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Pragmatic research methodology in education: possibilities and pitfalls

Emma Clarke and John Visser

Abstract

This paper considers the challenges experienced by a doctoral student engaging in qualitative research. It examines the difficulties experienced in selecting an appropriate approach from the traditional methodologies. A pragmatic methodology which provides the researcher with the opportunity to utilise a range of strategies to answer the research question are discussed. The advantages and disadvantages of the freedoms afforded in methodological thinking, rather than following prescribed strategies and procedures are then considered. How a pragmatic perspective informed the researcher's understanding of the impact of selecting a specific methodology and how this shaped the research and its outcomes concludes the paper.

Key words:

Pragmatic, pragmatism, methodology, educational research.

Pragmatic research methodology in education: possibilities and pitfalls

Introduction

This paper considers the ‘messiness’ (Letherby, 2003) and ‘muddy ambiguities’ (Finlay, 2002) that can occur when selecting an appropriate methodology from the numerous possibilities in qualitative research to answer a research question. Finlay (2002, 227) compared researchers to ‘explorers negotiating the swamp’ suggesting that they needed to;

...choose their path – a perilous path, one which will inevitably involve navigating both pleasures and hazards of the marshy swamp.

Finlay’s (2002) analogy of the swamp, where she suggests that the certainty of terra firma can disappear within the mire, points to the pitfalls which can so quickly and easily occur in the process of undertaking research. This in turn raises the question of what happens when a researcher-explorer takes the path away from solidity and enters the methodological marshland. This paper considers the challenges and opportunities that present themselves when the researcher-explorer employs an approach that moves from the traditional standpoint of choosing *between* methodologies, towards one of methodological pragmatism, and to choosing *from* them (Frost and Nolas, 2011).

When considering research, it may be assumed by the novice researcher that sure footing in Findlay’s (2002) swamp could be provided by pure methodologies (Maggs-Rapport, 2000; Morse and Chung, 2003). Grounded theory, phenomenology and ethnography all have specified or accepted methods for data collection and strategies detailed for analysing the data collected when conducting research. These can provide a form of methodological life-belt with which to navigate the swamp, as they narrow the wide range of options available when collecting and analysing qualitative data. Rigidly following a set of methodological prescriptions can provide a novice researcher-explorer with a feeling of security. This is particularly apposite when it had been suggested that the use of grounded theory

for example, would invest PhD students with not only a 'a subsequent career' but 'the acclaim of an original creative theory' (Glaser, 1999, 827).

Smith, Bekker and Cheater (2008) proposed that choosing qualitative methods to answer a research question was straightforward; the challenge was in then selecting a specific methodology within the array available. They encouraged the view that qualitative methods could stand alone without the support of an explicit methodology. Others (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001) had also previously noted that it was what being studied that was paramount, as opposed to a particular set of methodological principles. However, the safety net afforded by the familiarity and influence of pure methodologies can negate some of the arguments about the lack of rigor associated with other approaches (Denscombe 2010). This is particularly pertinent considering Hodkinson's (2004) view that the chosen research method was a key indicator of quality in research and that certain methods were perceived to have primacy.

Concerns such as these could cause a novice researcher to favour the well-worn paths through the methodological mire. This may involve utilising recognisable methodologies which, rather than improving research, can result in 'a collection of 'famous names'' used simply for the purposes of qualifying the study undertaken (Thomas, 2007; Thorne, 2011). Navigating qualitative research is also particularly challenging for novice researchers with a number of 'off the shelf' methodologies seemingly available to answer a given research question. Without a full understanding of the range of methodologies, and their suitability to answer specific research questions - all of which may seem apparent to an experienced researcher – novice, or early career researcher-explorers may sometimes feel lost in Finlay's (2002) swamp. For more experienced researchers, a pre-existing understanding of research methods and experience of undertaking research may exert an influence over what framework they naturally feel drawn to, or comfortable with. This in itself may alleviate some of the feelings of discomfort an early career researcher may feel when selecting an appropriate

methodology. For this study, my (first person refers to the first author throughout) own previous engagement with methodology had, in hindsight, been fleeting and rather superficial and this only served to compound the feelings of anxiety about the methodological hazards Finlay (2002) suggested lay ahead in the swamp.

Pragmatism as a methodological approach

A pragmatic methodology was defined by Frost, Nolas, Brooks-Gordon, Esin, Holt, Mehdizadeh and Shinebourne (2010, 2) as simply 'the use of more than one qualitative approach with another'. It is this description of a pragmatic methodology or what Johnson, Long and White (2008, 243) referred to as 'British pluralism', that will be the definition used in this paper. Working outside methodological boundaries, or a 'multi-methodological' (Nielsen, 1990) view of research was supported by Atkinson, Delamont and Hammersley (2003) who stated that British studies used a range of qualitative methods as opposed to a specific technique.

Boundaries between methodologies have increasingly been accepted as permeable and inclusive, with 'fuzzy semantic boundaries' acknowledged (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007; Hammersley, 1999; Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). Indeed White (2013) warned new researchers about the dangers of allying with specific research customs and practices due to their limiting effects on the range of research questions. Pring (2015) also highlighted the requirement for researchers to be 'eclectic in their search for the truth'. This reinforced Becker's (1996) earlier assertion that it was creativity and searching out what was effective to study a problem that made an outstanding qualitative researcher, rather than someone who used a specific methodology or followed a particular set of rules.

Views championing 'eclectic' (Pring, 2015) rather than traditional (White, 2013) approaches to research are at odds with some of the pure methodologies, such as ethnography and specifically

grounded theory, in their concern to generate overarching theory (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007; Thomas, 2007). Thomas and James (2006, 8) noted their concerns about theory warning that;

...in creating something called 'theory' (together with a set of procedural accompaniments for finding it) one does not inhibit rather than liberate discovery. One must be careful that fertility is not sacrificed to orderliness.

Thomas and James (2006) discussed the issues inherent with theory generation, which is central to grounded theory, suggesting that it falsely provided 'epistemological security'. They argued that to call findings from research theory, was giving it a standing often beyond its remit as something 'which works beyond the level of one's everyday patterning and practical syllogism' (Thomas and James, 2006, 9). They continued to assert that grounded theory was in fact an 'unqualitative' approach, with even 'middle-way' (Braun and Clarke, 2013) grounded theory practices such as those of Charmaz (2014) were criticised due to their focus on generating theory. Thomas and James (2006, 26), suggested it was instead diligence and creativity which necessarily produced new understandings;

...one needs to ask how this differs from the induction or abduction of our everyday sense, how it differs from using the tacit and spoken tools or normal sense-making...and coming to a conclusion.

Why is a pragmatic approach different?

Pragmatism has been noted as the most 'sensible and practical method available in order to answer a given research question' with a range of benefits for the researcher (Becker, 1996; Burr, 2003; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005; Robson, 2011; Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). Using a pragmatic, pluralistic methodology in qualitative research can ameliorate some of the tensions and limitations inherent within the pure methodologies (Maggs-Rapport, 2000; Morse and Chung, 2003). Goodbody and Burns (2011) noted the challenges they faced in finding a methodology that was consistent with the aims of their research, whilst Frost and Nolas (2011) discussed how a pragmatic approach addressed some of these issues by allowing them to utilise a combination of different positions. Indeed, it was suggested that within pragmatism a clash between

ontology and epistemology was negated by their alignment with the aims of the research (Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan, and Dupuis, 2011).

It was proposed (Morse and Chung, 2003) that no qualitative method could ever be expected to entirely inclusive due to its intrinsic conventions. These discount and divide reality and result in biases due to the procedures which specific methodologies require the researcher to adhere to (Morse and Chung, 2003). Morse and Chung (2003) cautioned that researchers were unintentionally restricting their investigations by utilising only one qualitative method, suggesting specific methodologies prescribe what data is valid. Indeed, Morse and Chung (2003) warned that simply broadening the range of data collection methods could not ameliorate the issues which the narrow focus required by some methodologies resulted in.

Unlike some of the pure methodologies, a key aspect in the pragmatic approach is that of values and a consideration of their role in conducting and subsequently drawing conclusions from data (Cherryholmes, 1992; Robson, 2011; Teddlie, 2005). Teddlie (2005) proposed that ensuring a close fit with the researcher's values, including the 'variables and units of analysis' that were felt most appropriate for finding answers, was essential in any methodological choice. Coyle (2010) noted that issues arose within data collection due to the necessity for the researcher to select from frameworks that best suit. However, Thorne, Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes, (1997) suggested that prior knowledge, both personal and from literature, within a pragmatic stance was thought of as the foundations for any new knowledge. They continued to recommend that an 'analytic framework' based on existing knowledge, rather than a 'critical framework' was an apposite starting point for qualitative design (Thorne Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes, 1997, 173).

Under a pragmatic research umbrella it is possible to combine several different approaches and methodologies (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003) and this pluralist perspective is able to limit some of the issues concomitant with discrete methodologies (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Morgan (2014) highlighted the often automatic link between pragmatism and mixed methods research, involving both quantitative and qualitative data. He suggested that a more comprehensive application and understanding was required, proposing pragmatism emphasised why to conduct research in a specific way rather than just the how to issues of research (Morgan, 2014). This argument goes some way to addressing Mason's (2006) concerns regarding the assumption that mixing methods was automatically beneficial calling for care to be taken in ensuring that the approach maintains 'theoretical logic'.

Pragmatism also has a strong focus on practicality and adaptation, using what works and producing cautious answers, as opposed to a truth (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Wahyuni, 2012). Coyle (2010) supported this, proposing that pragmatic research aimed to enhance 'holistic understanding', rather than engaging in a search for consensus or truth. The truths generated from pragmatic research are gained from experience and 'experimenting' and are viewed as imperfect or provisional truths, with thinking following an iterative;

...dynamic homeostatic process of belief, doubt, inquiry, modifies belief, new doubt...in an infinite loop where the researcher constantly tried to improve upon past understandings in a way that fits and works in the world in which he or she operates. (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, 18)

The unique features of a pragmatic methodology compared to other methodologies provide the novice or early career 'researcher-explorer' with a range of possibilities and pitfalls. A key feature of a pragmatic methodology is its question focused orientation (Cresswell, 2014; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005; Pansiri, 2005). This has led it be described as advocating action over philosophy (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), a feature which can be both an

opportunity and a threat when navigating the swamp. The range of possibilities and pitfalls pragmatism can offer will be discussed in more detail after an overview of the context in which it was used in the research undertaken.

Context

This paper considers how a pragmatic methodology was purposively and actively utilised in a doctoral research project. The research undertaken considered how teaching assistants (TAs) in mainstream English primary schools managed behaviour and the tensions they encountered in doing so, and to specifically address the research question:

- How do TAs view their role in managing behaviour in relation to a whole school behaviour policy and what are their points of tension in fulfilling this role?

The research involved two separate groups of TAs. Sample one (n=13) were all employed in the same primary school and sample two (n=17) were employed across a range of primary schools. Both groups were purposely sampled, with participants completing a questionnaire. TAs in sample one also took part in a focus group (n=11) and individual interviews (n=4), with document analysis of the school's behaviour also undertaken.

Extant studies (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown, and Martin, 2007, 2010; Blatchford, Bassett, Brown and Webster, 2009; Blatchford, Russell, and Webster, 2012, 2013, 2016) on TAs have in the main, focused on the academic support they offer and it is surprisingly rare to find research which includes TAs' role in managing behaviour, and none has been found where this is an explicit focus. This historic deficit has given rise to more recent calls for further research into how TAs support pupils 'soft skills' in school, such as managing behaviour (Clarke and Visser, 2016; Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Graves, 2013; Howes, 2003; Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou and

Bassett, 2010; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015). There is also a distinct lack of research which has foregrounded TAs' perspectives or voice, despite repeated calls to address this (Gilbert, Warhurst, Nickson, Hurrell and Commander, 2012; Lehane, 2016; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014; Trent, 2014; Wilson and Bedford, 2008). Blatchford, Russell and Webster (2012) justified their exclusion of the TA voice from their 'formidably extensive' (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010) study suggesting that their aim was to 'build a dialogue' not with TAs, but about them.

The outward display or observable aspects of managing behaviour and the external presentation of the relationships that influenced TAs was the focus of my research. A consideration of the multiple and differing realities of those involved (Cresswell, 2014; Robson, 2011; Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013), the joint understandings that were constructed during the course of people's daily lives (Burr 2003) and how this affected their understanding was needed to address the aims of the research. The view of knowledge as context based and relativist led to the constructionist epistemology that underpinned the research. Papert and Harel (1991) indicate constructionism as the external expression of internal constructivist processes. It was how these internal processes were externally represented which required investigation through the data collection methods in this research. Although constructivist processes supported this view of constructionism, with TAs processing and viewing new knowledge through the perspective of prior experience and learning, these focused on internal, rather than external processes.

The research was rooted in social constructionism, as it understood knowledge to be 'socially and culturally constructed' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, 29). Burr (2003) proposed that this recognition - that individuals constructed community understandings and collective reality through exchanges - naturally lent itself to research with a focus on the exploration of an individual's construction of meaning (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). Harris (2010) cautioned that the concept of constructing in constructionism was often perceived as 'an empty rhetorical device', but

was in fact a vehicle for investigating 'doing, discovering, managing and accomplishing' through highlighting 'processes, strategies and practices'.

Like feminist perspectives, social constructionism considers unbiased, objective, impartial and value-free research as an impossibility and instead recognises the researcher's own inclusion and influence, both in the process of research and data collected (Burr 2003). Study for the PhD that the research in this paper draws on was self-funded and undertaken part-time and whilst I was employed as a teacher in the same school that the research took place. Due to working and researching in the same environment, deep and pre-existing links with participants were drawn on, resulting in the process of researching being a daily lived experience. It was therefore, impossible to divorce myself from the research and my own involvement needed to be acknowledged and highlighted - as both a strength and a limitation.

Although constructionism can be seen as the reductivist 'learning by making', Papert and Harel (1991) argued it should be seen as both richer and deeper and more complex than this simplified view, and it was this reading of constructionism that framed the research undertaken. Cresswell (2014) suggested that the inherent multiplicity of an individual's views within the constructionist viewpoint called for research which looked for complexities. Kennedy and Lingard (2006, 103) noted that in education new approaches were developing;

...that move beyond post-positivism to involve, for example, the multiple socially constructed realities assumed in a constructivist approach or the emphasis on power structures and the emancipatory intent of critical theory.

As a result constructionism, as opposed to constructivism, was used as a lens through which the research was conducted. Burr (2003) highlighted that whilst there was no singular definition of social constructionism it was essentially concerned with a 'critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world', which was key in this research.

The research conducted adopted a position that did not add women in 'but begins from their perspective', and was centred in their routine practices (Letherby, 2003). A feminist perspective has been described as paying particular attention to the private lives and being centred on individual's experiences (Birch, Miller, Mauthner and Jessop, 2008, 5). This was exemplified by the entirely female cohort of the first group of TAs (sample 1) in the research undertaken and the largely female dominated role, with ninety two percent of all TAs being female (DfE, 2014).

In line with feminist perspectives, the research also considered experiences, emotions and perceptions as sources of knowledge. This was supported by the careful selection of data collection methods that avoided or adapted traditional 'malestream' and 'androcentric' methods (Kohli and Burbules, 2013, 36). This was achieved in part by ensuring that views, opinions and perceptions were collected rather than purely focusing on gaining objective and concrete data. This included open questions in the questionnaire and flexibility in the questions asked and organisation of the focus group and individual interviews. Usher (1996) stated that feminism was not a 'method' but was rather a 'perspective that can be infiltrated into all disciplines', as it was considered in the pragmatic research undertaken.

Participants in sample one were employed in the same school and some were close working colleagues. As a result, the established, friendly and professional relationships that existed between the participants in sample one and myself and the disclosure of my own views as part of the interviews and focus group fostered an informal, collaborative ethos. This aimed to reduce the hierarchical relationships extant within the research process and was allied to the purposes of feminist research which focus on non-exploitative relationships, viewing emotion as both necessary and a possible source of understanding (Birch et al., 2008; Kohli and Burbules, 2013; Letherby, 2003). Although there was still the possibility that power relations may have affected the research process and that the

existing relationships may have encouraged the TAs to say what they felt was the right thing, the multiple and group nature of aspects of the data collection employed (specifically the focus group) redressed this to some extent.

The research conducted also focused on a comparatively voiceless population, inferred from the relative paucity of research into TAs and the distinct lack of research from TAs' perspective (Lehane, 2016; Trent, 2014; Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett, 2013). Indeed, despite significant increases in numbers over recent years, TAs have had very little opportunity to inform research from their perspective (see Downing, Ryndak and Clark [2000] and Roffey-Barentsen and Watt [2014] as exceptions). It may be speculated that the lack of research into TAs' role is due to its substantive female composition which allies it with mothering and caring identities whose work was suggested to be unseen and marginal (Ball, 1987; Graves, 2013), being both historically and financially 'undervalued' (Gilbert et al., 2012, 185).

The research undertaken also adhered to several key principles that marked it as feminist, rather than simply feminine. It reconsidered the traditional positivist commitment to 'truth, objectivity and neutrality', was 'interdisciplinary', and I was closely involved with those researched in sample one (Burr, 2003; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The study also considered existing power relations and their influence on the research process, and aimed to reduce these as much as possible. This was fulfilled through a focus on collaboration, and the reduction of exploitation through a renegotiation of the 'subject/object' relationship (Oakley, 1981) though the aim of maintaining participants' involvement as much as possible in the research process (Cresswell, 2014). An overarching consideration of 'how meanings about gender are implicated in the criteria that guide thinking' (Usher, 2006) was also employed. As a result of the feminist issues which arose and the desire to 'highlight the overlooked experiences and practices of women' (Kohli and Burbules, 2013, 37) the research was required to place itself within a feminist context.

The participants in sample one, where I was employed, were keen to take part with all but two TAs completing the initial stage of data collection. However, the expected benefits of working closely with enthusiastic participants did not proceed as anticipated. I became employed elsewhere during the course of the research and went from being a teacher in the same school as the TAs in sample one, to a different but associated profession in a different organisation. This occurred after the focus group but before the semi-structured interviews. This may have been advantageous, as when TAs were interviewed they may have felt able to give more honest responses, knowing I was no longer employed at the school. The change in employment was also disadvantageous, as it meant access to participants in sample one became more problematic.

One of the intentions of the research was to ask participants in sample one to check their transcriptions and corroborate emerging themes to ensure that the data collected and my analysis paralleled their perceptions. Although various times were allocated to do this, it became impossible to meet with all of the focus group respondents together. This difficulty was additionally compounded when several of the TAs also became employed elsewhere (two of the TAs involved in the semi-structured interviews, and three that had participated in the focus group). At this stage, this goal for the research was relinquished, although if pursued it may have produced richer findings and greater certainty in the analysis, remaining closer to the feminist epistemology.

Pragmatism as a methodological choice

Devecchi (2005) stated that her research into TAs traversed diverse areas which she noted, necessitated a range of 'epistemological requirements', as with the research considered here, which in order to answer the research question ultimately sat within many different approaches. The more reading that was undertaken about traditional and pure methodologies, the more my uncertainty

grew about their ability to answer the research question or about the compromises necessary to force the research to sit within the boundaries of these methodologies. Overtones from a range of different methodologies were drawn upon but the aims of the research could not be fulfilled by following an individual methodology. This in due course, encouraged the consideration of a different approach, one that would help to answer the research question but that firstly necessitated a deeper exploration of the methodological mire.

A case study methodology was initially assumed to meet the needs of the research, as it was focused and narrow, but a key tenet was participant observations which would not have been a suitable. Ethnography was then considered, it involved research in situ but required a long duration in the field - something that was not practical or possible. Attention was then turned to phenomenology which emphasised working with participants in their own context but required a specific method of data analysis, which again did not feel suitable. Finally grounded theory was investigated with its focus on concepts, structures and processes which was key in the research however, it enforced on an objective stance with little personal disclosure. Considering my relationship with participants and role in the school as a colleague, this would have been disingenuous. Therefore, it was felt necessary to use a combination of methods, or a method that enabled the ability to combine different approaches that remained true to the qualitative, constructionist and feminist epistemology of the researcher. Mason (2006) offered the term 'qualitative thinking' to begin to address some of the issues raised by this multi-faceted research. She suggested this was a starting point rather than a prescribed framework and could be used to transcend rather than reinforce boundaries (Mason, 2006).

The research undertaken necessitated a focus on actions, real-world practice being both inclusive and problem focused which made it particularly suited to a pragmatic perspective (Biesta

and Burbules, 2003; Cresswell, 2014). In defining the general characteristics of pragmatism, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, 18) highlight several features that were specifically pertinent to the research conducted, including careful consideration of the 'reality of and influence of the inner word of human experience in action'. They also noted the pragmatic perspective on knowledge which views it as simultaneously constructed and grounded in experience, placing importance on 'culture, human institutions and subjective thoughts' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, 18). Kohli and Burbules (2013, 44) defined the aims of feminist research, concomitant to those Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) noted, as;

...the means to gather more complete evidence, to warrant more inclusive, more accurate, more accountable descriptions and explanations of the world...

As a result, a pragmatic approach enabled a focus on the multiple experiences of participants and their 'multi-ontological worlds' which Frost and Nolas (2011) suggested were not accessible through a single methodological approach. Methodological pragmatism was allied to the pluralism inherent in the constructionist epistemology of my research that was not overly concerned with the 'grand Either/Or' (Teddlie, 2005). This perspective of pluralism was also in line with feminist perspectives which Usher (1996) suggested, value inclusivity over convention. Therefore pragmatism, was actively chosen as a research methodology as it provided a close fit with the aims and epistemology of the research.

Possibilities of pragmatism

Pragmatic methods were found to be the most commonly used form of qualitative research in many fields, including education (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003; Sandelowski, 2000; Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). This may be, as Thorne (2011) stated, because fields such as education are more confident in adjusting and amending the approaches they utilise and tailoring them to fit their specific requirements. Sechrest and Sidani (1995) had previously argued that methodological plurality was essential, whilst others suggested that pragmatism was not only practical, but inescapable (Johnson,

Long and White, 2008). Maggs-Rapport (2000, 223) called for an acknowledgement that nursing, and it could be argued education, was multi-layered, manifold and 'unknowable in its entirety' and that it therefore required a not a singular approach, but 'wholism'. Others (Hood, 2006; Morgan, 2007; Thomas, 2013) have also highlighted the countless differences in qualitative research where the majority of inquiry does not tidily sit within the boundaries of one specific approach. This perspective supported Griffiths' (1995) earlier findings about the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of educational researchers work. Taylor (2002) cited freedom from methodological distinctions as a factor to improve educational research, as his findings showed the rigidity this necessitated suppressed any discussion or challenge around methodological approaches.

The research question (How do TAs view their role in managing behaviour in relation to a whole school behaviour policy and what are their points of tension in fulfilling this role?) was seen as paramount and this dictated the methodology, as opposed to the methodology being prime. This perspective was also noted by others (Bryman, 2006; Chamberlain et al., 2011; Feilzer, 2010; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005) who highlighted the centrality and importance of the research question. A pragmatic methodology also aims to find a 'middle ground between philosophical dogmatism and scepticism to find a workable solution' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, 18). Frost and Nolas (2011, 116) noted that unlike a single methodological approach, pragmatism enabled access to;

...actions, feelings and thoughts intersect with issues of power, identity, meaning-making practices and interpretation, and practical, material challenges, all at the same time.

These were all key foci for the research undertaken and would have been challenging to encompass within one pure methodology. Given the paucity of research in the area, freedom to interact with the participants and the data they generated in a way that supported answering the research question, rather than following a given set of steps was crucial.

The choice of a pragmatic approach was an important one, as Birch et al. (2008, 5) suggested research should not simply 'appeal to abstract rules and principles' but that 'contextualised reasoning' should form a key component, one they suggest feminist research enables due to its emphasis on 're-examining and challenging assumptions'. This allies with Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2005) argument that pluralist researchers have an increased understanding of a wide range of methods and paradigms. As a result, the researcher is able to make an informed decision on which aspects do and do not support answering the research question, as opposed to 'preconceived biases about which paradigm is a hegemony in research' (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005, 387). A pragmatic pluralist approach therefore, affords greater sensitivity to the data, particularly in the analysis phase. Alldred and Gillies (2012) suggested that the requirement to place the research within specific boundaries that enforce certain expectations are negated. Coyle's (2010) view that the plurality enabled by pragmatic research improves the 'quality and depth' of the research undertaken was also ascribed to.

The notion within a pragmatic approach of ensuring that research is not limited by the partiality, subjectivity and precise requirements of the traditional methodologies provides the possibility that enforced and unwitting biases can be reduced. It encourages the researcher to make deliberate, conscious choices that are not dictated by a set of methodological rules. This in turn encourages reflexivity and reflection on the choices made, that does not always occur with prescribed methodological typologies. As a novice researcher this afforded the opportunity to tailor the research to address the specifics of the context, the lack of published research in the area as well as to the participants' needs. It also promoted the autonomy required to focus on the research question and continually query and reflect on the choices made; how they affected the data collected and how closely they matched the aims and objectives of the research. As such the process of engaging with the research methodology was iterative and dynamic, with each iteration aiming to be more reflective and refined than the last. Biesta and Burbules (2003) view that pragmatism, rather than being

prescriptive, was a way of 'un-thinking' that in turn supports the researcher in ensuring their work is reflective supports this. Goldkuhl (2012, 92) also described the 'continual interplay between action and reflection' which defines pragmatism.

Holloway and Todres (2003) highlighted that methodologies which claim alliance to relativist perspectives, where reality was negotiated must by definition be fluid and adaptable.

This...is an argument both for 'method slurring' and against the view that some claimed 'philosophical inconsistency' will result from the mixing of methods... (Johnson et al., 2008, 248)

Within pragmatic research, the necessity for slavish devotion to a specific method is removed and the researcher is permitted to choose methods and methodologies which best address the research question. Pring (2015) supported this stating that within research as a range of questions are addressed there will be a range of different approaches should be used. It was proposed that 'the increasing complexity of qualitative methods' along with freedom from the 'tyranny of method' made the non-reductionist pragmatic approach popular (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Schmidt-Felzmann, 2003; Thomas, 2007). Sandelowski (2000, 335) also believed that pragmatic research enabled the researcher to break free from the 'methodological acrobatics' which may be necessary to classify research as pure ethnography or phenomenology and so on. Thorne (1991, 195) too advocated 'methodological heterodoxy' as a positive method to generate new knowledge and Hammersley (2005, 144) asserted that research should not be 'reduced to the following of explicit rules', but that;

...much scope for variation in methodological approach must be tolerated...and that individual researchers should be free to identify the most productive areas of inquiry and to determine the most effective means for investigating them.

Janesick (1994, 215) had previously raised concerns about what she described as 'methodolatry', or 'a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods', with White (2013, 219) later describing how a 'method-led' or even 'mono-method' approach was a clear barrier to question

focused research. Frost and Nolas (2011, 115) also asserted that 'silos of mono-theoretical and mono-methodological' approaches only encouraged 'methodolotry' that gave prominence to the method rather than the inquiry. Thorne (2011) believed that the rigidity which some approaches called for was disadvantageous. It was suggested (Frost et al., 2010; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005) that proponents of 'paradigm purism' focused on the differences as opposed to the similarities between methodologies, whereas the pragmatic approach reduces the emphasis on these.

The key possibility methodological pragmatism offers researchers, is the opportunity to focus simply on how best to answer the research question. Lamont and Swidler (2014, 154) clearly advocated a pluralist, pragmatic stance and defended 'methodological pluralism' against what they termed 'methodological tribalism' reiterating the importance of the research question over method. Lincoln (2010, 8) forcefully argued that pragmatic methodologies were the 'new virtue' and that 'purism is the new doctrinal error', with some perceiving it a 'paradigmatic sin'. This was echoed by others (Thomas and James, 2006, 29) who championed the unconstrained collection, use and analysis of knowledge suggesting;

A preoccupation with method makes for mirages of some kind of reliable knowing, and this in the end makes us almost more concerned with the method than the message.

Thomas (2007) even called for 'methodological anarchy'.

Despite the range of advantages afforded by a pragmatic methodology as discussed, there can also be disadvantages, particularly for novice researchers.

Pitfalls of pragmatism

The freedom provided by a pragmatic methodology can be seen as a double edged sword. Whilst it gives the researcher autonomy in conducting the research in the most suitable way to answer

the research question, this in turn relies on a broad understanding of research techniques. Within the research undertaken, the choice of a pragmatic methodology was challenging due to its lack of prescription, which resulted in a substantial amount of additional reading and deliberation. This caused a significant delay in formalising the research, as much additional reading and time for consideration needed to be factored in, which caused a great degree of frustration for a novice researcher who just want to get started. The idea of autonomy within the research was beneficial, but it required confidence that using a pragmatic methodology was a sound choice and that it could be suitably justified. The uncertainty about the choices made and concerns about taking the wrong turn and becoming lost in Finlay's (2002) swamp never entirely went away. This made me, as a novice researcher, more insecure and self-doubting.

Pragmatic research has drawn criticism due to its perceived lack of both theoretical and philosophical rigour. Despite Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) suggestion that qualitative research favours no one methodology over another, the implication from some (Hodkinson, 2004) have been that that pragmatic methods are not allied with high quality research. The paucity of literature within the field of pragmatic methodology makes an evaluation of the approach challenging (Caelli, Ray and Mill, 2003; Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013; Smith, Bekker and Cheater, 2008). In order to address some of the criticisms levelled at pragmatism, Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003, 5) proposed key areas which must be considered to enhance the credibility of pragmatic research, these included:

...the theoretical positioning of the researcher; the congruence between methodology and methods; the strategies to establish rigor; and the analytic lens through which the data are examined.

It can be particularly challenging for a novice or early-career researcher who does not have the practical expertise, or in-depth methodological knowledge to confirm these key aspects independently rather than being assured they would be provided by their chosen methodology. This again calls for a significant additional amount of reading and reflecting. The necessity within the

pragmatic stance to acknowledge the researcher's own influence on the data is also allied to the feminist epistemology, where 'personal history, social background and cultural assumptions' all influence research (Morgan, 2007, 69). Nevertheless, striking the balance between recognising one's own influence and the bias this brings and not, either being too paralysed by impact of this influence to act or, making the research too personal is challenging without the direction offered by pure methodologies which help to guide against these eventualities by following exacting procedures.

Pragmatic methods were contested (Greene, 1994) particularly by what Teddlie (2005, 213) described as 'paradigm purists'. However, this was challenged by Miles and Huberman's (1984, as quoted in Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005, 377) protestation that 'epistemological purity doesn't get research done' and Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2005) reminder that methodologies were only tools to support the researcher's developing understanding of the world they were researching. Others (Holloway and Todres, 2003; Johnson, Long and White, 2008, 247) raised concerns about the misplaced claims to purity that any methodology made, suggesting that phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography have all had issues in 'having their procedures rigidly adhered to'. Holloway and Todres (2003) noted that even within established approaches boundaries are often blurred and Johnson, Long and White (2008, 245) later proposed that adherence to a specific methodology may give rise to the 'misplaced view' that rigor is guaranteed through 'absolute conformity'.

The pragmatic nature of the methodology freed the researcher from the 'tyranny of method' (Thomas, 2007) when conducting the research. Nonetheless following a set of methodological 'rules' or guidelines may have provided a more objective, dispassionate reading of the data, or indeed prescribed different forms of data collection.

Conclusion

In the research considered in this paper, a pragmatic methodology was utilised to connect the constructivist and feminist epistemological perspective with the data collection techniques. These enabled a focus on hearing and maintaining the participants' voice and their understanding of the tensions they experienced. Morgan (2007, 58) noted the requirement for a close match in pragmatism between the methods of data collection and the overarching epistemology, through looking for associations rather than 'separating our thoughts about the nature of knowledge from our efforts in producing it'. This understanding of similarities as opposed to differences reflects the exclusionary (Morse and Chung, 2003) and 'mono-theoretical' (Frost and Nolas, 2011, 115) arguments related to adhering to the pure methodologies (Maggs-Rapport, 2000; Morse and Chung, 2003).

Maggs-Rapport (2000, 223) proposed that a significant limiting factor for research could be 'methodological inconsistencies'. This was addressed in the research undertaken by ensuring as close as fit as possible between the data collection methods, the pragmatic methodology and the guiding feminist and constructionist epistemology. The feminist principles of research being 'contextual, experiential' and 'socially relevant' (Nielsen, 1990, 6) were used to guide the research, and data collection methods tried to address the 'subject/object' dichotomy (Oakley, 1981, 34) and hierarchical power relations within the research (Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Kitzinger, 1995; Thomas, 2013).

To conclude, utilising a pragmatic methodology and straying away from solidity as a 'researcher-explorer' in the methodological swamp (Finlay, 2002) can remove the constraints, rigidity and 'acrobatics' (Sandelowski, 2000; Thomas and James, 2006; Thorne, 2011) associated with adherence to pure methodologies (Holloway and Todres, 2003; Johnson, Long and White, 2008; Maggs-Rapport, 2000). Pragmatism can be used to effectively explore the manifold and multiplicative

nature of research in education as it enables a focus on inclusion rather than adhering to orthodoxy as Usher (1996) suggested in relation to feminist research more broadly.

Although it would be compelling to suggest, as Thomas (2007) rallied, that methodological rebellion had occurred, the truth is less provocative. The possibility of lawlessness when researching made me considerably more prepared, knowledgeable and reflective in my approach. Researching from a methodologically pragmatic stance provided me as a novice researcher with a range of both pitfalls and possibilities. It generated a significant amount of additional anxiety, and at times panic, when struggling to find a methodology that would be appropriate for the research question and context of the research. This challenge required extensive reading, much more than had been anticipated and this caused delays and frustration when I felt I should be *doing* rather than just *thinking*.

However, it was the extended periods of reading and thinking before any active research took place which were a key possibility. This provided me with a deeper understanding of the tensions and limitations, as well as potentials of a wide range of methodological perspectives. This process forced me to engage with methodology as a concept in a way that I had not expected to at the outset of my research. It made me a more reflective, reflexive and considered researcher. The process of using a pragmatic methodology provided me with a sound grasp and keen interest on the impact of methodological choices on the research undertaken, possibly, it could be argued, more than if I had simply followed a set of prescribed guidelines.

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