

## **Critical Review: A phenomenological study of rural consolidation**

(by Keith Nitta, Marc J. Holley and Sharon L. Wrobel)

Nitta, Holley and Wrobel (2010) carried out an exploratory study on the affects of school consolidation on the lived experience of students and educators in Arkansas, USA. The authors believe that previous research focus on school consolidation has been around finance and optimal school size, leaving a gap in the effects of the experience on those involved. The aim of this study is to inform discussion from the perspective of the people actually involved. The study addresses three categories of experience by students and staff: Relationships, working conditions and learning opportunities. The authors conclude that, in this case, the students appear to have adapted better to consolidation than teachers and that overall, everyone benefited in some way from consolidation. They highlight the limits to the generalising of this study and this review will look at data sampling and collection, analysis and findings of the authors.

The planned purposeful sampling strategy adopted appears well justified, using older students who would be able to discuss and explain their experiences and using large schools to ensure ample participants, geographic diversity and ethnic and social diversity to cover a range of experiences. However, as a result of circumstance rather than intention, there are a number of limitations in how representative the selection within this sample was. Firstly, as identified by the authors the selection of the schools was not random as some schools refused to participate. This may have led to only collecting data from schools with a reasonably positive experience, which may lead to positive bias in the experiences and lessens the potential to generalise the findings.

Another issue is the possible unintentional bias caused by allowing the high school principals to select the sample. In a randomly selected sample “there should be nothing motivating the selection and allocation of a particular person to any particular group” (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 45). It seems unlikely in this case that a principal would select a truly random sample of students as they have the motivation to promote their school, which is part of their job. As a result, students selected are likely to be positive representatives of the school, who have settled in well. This limitation may account for the fact that students had a generally more positive experience than staff, who the study accepts were more limited in number and were often the only participants available. The sample size from each school also appears small for each category (teacher, administrator and student) where you would expect each category to have different characteristics which may affect their experiences, it may have been more appropriate to focus on the experiences of one of these groups. In a phenomenological discussion it is important to “describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (Creswell, 2012, p. 161) by only focussing on one of these groups and increasing the sample size of students for example, they may have been had more potential to identify the essential nature of consolidation. As an alternative the researchers could also have used theoretical sampling a process of sampling individuals that can contribute to the theoretical field.

The authors suggested they adopted a phenomenological approach to data collection, that is the use of in depth open ended interviews to allow participants to “describe the meaning of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 161), using hour long interviews with participants. The structure of the interview questions used for each group involved are given in the appendix and appear to be very rigid, if this interview schedule was kept to. Dowling and

Brown (2010) suggest that “it helps to move from the particular to the general as interviewees often find abstract questions difficult to address” (p81). Opening with questions to evaluate their experience of consolidation before allowing a rapport to build between interviewer and interviewee may have led to students giving the answer that they think the adult wants to hear. In schools “questioning is used by teachers in order to test children’s understanding or knowledge” (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 80). Carrying out the interviews in this location may have led to a teacher-student kind of interaction and resulted in the reported more positive experiences with students.

A further limitation that results from data collection is the time lapse between the experience and the date the interviews were conducted (2007). In some cases there was a time lapse of four to five years. This is a significant period of time and may have led to a more retrospective and different perception of the experience. It seems likely that this change in perception may lead to participants giving a different description of the experience than they would have given at the time. Additionally, the variation between time lapses may also weaken the ability to find a common understanding because as the participants spend more time in their new schools the experience and thoughts on the experience may change. It is possible that there may be a common theme and that further research could be carried out to investigate how the experience changes over time, although this is not within the scope of the stated aims.

Nitta, Holley and Wrobel transcribed their interviews and developed “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2012, p. 82), these were then used to write a textural description, of what the participants experienced and a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced in the context. Finally, an attempt was made to develop a composite

description to reveal the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The essence of the phenomenon is described by Creswell (2012) as a “brief description that typifies the experiences of all participants in the study” (p284). It is doubtful that the analysis has produced an essential common nature between all participants. A number of themes have been identified that were experienced by participants, however the experience of each of these themes was seemingly different for the students and the educators and does not seem to be shared across the differing contexts. It therefore seems difficult to say that any of the findings are typical to all participants.

The authors identified two themes in the three prefigured categories (relationships, working conditions and learning opportunities). The categories were developed from literature before the interviews took place and may have limited the analysis. The researchers give no indication of being open to emerging categories in addition to the ones already decided and this may have resulted in a missed opportunity to find a common meaning in the shared experience. While there are descriptions of individual experiences in the different contexts, the focus seems to be predominately on teachers and students. This may be a result of the limited number of administrators that participated but still limits the validity in any conclusion applying to all participants.

While this research has highlighted two themes that could inform discussion about consolidation of schools in the USA, it has failed to find an essential nature in common. The second theme: that everyone experiences some benefit, is an easier conclusion to accept, perhaps because of its non-specificity on what they classify as a benefit. However, with this conclusion it is necessary to consider if *some* benefit means an *overall* benefit. With the finding that teachers seem to struggle with consolidation this conclusion needs to be

considered further. The first theme, that students are “better adapted to consolidation” is limited by the sampling of students and schools who are likely to have been biased towards positive responses. As identified by the researches, a more representative sample is needed to reach valid conclusions about the ability of all students in all contexts to cope. In addition, the time lapses between the interviews and the consolidation process limits the shared experiences of participants who may be reporting positive experience in hindsight rather than how they experienced the phenomenon at the time. Further research is needed, either during the consolidation or after a shorter time frame to establish if this is the case. Finally, the suspected rigidity of the questioning may have led to missed themes which may have allowed the researcher to find the “essence” of the experience. (Nitta, et al., 2010)

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## References

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