rationale for adopting grounded theory was that it opens up areas for research where 'existing theory is inappropriate, too abstracted, or absent entirely' (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003 p134 cited in Kunkwenzu & Reddy 2008). The authors claim that despite extensive literature in the area there is no theory that can be used to help understand beginning teacher's experiences. However, they cite only 2 papers, which were more than 25 years old. These papers are referred to in general terms in relation to the problematic experiences that beginning teachers mostly

experience. The negative aspects of teacher socialisation are described in some detail including reference to unexplained terms such as 'practice shock'. Teacher education and induction may have developed in the last 25 years. As a teacher educator, Kunkwenzu may have brought her own experiences and assumptions to her descriptions of teacher socialisation. This lack of specific reference to purported literature undermines the author's claims of lack of existing theory and therefore part of the rationale for adopting a grounded theory approach. The description of the literature omits any reference to positive experience of teacher socialisation and has the impression of reflecting the main researcher's views. She states the importance of making her perspective known and the possible impact that this may have on the research process (Kunkwenzu & Reddy, p138) but does not actually provide her perspective, only her background. This potential bias needs to be recognised, particularly when reviewing the data analysis procedure and theoretical development.

Data Development

Kunkwenzu and Reddy claim to have used qualitative and quantitative methods in data development. Data was collected from 6 beginning teachers over a 6 month period. Theoretical development was based on qualitative data and the quantitative data was not referred to. The authors reported that data was developed through triangulation of five research tools. Methodological triangulation is employed to give researchers a clearer view of the empirical field by employing 2 or more research methods (Dowling & Brown 2010). The authors refer to their triangulation of five methods of data development in providing slices of data to contribute to reliability and trustworthiness (Glaser &

Strauss, cited in Kunkwenzu and Reddy 2008). However the description of each method of data collection suggests that only 3 sources of data were actually employed in theoretical development. Firstly, quantitative questionnaires were used to gather biographical details. These were used to describe the characteristics of beginning home economics teachers in Malawi. The intention appears to be to generalise a description of the 6 participants to be representative of all home economics teachers in Malawi. This is an extremely small sample if indeed this was the case. No information is provided on how this data was used. Secondly, focus group discussions were identified as a method of data development that added to triangulation. However, this method appears to have been used only for member checking and not for data collection. Focus groups can be employed to provide alternative methods of data collection, which utilises interaction among the participants (Cresswell 2007 p133). If focus groups had been used in this way they would have legitimately contributed to the triangulation of data. No details were provided regarding outcomes of focus group validation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a 'face-to-face interview guide'. The guide was not provided so comment can not be made about the interview topics and whether these may have biased the responses of the participants. The consistency of the interviews and the claims that data was transcribed and coded between interviews would have facilitated the ability to follow up emerging issues, allowing a dialogue between data collection and data analysis, 'the one informing and directing the other' (Dowling and Brown 2010), a process that is significant in grounded theory. In addition classroom observations were

employed to provide the researcher with insights into issues raised in interviews and to guide follow-up interviews. The researcher also claimed that classroom observation helped make sense of non-verbal communication. However, the coherence of these relationships is problematic as the classroom was not the context in which data was gathered concerning teachers views on socialisation but rather the context of their actions. Finally, reflective diaries were used to help teachers make sense of their experiences. Interviews, observations and diaries did contribute to triangulation.

Sampling

The methods and intention of sampling are not entirely clear. No information is provided as to how participants were recruited to the study or whether they were known to the researcher. It would have been helpful to know whether the sample were self-selecting as this may have influenced the nature of the data. Participants may have had negative experiences of teacher socialisation and been keen to air their grievances. They may therefore have been picked as *critical cases* (Dowling and Brown 2010 p28). Alternatively they may have been sampled as being representative of beginning home economics teachers in Malawi. There is not enough information to ascertain the intentions of the sampling strategy. Other biographical information such as whether they have worked in other professions would have aided data interpretation.

Empirical Setting

The empirical field is clearly defined as beginning home economics teachers in Malawi. The empirical setting is less clearly defined, only that it is secondary

schools in the north and south. No specific contextual information is available, making it harder to assess the validity of the theoretical framework produced.

Data Analysis/Theoretical Development

Analysis employed the use of coding, development of level 1 and level 2 categories and a core category. Partial audit trails and logic diagrams helped to make explicit the process of analysis at certain stages, contributing to the validity of theoretical claims. The subjectivity of *in vitro* codes and category descriptors is highlighted in these audit trails. For example the codes 'Treated as fellow teacher', 'Similar teacher expectations', 'Teaching senior classes' are put into the category 'High Expectations', loaded with negative connotations. It might have been labeled 'Respect', which would have carried more positive connotations. The perspectives of the researcher would have been enlightening in how these labels were arrived at and added to validity of the claims made.

Data was dropped that did not 'seem to add any meaning to the emerging theory' (Kunkwenzu & Reddy 2008 p141). Some qualitative researchers would argue that discrepant data should not be completely discounted. Erickson (1986 p146) suggests that 'even if most cases fitted the assertion, discrepant instances would be noted for subsequent analysis'. Other researchers such as Lather (1993 cited in Freeman et al 2007) suggest reworking emerging patterns to fit the data. The authors have not adopted this position but neither have they made reference to subsequent analysis of discrepant data.

During data analysis, initial findings were compared to 'most research' in order to validate their claims. These claims were undermined by reference to a table of '22 categories' containing only 21 and the broad descriptor of most research with no supporting detail. The list of level 2 categories could be seen to call into question the content of interviews. Topics which might have been expected to arise in conversation, such as teacher's expectations, were not included.

Conclusion

The emerging theory highlights challenges for teacher education and induction. It does not state how the theory may impact on professional practice. The authors do not discuss how future research may usefully develop this emerging theory. Neither do they refer to any effects the research had on the participants including any support offered.

The authors did reflect usefully on the experience of using grounded theory and illustrated the use of open coding. The lead researcher described the overwhelming process of transcribing, coding and categorising, emphasising the 'large epistemological demands on the researcher (Kunkwenzu & Reddy p139). Difficulties in applying Strauss' (1987 cited in Kunwenzu & Reddy p142) coding paradigms were acknowledged. As a student in research methods I found it useful in illustrating the process of data analysis in grounded theory.

The authors explain that the use of grounded theory provided explicit and systematic procedures which were important as they 'ensured that issues of research rigor, credibility and trustworthiness were well taken care of.'

(Kunkwenzu & Reddy p136). However, the validity of the claims made by the theoretical framework is informed by the data developed as well as relevant literature (Freeman et al 2007 p29). The minimal review of literature as well as issues concerning data sampling have impacted on the legitimacy of the theoretical framework within the specific empirical setting, as well as its ability to understand teacher socialisation in the empirical field.

References

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