Qualitative Research Project

Keith D. George

University of Alabama

Dr. A. Webb
Qualitative Research Project

Interpretive Framework

Pragmatism as an interpretive framework comes in many forms (Creswell, 2013). In researching a current trend in education with the goal of identifying the most successful approach for implementing a specific change, the pragmatism framework appears best suited for the research. As Creswell outlined in his 2013 work, the pragmatism framework asserts, “truth is what works at the time” (Creswell, 2013, Chap. 2, Pragmatism, Paragraph 1). It is also seen as an effective framework when multiple data collection methods are utilized. Morgan (2007) states that a defining feature of pragmatism is the “emphasis on ‘what difference it makes’ to believe one thing versus another or to act one-way rather than another” (p. 71). This focus on the outcome is “appealing to the researcher as the goal of the research is to discover ‘what works’” in the integration of technology coaches in K12 education. Morgan (2007) also sees the pragmatic approach as relying on abductive reasoning that moves freely “back and forth between inductive and deductive” reasoning (p. 71). He continues to support the use of pragmatism in mixed methods research “where the inductive results from a qualitative approach, and vice versa” (p. 71). It is this “vice versa” that will be of benefit to this researcher as the quantitative data will identify the ‘what’ of effective technology coaching and will help form the qualitative questions that will uncover the ‘why’.

The appeal of this framework lies in the flexibility to use a wide variety of methods for data collection. This researcher believes that using qualitative data to attempt to uncover the reasons for a phenomenon is a valid endeavor, but it is also necessary to determine the frequency of the phenomena by using quantitative data collection. This data uncovers the patterns that exist and how they relate to one another.
It is also important to this researcher to accept that, as Creswell (2014) summarizes, the pragmatist believes that research takes place in the historical, political, and social context of that time (p. 11). Therefore, it is accepted that similar research in a different context may uncover different results for that particular topic. This could particularly become evident in trying to discover the ‘why something works’ in one setting but may not work in a different setting. This is accepted as another example of the “real world practice orientation” that is characteristic of pragmatism (Creswell, 2014, p. 6).

The qualitative portion of the proposed study will be a narrative investigation in which the researcher seeks to interview several technology coaches that have been purposefully selected by means of the pragmatic approach described by Creswell (2013). The selected participants will have emerged from the results of the quantitative portion of the study. The researcher will analyze the data collected from the quantitative surveys to identify technology coaches that are viewed as ‘effective’. Two to four of these individuals will be interviewed to develop a more in depth picture of the qualities that may be used to predict which technology coaches may be successful. This also falls within Creswell’s (2013) description of a narrative study targeting individuals who “can shed light on a specific . . . issue being explored” (Chap. 7, The Site or Individual, Paragraph 1).
Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Creswell (2013) acknowledges that qualitative research books often fail to adequately define qualitative research (Chap. 3, The Characteristics of Qualitative Research, Paragraph 1). Therefore, he includes the definition from the SAGE *Handbook of Quantitative Research*. This definition includes aspects such as a “situated activity” that turns “the world into a series of representations.” It highlights some examples of the representations such as “field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (Chap. 3, The Characteristics of Qualitative Research, Paragraph 2). Creswell (2013) expands on this by placing “emphasis on the *process* of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions, to interpretive lens, and on to the procedures involved in studying social or human problems” (Chap. 3, The Characteristics of Qualitative Research, Paragraph 7). When taken in whole, several common characteristics of qualitative research emerge. Creswell names four—natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods and complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic (Chap. 3, The Characteristics of Qualitative Research, Paragraph 7). Hoepfl (1997), in her *Choosing Qualitative Research; Primer for Technology Education Researchers*, adds to this list by including that qualitative research is “descriptive”, has “an interpretive character”, pays “attention to the idiosyncratic as well as the persuasive, seeking the uniqueness of each case”, has “an emergent design”, and “is judged using special criteria for trustworthiness” (p. 49).

One aspect of qualitative research that may be of significant value in this study is the idea that qualitative research can “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researchers and the participants in a study” (Creswell, 2013, Chap. 3, When To Use Qualitative Research, Paragraph 2). Specifically,
the relative ‘newness’ of the position of technology coaches has limited the knowledge of the traits, characteristics and qualities that may be represented in an effective coach. Therefore, school leaders have not had great experience in the selection of who to place in these positions. Allowing current coaches to describe the characteristics that they see as important for the position should provide valuable information for the future selection of the best qualified candidates.
Focus of Qualitative Research

The topic to be undertaken by the researcher is the efficacy of technology coaches in K12 education. There have been a variety of efforts over the past several years to incorporate instructional technology coaches in schools (Lowther, Strahl & Inan, 2007; Virginia Department of Education, 2008). The overarching goals of these efforts have been to improve student achievement and engagement by improving the technology integration level of the classroom teacher. These efforts have met with mixed results.

In Alabama, the outcomes have likely been affected by the wide variety of implementation models utilized across the state. Sugar (2005) identified several implementation models for technology coaches and each of these models have been implemented across Alabama. In some schools, a certified teacher with extensive training and experience is moved into a full-time coaching position. They do not have any regularly scheduled classes with students but are charged with working alongside other teachers in the classroom to assist in the planning, designing, and delivering of technology-infused lessons. They work with the teacher to develop the lesson and then the technology coach models the delivery of the lesson. Next, the classroom teacher will deliver the lesson with the support of the technology coach. After feedback has been provided, the teacher will then deliver the lesson independently.

Additionally, the technology coach in this model will also provide individual, small and large group professional development related to technology integration. The technology coach in this model focuses on technology instruction and has little or no responsibility for technical support. In another model, the technology coach has very similar goals but serves multiple schools in a cluster or even every school in the district.
In a third model, the expressed goals may again be similar but the instructional technology coach also has daily responsibilities unrelated to technology integration. This model may include coaches that have a partial schedule of student classes or those that have expressed responsibilities to serve as technical support for technology equipment and infrastructure.

In a fourth model, the technology coach again has some of the previously expressed goals but these coaching responsibilities are in addition to a regular, full class schedule. Their work is limited to occasional release time during the school day and regular afterschool work with teachers when students are not present.

There is no current data on the number and type of technology coach implementation in K12 schools in Alabama although, beginning in 2013 this will be collected as part of the Alabama Department of Education’s Transform 2020 Technology Plan (Alabama Department of Education, 2013).
Problem Statement

As more technology becomes available, teachers are recognizing the benefits of it in the classroom. In a recent study by Common Sense Media (2013), eighty-six percent of teachers indicated that utilizing educational technology in the classroom was “important” or “absolutely essential.” Schools and districts are also adding technology coaches to train teachers in effective technology integration (Lowther, Strahl & Inan, 2007; Virginia Department of Education, 2008). However, these coaches are being added without adequate attention to skills and qualifications of the coaches and little follow up to determine the effectiveness of the coaches as it relates to teacher technology integration.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed-methods narrative study is to discover the characteristics of effective technology coaches in Alabama schools. At this stage in the research, a quantitative study will have already been completed that should identify the characteristics of effective technology coaches in Alabama schools. The qualitative portion of the study will examine a small number of those coaches identified as being effective in the quantitative portion of the study in depth to discover the personal traits that make them effective.

Research Question

What would you describe as the best approach for working with teachers and other school staff in order to increase their technology integration levels so that student achievement might be increased?
References


