

State of the Field: An Analysis of Qualitative Work in JAE from 2015-2019

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Introduction

The post-positivist epistemology of the agricultural education field has long lent itself to quantitative research, as evidenced by the many research studies that use empirical observation and measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The *Journal of Agricultural Education* (JAE) philosophy of content focuses on philosophical considerations, current trends and issues in agricultural education, among other research items (JAE, 2018). Qualitative research is particularly useful in addressing the meaning of individuals/groups as they navigate problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and as such aligns with the philosophy of JAE. Dooley (2007) recommended that qualitative research programs should be taught in graduate programs and the discipline should focus on qualitative methods if it is appropriate for the research design. Cooper (2010) stated that to establish trustworthiness within the scientific community a review of past research is necessary. The data gathered from this analysis can be utilized to spark conversations among the professional community regarding how graduate programs should approach teaching qualitative research and determine if the professional is adopting best practices.

Conceptual Framework

While quantitative research has historically been the primary means for conducting research in JAE it would be remiss to not approach research issues from the lens of meaning making since many issues under exploration involve social and human problems (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that there can be multiple realities and Conger (1998) argued that qualitative studies are an optimum approach for understanding perceptions. This is echoed by Patton (2002) who stated that qualitative methods are important for developing more complex understandings of topics.

However, as Creswell (2013) stated, “those undertaking qualitative studies have a baffling number of choices or approaches” (p. 7). As a field who is primarily post-positivist in nature, qualitative research can be an unknown territory. Creswell and Poth (2018) identify five inquiry methods for qualitative research: phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative, and case study. These five inquiry methods take basic qualitative research a step further by identifying the type of qualitative research being conducted based on the aims of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Categorizing qualitative research from these approaches provides direction for researchers to identify and design studies as each method has distinct features. It is unknown though the amount of qualitative research being conducted within JAE and whether researchers have adopted standards to their qualitative approach.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to conduct a qualitative state of the field of JAE from the years 2015-2019. The objectives of the study were to: (a) determine the number of qualitative articles published over the 5 year period, (b) determine the frequency of qualitative inquiry approaches being utilized over the 5 year period, and (c) identify qualitative methods utilized by researchers over the 5 year period.

To achieve objective one, all articles published by JAE between 2015-2020 were examined using the criteria that the methodology utilized strictly qualitative approaches. Delphi studies were excluded from this analysis due to the ambiguity of the approach (Sekayi & Kennedy, 2017). Once an article was identified as qualitative, the purpose statement and methodology of each article were examined to determine the qualitative inquiry approach. Creswell and Poth (2018) five approaches to qualitative research were used to operationalize the

inquiry approach, with a sixth category emerging that was identified as uncategorizable. Objective 3 focused on the qualitative methods identified by the authors. While there was some overlap with the five inquiry approaches, the primary focus was of the methods as described by the authors. Where there was ambiguity in the methods, a decision was made to place methods within categories that aligned most closely with the researchers' approach.

Findings

Objective 1: In total 115 articles were identified as qualitative out of 388 articles accepted by JAE from 2015-2019. The percent breakdown for each year is as follows: in 2015 34% of the articles were qualitative, in 2016 35% of the articles were qualitative, in 2017 33% of the articles were qualitative, in 2018 25% of the articles were qualitative, and in 2019 23% of the articles were qualitative. Overall, about 30% of the articles accepted were qualitative over the five years.

Objective 2: There were 22 articles that were categorized as phenomenological in their approach. Ethnography did not have any research studies using this inquiry method, while there were six articles identified as using grounded theory. Three articles used a narrative approach and 51 articles used a case study approach. Thirty-three articles were deemed uncategorizable because either the authors mentioned using several approaches in their research or they did not fit into any of the approaches (ex. historical research). Fifty-three articles did not mention the inquiry approach used within their research.

Objective 3: The seven categories of methods that emerged from the analysis were: phenomenological ($n = 12$), case study ($n = 28$), grounded theory ($n = 6$), content analysis ($n = 32$), photovoice analysis ($n = 4$), focus groups ($n = 12$), and basic qualitative design ($n = 21$). Articles that were categorized as content analysis included literary analysis, historical analysis, and document analysis. Basic qualitative design articles included articles whose primary data collection methods involved interviews, observations, and field notes and/or self-identified as a basic qualitative design. Content analysis and case studies are the methods used most often in the field which is a shift from a decade ago when basic research design was "the most common type of qualitative method used in agricultural education" (Dooley, 2007, p. 34).

Conclusions

JAE is primarily quantitative/mixed methods but there is a robust qualitative presence; however there has been a decrease in the number of qualitative articles accepted into JAE. There is a lack of articles that identified an inquiry approach and/or did not mention what approach was used. The lack on inclusion of this information may compromise the quality of research and it can be speculated that graduate programs are not adequately addressing what should be included in a qualitative article. There is also a shift in that qualitative methods being utilized, and graduate programs should consider expanding qualitative method instruction.

Recommendations

An analysis of years prior to 2015 should be conducted to determine if there has been a change in the number of qualitative articles over time. In addition, as a discipline the adoption of standardized descriptors for qualitative methods should be developed. A review of the quality of qualitative methodology should also be conducted to determine if researchers are following recommendations (ex. subjectivity statements, design matches stated inquiry approach etc.). Graduate programs should review what content is being taught in their qualitative classes and ensure that their students are well grounded in qualitative methodology.

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