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Critical review:

Nitta, K. A., Holley, M. J., Wrobel, S. L. (2010)

A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 25 (2), 1-19

Submitted as assessment for the module *Investigating Research* in the MA Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment.

Submission: June 2013-06-03

Word length: 1,542 words

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A critical review of:

Nitta, K. A., Holley, M. J., Wrobel, S. L. (2010) A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 25 (2), 1-19

Nitta, Holley and Wrobel (2010) investigate the phenomenon of school consolidation and how this process impacts on students, teachers and administrators. They state their aim is to ‘inform discussions around and decisions about consolidation policies’ as opposed to presenting any recommendations of actions or supporting either side of the debate about consolidation. Although it is unclear who funded this research, on his university’s website Nitta states that all his research is a response to the concerns raised by educational policy makers in Arkansas and Washington whilst Holley’s and Wrobel’s biographies suggest they carried out the research for a nonpartisan education policy research institute housed at the University of Arkansas, indicating a degree of independence.

Their research came to four findings:

- 1) Students adapted better to the process than adults.
- 2) All parties saw at least some benefits.
- 3) Moving parties found it harder.
- 4) Moving teachers found the consolidation process the hardest.

Methodology:

This study is a piece of qualitative research, however it has elements of quantitative research, with numerical data being presented. Dowling and Brown (2010) urge against the ‘binary choice’ of categorising research as either qualitative or quantitative stating that ‘the best option will often be for a dialogical use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods’ (p89). Arguably the size of the schools involved in each case of consolidation would have an important influence on the experience of those involved. Therefore the quantitative aspects of this study are necessary to help explain the context of each of the schools.

Nitta et al chose to adopt a phenomenological approach to the research, drawing on the work of Creswell (2006) with the purpose to reduce the experiences at schools in four regions to a description of the 'universal essence' of the phenomenon (p58). They indicate that their study shares some of the grounded theory approach 'developing and investigating research categories' (p8). However, it is through their literature review that they identify three categories forming the basis of their analysis: relationships, learning opportunities and working conditions, rather than letting the categories emerge from the data. Perhaps if they had adopted more of a GT approach, different issues may have emerged that either challenged or added new dimensions to the existing research.

In line with the phenomenological approach, the authors used in-depth interviews of participants to collect their data (Creswell, p61). According to Polkinghorne (1989) between 5-25 participants should be interviewed to collect data in phenomenological studies, Nitta et al adhered to this by interviewing 23 individuals. Although they initiated the interviews with the same open question, the subsequent questions were more specific and set questions were used for each type of participant. This rigid approach to questioning does not fit with Moustakas' (1994) approach of adopting two main open-ended questions for the interview, inviting subjects to describe the nature and context of their experience (Creswell, p61). This approach might have also closed down opportunities to follow up any interesting responses made by the subjects, limiting the descriptions given.

Analysis of the transcripts enabled the authors to identify significant statements to show how the participants experienced the phenomenon and from this they were able to cluster meanings. These themes were then used as the basis for the 'textual description' and 'structural description' from which emerged their 'composite description' presenting the 'essence' of the experience. However, the categorisation of the collected data remained shaped by the themes that emerged from the literature review rather than themes that emerged from the analysis.

The setting:

The research took place in four rural locations in the state of Arkansas, with two distinct types of consolidation: two mergers and two annexations. Although the

authors did set out to identify schools with differing contexts, using indicators such as free school meals to guide them, their selection was limited by the willingness of school districts to participate. They were only able to gain participation of schools in four of the six regions, therefore the findings cannot be generalised at a state level let alone beyond. On top of this, within each region they were not always able to secure their first choice schools. However, the authors do recognise that those who were willing to participate most probably had had better experiences and therefore the findings from these contexts were likely to be more positive than most (p5). Although they set out the contexts of the schools and recognise the racial and income diversity of the schools, they do not explore the complexities of the contradictions emerging from these differing contexts and instead focus on the commonalities. The experience of Cherry school seemed to have some distinct features, potentially setting the experience apart from others; the fact it was ‘involuntarily annexed in the middle of the academic year’ (p2) as well as having a school population from a notably different cultural and socioeconomic background, with almost twice as many receiving free or reduced price lunches. Although their conclusion does refer to how in the annexed schools some teachers felt some students had been alienated, this is presented more as an anomaly and the differences in experiences between the mergers and annexations is not thoroughly explored. Perhaps focusing on just one type of school consolidation would have narrowed the breadth of the study, enabling more comparability between the cases and thus leading to richer data from which to formulate their ‘composite description’.

Nitta et al chose to limit their research to high school students on the basis that ‘understanding and explaining the academic and social effects of consolidation would prove to be challenging for younger, less mature children.’ (p4) This statement is a bold assertion. Hargreaves’ (2013) research into the responses of primary school children to feedback given in the classroom highlights how young children can speak honestly and maturely about their experiences. Although to obtain the rich data required for a phenomenological study, a small sample is necessary, their rationale behind focusing on high schools is unsatisfactory.

The sample:

Mills, McGee and Greene (2013, p5) recognise a limitation of the Nitta, Holley and Wrobel study, as its 'small sample size and reliance on survey data'. However it is the quality of the sample rather than the size that is problematic. To generate their sample, they requested principals to 'randomly' select five students, teachers and administrators who were new to the school, and an additional five from each of the categories from the existing school. They justified this by the fact that numbers of moving teachers and administrators were small enough to provide 'little discretion for principals' (p4) and for simple logistical reasons; 'The students needed to be available on the days of our visits, and we needed to collect consent forms signed by parents before students interviews began' (p4). They tried to mitigate the potential bias by asking principals to ensure that the selection of students represented a range of experiences and then by randomly selecting from that selection. Understandably, principals would be interested in managing image of the schools and this in all probability would lead to the selection of those who would be good representatives of the school, as well as the most articulate. If the researchers were able to secure greater freedom it might have been preferable to select students via class lists themselves. The use of 'random' selection does not seem to serve a specific purpose in their study - there may have been a good reason for this but it is certainly not explained.

Ethical issues were addressed by ensuring the anonymity of the participants. However, the fact that the school principals were involved in the selection process and in the cases of moving staff, there was often limited numbers to select from, participants may have felt professionally 'at risk' and therefore might have been more restrained in their responses.

Conclusion:

Overall, the broad focus of the study meant that although the paper covered multiple issues raised by the consolidation process, often the complexities of these were not explored, for example the issue of class sizes. The use of the statement 'kids are kids' to explain how students tended to adapt to consolidation better than adults seems somewhat reductionist. Having said this, the study raises interesting comparisons

between the perceptions of students and teachers - do teachers perceive social issues where there are none, or do they have a better overview than the students?

The authors throughout are very clear about the limitations of their study, in terms of school selection being determined by willingness to participate and the room for bias in their selection process. They also repeat the fact that generalisations to other consolidation contexts cannot be made from their work. However, the study could have benefited from focusing on just one *type* of school consolidation, as arguably the phenomenon of 'annexation' will have significant distinctive features that set it apart from that of a process of 'merger'. Utilisation of a sampling approach that reduced the influence of the principal would have also been preferable and perhaps easy to achieve, for example, selecting off the school roll. A less rigid approach to the questioning of participants might have also resulted in the identification of different and perhaps more pertinent themes to each group, as opposed to the themes from the existing literature shaping the dialogue.

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