

Qualitative Research Designs for Policy-Relevant Research

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Chapter 7 - Qualitative Research Designs for Policy-Relevant Research

By Amanda U. Potterton and Joel R. Malin

Introduction

Qualitative research can — and, to some extent, currently does — play a key role in terms of guiding and informing education policy. This chapter provides an exploration of the ways in which qualitative research designs can be useful in education and, more specifically, how they might better inform school improvement efforts at both the national and international levels. First, we consider the marginalization of qualitative research, discuss quality and rigor, and provide an overview of prominent qualitative research designs. Next, we pay particular attention to “what works” research, describing limitations associated with these approaches and suggesting ways that new roles can be carved out.

We then explore qualitative, case-specific research for examples of public scholarship and policy knowledge and recognize evaluation, with the incorporation of qualitative research designs, as an especially policy-relevant mechanism. As we detail later, our understanding of “relevance” (e.g., *to have a bearing upon*) in this context is quite broad, for instance moving beyond narrow conceptions of “what works” and inclusive of more diffuse, conceptual influences on policy/policymakers. Next, we acknowledge some existing qualitative studies that have extended relevant theoretical and conceptual knowledge in the field of education. We suggest that researchers and practitioners can continue to learn from qualitative studies like those described through critical engagement with the designs, findings, and conceptual contributions.

In the second portion of the paper, we posit that qualitative research and knowledge mobilization are key components for addressing and enhancing policy relevance, and we point to

some under-investigated education issues that could benefit from further exploration using qualitative research designs. In doing so, we provide suggestions about how researchers might move forward with their studies, especially if they are interested in ways that their findings can be policy-relevant for a variety of education audiences. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and an appendix of resources that might be helpful for researchers and practitioners who are interested in developing and carrying out qualitative research. Throughout, some examples we provide (to illustrate or elaborate on points we make) are in the area of school choice research given that we both operate in this research space.

Understanding the Marginalization of Qualitative Research, and Carving Out New Roles

Various arguments surrounding the relative utility of qualitative and quantitative research approaches exist, and we begin this section by explaining our standpoint. We align with those who encourage us to move beyond debates that promote the use of one approach over the other, and we push forward in thinking about how both qualitative and quantitative methods are valuable (e.g., Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Tierney & Clemens, 2011; Westmarland, 2001). Even more, we believe quantitative and qualitative approaches to a research problem can be interrelated and more strategically coordinated to understand specific cases (and, ultimately, to build theory). We believe that there is good potential, when thinking about these strategic approaches, to build *complementary* knowledge and a deeper understanding of the complexity and richness of education policy and social science problems. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the past in order to move forward.

Whereas quantitative research generates numerical data for the purpose of understanding education problems and often describes the “what” of a problem, qualitative research tends to explore the “how” and “why” of a research problem through the collection and analysis of

textual data. There are clear differences, then, between quantitative and qualitative research, including inferential statistics that are possible because of quantitatively-generated data.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, examines underlying questions surrounding context and can provide helpful insight into problems. As stated above, quantitative and qualitative research can be complementary, and it is through the creative and careful consideration of social science research problems that researchers can work together to build a strong picture, or a more holistic view, of a particular problem.

This potential is different from the benefits of singular mixed methods studies, which are also valuable in many contexts. What we are envisioning here, instead, is illustrated by what is now occurring at Tulane University in the research organization Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans). Researchers at ERA-New Orleans are working to provide a multi-faceted view of the education reforms in New Orleans post-Katrina. Their research agenda includes but is not limited to trying to “understand [Charter Management Organization] CMO policies and practices and how these shape the options available to families in New Orleans” (Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2020). The organization’s publications include reports from experts that are both quantitative and qualitative in design, and they are archiving their work to build a summary of findings for policy-knowledge and relevance.

Another example of the way in which qualitative work can work alongside quantitative research studies is by providing supplemental explanations. For example, Scott and Villavicencio (2009) created a contextual framework with the aim of better explaining charter school achievement. At the time of their writing, Scott and Villavicencio (2009) explained how issues related to quantitative studies about charter school achievement included in some cases, as examples, single point-in-time limitations, selection biases, and value-added measures concerns

(Scott & Villavicencio, 2009). Of course, qualitative studies also carry limitations related to generalizability since sample sizes are smaller and bound in wider context. Scott and Villavicencio (2009) suggest, however, that:

Qualitative studies of school context can enrich the research and policy debates on charter school achievement, though those who want to simply ascertain if charter schools are “working” tend to neglect such scholarship. Although research on school contexts cannot establish causal relationships between school characteristics and school outcomes, it can inform and broaden our understanding of quantitative measures of student performance. (p. 228)

Qualitative studies are needed (for one) to support the important work being done quantitatively (e.g., by assessing contexts, variances, and in-depth perceptions that are likely to be missed in larger-scale quantitative designs). Overall, we believe that, broadly speaking, we can do a better job as researchers to more strategically examine a phenomenon in one area, through studies that explore different aspects of education problems and with different projected outcomes, to more holistically understand complex issues in education, policy, and practice.

Quality, Rigor, and Prominent Qualitative Designs

There are numerous options to choose from when approaching qualitative work, as well as specific methods. In terms of analytic approaches and research design, Creswell and Poth (2018) describe five main choices: 1. narrative research, 2. phenomenology, 3. grounded theory, 4. ethnography, and 5. case study. Within each of these approaches, there are subjective but largely supported criteria for “good” study, which are based around issues like transparency, acknowledgement of positionality, and staying within the bounds of generalizability. These quality criteria are relevant for both quantitative and qualitative studies, and we encourage

researchers to maintain strict levels of rigor and transparency when developing, carrying out, and reporting on qualitative designs. Given the above, below we also provide a very brief overview of the five main qualitative analytical approaches (please see our Appendix for a list of useful resources for further exploration).

Narrative research focuses on individual experiences and their lived and told stories, and can include life history, biographical studies, autoethnography, or oral histories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is an approach wherein researchers examine what individuals or groups have in common (a phenomenon), and is useful for better understanding shared experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In grounded theory, researchers move beyond description and actually generate new theory after a process of fully developing (or saturating) the data to best understand a problem (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnographers focus on culture-sharing groups, observing patterns and providing thick descriptions of the group (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, case study research differs from ethnography because, even though ethnographers may study a group, which might in some instances be considered a case, they focus on the culture rather than using a case as a specific illustration to explore an issue (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Within all of these approaches, researchers choose methods that help them understand the problem in question. They might conduct interviews and focus groups, analyze documents and other artifacts, conduct participant observation, and/or create journals and memos.

Most importantly, it is important for researchers to ensure that interpretation of data is clear and transparent, as this will improve overall rigor and is key to establishing trustworthiness in relation to study findings. As Brooks and Normore (2015, 2018) explain:

While each research design has a specific approach to establishing rigor, there are a few issues specific to qualitative studies of educational leadership that scholars should

consider. It is critical that scholars are aware of the ways that various research designs establish rigor and then even more important that they do not violate these norms and rather meet various thresholds for quality and rigor. ... If triangulation is the technique scholars use, then they should actually follow through and explain how they approached this aspect of the study. ... if a study claims that data were gleaned from an analysis of documents, interviews and observation, all three forms of data should be evident in the findings. (2015, p. 802; see also 2018, p. 26)

“What Works” Research, Limitations, and Possibilities

To the extent that qualitative research has been marginalized in terms of its “policy relevance,” it is important to briefly consider *why* this has happened as well as *how* it might appropriately assume a more prominent place. We do assert that an overly narrow “what works” agenda has privileged quantitative over qualitative research in some arenas, and at considerable cost. We also point to recent developments suggesting there is strong opportunity to move forward differently. We draw from fundamental research utilization scholarship (e.g., Weiss, 1979) and from others such as Dumas and Anderson (2014), Tierney and Clemens (2001), and Westmarland (2001) to point out several key roles of qualitative research (for example, various ways of understanding and *utilizing* qualitative research that clearly underscore its actual or potential policy relevance).

Emphasizing “what works” relative to education policy and educational improvement decisions is appealing and not entirely misplaced. Ultimately, though, in United States (U.S.) education we have, since the early 2000s, seen a hyper-focus on “what works” that is, overall, counter-productive and that fails to illuminate the assorted ways in which research can beneficially link with practices and/or policies. Tseng and Coburn (2019) detail how and why the

“what works” (p. 351) agenda has been dominant in education policy since the early 2000s. In brief, several key federal policies and developments — such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, and the development and initial charge of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) — coalesced to ensure that particular research designs and forms of evidence (read: evidence-based programs as shown via quantitative, experimental designs) would be privileged by educational decision-makers. For instance, educators seeking to select/adopt particular programs were now required (if they desired federal funds) to select only those that were sufficiently supported by “scientifically based research” (a term introduced in NCLB). Gathered studies from IES accordingly show a clear focus on replicability and randomized trials (Wallechinsky, 2016).

Of course, we do not see all of this as universally bad and these efforts are indeed important. We do not deny the potential usefulness, for instance, of the U.S. Department of Education’s “What Works Clearinghouse.” However, we argue that its existence carries with it the possibility of misrepresenting a vast and rigorous list of peer-reviewed research studies surrounding topics that are also relevant for education policy and social science problems. To highlight Tseng and Coburn’s (2019) explanation, Figure 1 is sourced from the IES (2020) website when we searched for “What Works Clearinghouse” studies on charter schools (since this topic is an example that is familiar to our personal areas of research scholarship):

[Figure 1 here]

In *Figure 1*, aside from these nine topics and their associated small number of studies that meet the site’s “What Works” standards, there are many more examples of evidence-based research (both quantitative and qualitative) that address programs that are about or like the ones noted above, which include the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Green Dot Public Schools,

Reading Mastery, SuccessMaker®, Academy of Reading®, Bridges in Mathematics, CompassLearning, Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) Promise Academy Charter School, and Youthbuild. Of course, we acknowledge that the research studies provided in the site are also valuable for better understanding how charter schools may or may not be impacting students, parents, and surrounding district public schools that already exist. However, our key point here is that there is also *a vast body of* evidence-based research that is *not* included in this list. Aside from many robust and peer-reviewed quantitative studies that are not included (which we will not expand on here given our chapter’s focus), other qualitative studies also robustly address charter schools and various effects for stakeholders. They, too, are undeniably rigorous and policy-relevant, and have only been published after adhering to strict peer-review standards and revisions.

An Example: Qualitative Case-Specific Research for Public Scholarship and Policy

Knowledge

To provide an example, amongst some qualitative charter school research studies missing in the “What Works” list are those that capture the perceptions and experiences of individuals who make sense of education policy and implementation in many different settings. The list of missing studies is long. To demonstrate this, Table 1 details a small number of evidence-based studies related to charter schools that used qualitative research designs to explore and analyze local, “on the ground” experiences of parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members, as well as other stakeholders who are invariably affected by (and who also affect) policies. We chose these studies because they address various aspects related to charter schools, as do the studies in the “What Works” list. The studies below indeed provide information about “what

works” (and what may not be working well) for charter schools and the stakeholders impacted by them.¹

[Table 1 here]

Aside from providing peer-reviewed evidence about charter schools, several of the articles highlighted above also introduce new concepts and typologies that can inform future, evidence-based charter school, school choice, education reform, and education policy studies.

Encouragingly, Tseng and Coburn (2019) also claim that the landscape is undergoing a shift, as shown for example by the somewhat loosened criteria for evaluating whether particular programs are “evidence-based” within the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (even if they are not yet recognized by the IES at the U. S. Department of Education). Tseng and Coburn (2019) suggest that “the pendulum” may be “swinging towards more pluralistic approaches in US education” (p. 363). By this, they explain that they identified a partial shift from primarily top-down strategies (e.g., research into practice) and more so toward bottom-up strategies (e.g., connecting research and practice). Dumas and Anderson (2014) also poignantly recommend thinking critically about policymaking as a process that is built from the bottom up. In our view, and as we will further articulate, such shifts would enable qualitative research to assume meaningful, and more practice- and policy-relevant, roles.

Turning to research-use scholarship for public scholarship and policy knowledge, we can further see that the “what works” emphasis is limiting and inconsistent with the real world. The process of influencing policy through research is complex and non-linear, with decision-making occurring as a process rather than an event (e.g., Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Oliver &

¹ Please also see our note in the Discussion about the importance of acknowledging the power and potential for naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) in qualitative research.

Cairney, 2019). Policymakers — construed broadly here, and inclusive of district officials, for instance — ultimately must consider a variety of information about particular issues and collectively integrate it with their values and professional judgment to make decisions (Brighthouse, Ladd, Loeb, & Swift, 2018). Further, as Nutley, Walter, and Davies (2007) summarized, research is much more often used *conceptually* (e.g., shaping how one views their professional worlds and thinks about problems) than *instrumentally* (e.g., directly influencing policy or prompting a change in practice).

Operating from this understanding, we can see more clearly the potential roles of qualitative research. Dumas and Anderson (2014), for example, pointed to overlapping issues and suggested the need to move our focus from “policy prescription” to “policy knowledge” (p. 8). They argued that qualitative research was particularly well suited to supply the latter, defined as “information and ideas useful in framing, deepening our understanding of, and/or enriching our conceptualization of policy problems” (p. 8). Qualitative research, for example, can help us to understand what McLaughlin (2006) termed “the problem of the problem” (p. 210). For example, why are a subset of a school’s students experiencing disappointing math outcomes? What are the problem/s related to this problem? Of course, answers to these questions have profound policy implications — we should decide differently depending upon the specific problem that is operating. Dumas and Anderson (2014) argue — and we concur — that qualitative research can be particularly valuable in such regards.

We take the position that qualitative research designs are a necessary consideration when researchers are aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts that all work together to assist in shaping schools and the students within them. Ultimately, we are rooting and aiming for research that moves forward to consider how all

of our work can interrelate if we are thoughtful and diligent. Indeed, as public researchers, we believe that we have, as does the wider research field, a service responsibility to commit ourselves to thinking about how our work across the whole field can do this better.

Program Evaluation as a Policy-Relevant Mechanism

As an important point relating to this chapter, there is a very helpful body of research focused on program evaluation, and learning about these policy-relevant evaluations can be of great value for scholars who want to gain a better understanding about how research can be practically useful for and centered upon specific programs and policies (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2012). For example, deliberative democratic evaluation (House & Howe, 1999) is an evaluation approach that centers democracy and social justice as primary goals. Program and policy evaluations center stakeholders, whether they use quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods designs. Fitzpatrick et al. (2012) explain that:

Research and evaluation seek different ends. The primary purpose of research is to add to knowledge in a field, to contribute to the growth of theory. A good research study is intended to advance knowledge... that is a secondary concern in evaluation. Evaluations' primary purpose is to provide useful information to those who hold a stake in whatever is being evaluated (stakeholders), often helping them to make a judgment or decision...

Research seeks conclusions; evaluation leads to judgments. (pp. 9-10)

There are multiple approaches to program evaluation, including branches of Methods, Use, Values, and Social Justice (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Such branches, especially in the areas of Values and Social Justice, are particularly well-positioned for qualitative research since a social justice framework includes evaluators who might, “develop theoretical frameworks based on cultural responsiveness, race/ethnicity, human rights, feminist, disability rights, deafness,

postcolonial/indigenous, and queer theories” (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 40). We want to acknowledge the potentially troubling notion that there may be a necessary and true, yet sometimes unhelpful, divide that can separate the work of evaluators who are researchers and more traditional university-based academic researchers. We hope that program evaluators and more traditionally-based researchers can continue to better align themselves with each other, in the same ways that we hope quantitative and qualitative researchers can better align themselves, for strategic purposes in social science research and for the greater overarching purposes of learning, building better policy knowledge, and understanding complex issues.

In other words, we value the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods to better inform topics and similarly encourage the development of more cohesive communication between the fields of evaluation and research occurring in more traditional settings. This will benefit everyone, perhaps especially those policymakers and stakeholders who have a level of distrust of academic institutions. We think that it is our responsibility to help break down these walls. As we grow in the ability to share knowledge and move research from the “ivory tower” into the communities where our work matters, such distinctions between evaluators and researchers might soften.

Learning From What Already Exists²

Here, we emphasize the importance of researchers and practitioners accessing, reading, and critiquing existing studies and then moving forward with potentially new ideas and designs. Research may or may not be policy-relevant, and we argue that it is in the accessing, reading,

² Thank you to Dr. Gustavo Fischman for his committed leadership and teaching practice at Arizona State University. The majority of the readings that are included as examples in this section come directly from coursework in his class about power, policy, and politics, and they continue to be influential still.

understanding, and acting upon what we have learned where good potential lies for improving its relevance. In this section, we give attention to some powerful qualitative research studies that can help to inform and build knowledge. The conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and deep analyses used in the studies we discuss below have critically pushed boundaries to build upon educational theories and concepts. Existing and striking qualitative research studies, many that are ethnographic, can provide rich conceptual contributions that are both informative and ongoing. Not all of these examples described below are recent, nor are they exhaustive, of course. Yet, their contributions are lasting and still relevant, with good potential to have policy-relevant implications for school improvement today (depending, of course, on how they are accessed, read, understood, critiqued, and then built and acted upon).

In the 1970s, Paul Willis (1977) conducted an ethnography in England, illustrating in rich detail how a group of lads from working class backgrounds experienced and acted within a contradictory culture both inside and outside of school. Willis' (1977) book, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, unveils students' agency and students' intentional opposition to authority and, although they sometimes penetrated the conformity expected of them in the system, they were also limited by an oppressive class structure that within it existed sexism, racism, and, centrally, strong labor reproductive power. These experiences all worked in complicated ways to ultimately reproduce working class jobs. Such depth of understanding was made possible through rich engagement and data collection in the lads' setting and then also through in-depth immersion and time spent analyzing and building upon previous conceptual frameworks surrounding social class reproduction (see, for example, Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Readers of Willis' (1977) work will gain a stronger understanding of

agency and power, and conscious consideration of this study can sharpen educators, our research, and our practice in nearly every way.

Peter McLaren's (1999, first published in 1986) book, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Toward a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*, offers social theory contributions developed from a project about student and teacher life in an inner city Catholic school in Toronto, Canada. McLaren's (1999) post-structuralist, anthropological, critical ethnographic study provides excellent material for both researchers and practitioners to think deeply (and with policy relevance as a goal) as they read about systems and cultures in educational institutions, either individually or in group studies (Lankshear, 1999). Indeed, Apple (1988) wrote a review of the work that highlighted its strength and potential:

McLaren's work goes inside the institution. He illuminates the interaction between the students and the rituals that organize day-to-day life in a largely working-class school in Toronto and links these to family and "street corner" life as well. Furthermore, where Willis draws his interpretations from culturalist Marxist work, McLaren incorporates some of these interpretations within a framework of analysis taken from the anthropological work of Victor Turner and others who stress the importance of symbol and ritual in the organization of institutions and culture. The books' roots are in "ritology." ... McLaren is the first to apply these insights in such a thorough and detailed manner to the ordinary working of the school. (p. 122)

Apple's (1988) description is important because it highlights how it was a first of its kind and can continue to provide important, educational theory insights. Similarly to Willis' (1977) piece, McLaren's (1999) study captures a culture, within and surrounding a school site, and a conscious

consideration of this in-depth ethnography can help both researchers and practitioners as they consider power dynamics within daily rituals that take place in schools.

Annette Lareau's (2000) conceptual contributions provide researchers and practitioners with a better understanding of the role of social class as it relates to both positive and negative impacts of parent involvement in schools. Lareau (2000) includes a helpful appendix in *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education* (2000) that details her process of gaining research site access and struggling through decisions about data analysis. Such transparency provides an excellent model for existing and aspiring qualitative research designers, and can help both researchers and practitioners understand some of the nuts and bolts of a study. Lareau's (2011) later in-depth qualitative fieldwork with a research team in her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* further develops notions of class differences, and, in this study's case, in terms of how these differences relate to raising children. Again, this is a body of work that provides illustrations for researchers' and practitioners' critically conscious consideration.

Eve Ewing's (2018) *Ghosts in the Schoolyard* provides an in-depth critical analysis of Chicago Public School closings and slated closings. In an important sense, it was built to uncover and understand why many Chicago residents were resisting the closure of schools that, according to dominant discourse, were clearly "failing" and "underutilized" and so on. Ewing (2018) provides an historical analysis, contextualizing the situation not in terms of the stale and often objective-sounding rationales for closing the schools, but more deeply in terms of longstanding racism and racist policies (e.g., education, housing, and criminal justice policy). She also provides a discourse analysis, aiming to understand the evidence that various parties marshalled to support their claims, and to understand how certain citizens and groups resisted

these policy plans and responded to challenges that arose along the way. For example, they faced inadequate and shifting opportunities to voice their experiences in formal settings. Out of Ewing's (2018) analysis emerged several key theoretical constructs, including that of institutional mourning, which is the idea that "individuals might mourn institutions or intangible entities, much as we mourn people" (p. 181). For us this work was rich, broadening our sense of public education in relation to culture, race, and power, while also (on a micro-level) helping us to better understand the disparate, meaningful evidence that different stakeholders bring to bear about the value (or non-value) of particular schools. This is important for policy-relevance because it is through a conscious consideration of racist policies that practitioners and researchers might gain a more critical lens through which to work.

Such works are models that we suggest can be collectively and intentionally read, analyzed, and critiqued by researchers and practitioners in order to build a deeper repertoire of theoretical knowledge for their own policy and practice understanding and relevance. We included the specific examples above because we think that they, similarly to how Apple (1988) described McLaren's (1986) work, build upon and challenge findings in some ways, include qualitative research designs that have created new theories and ways of thinking about systems, institutions, culture, agency, social class, and race, and have pushed boundaries in terms of critically examining the political, social, cultural, and economic spaces in schools.

Qualitative Research and Knowledge Mobilization: A Key to Policy Relevance

If researchers wish to be integral to school improvement and to have policy relevance, it is key that we understand (or contribute to the understanding of) the construction, use, and mobilization of knowledge in policy and practice (see Malin & Brown, 2020). On the practice side, for instance, we must consider: What school improvement ideas are being communicated,

adjusted, and adopted in multiple settings? How and why are these ideas being mobilized? What knowledge is key to educational decision-makers in these settings? To what extent and how are these new approaches being evaluated, and how are the results being communicated and utilized? Similar questions can and should be asked on the policy side and, in fact, there are considerable similarities between evidence use in policy and in practice (Rickinson, de Bruin, Walsh, & Hall, 2018).

We want to make a couple of points here, in relation to this chapter. First, it is clear that qualitative research is essential for understanding knowledge construction, use, and mobilization in education. As Gitomer and Crouse (2019) detail, researchers studying the use of research (a related area) tend to be pragmatic in nature and often rely on multiple methods to address their questions. Invariably essential are “up close” qualitative methods like observation (e.g., while deliberations are occurring or as decisions are being made) and interviewing (e.g., to understand why a person has made a particular decision and what evidence they weighed during the decision process). Recently, Malin, Brown, and Saultz (2019) qualitatively analyzed educators’ written requests for grant funding to purchase desired educational resources or services. Their goals were to understand “to what extent, and how, educators utilized research and other forms of evidence to support their decision-making” (p. 1). Such research, which examines research and other evidence use *in situ*, has potential to generate insights into educators’ key concerns, needs, and reasoning around core aspects of their work.

Second, it becomes clear that there are few direct lines between research and practice or research and policy. Rather, these connections tend to be mediated or brokered (e.g., see Malin & Brown, 2020). It is thus critically important to understand this mediation process, from a research perspective, and/or to learn how to leverage it (e.g., for researchers who wish to make

particular impacts). And, as with the above, it is important to consider not only presence and communication of research evidence, but other forms of evidence as well, and how evidence use might shift over time. For example, on the policy side, Malin, Lubienski, and Mensa-Bonsu (2020) qualitatively examined media-based coverage, deliberation, and knowledge use/framing as school choice reforms were advanced and accelerated in Indiana. They noted that shifting justifications and arguments were more ideological than empirical in nature. Further, they reported that advocates were routinely and successfully dominating the media space to frame problems and associated solutions as they desired. On the practice side, Malin, Brown, and Trubceac (2018) conducted a (primarily qualitative) multiple case study of brokerage in education. Their study revealed two distinctive types of knowledge brokerage (one that is primarily one-way in nature, and one that is more interactive), and this analysis led them to suggest ways in which research engagement could be increased in education. Drawing upon extant research, they suggested that interactive approaches are favorable, and they encouraged researchers and other stakeholders to join the ongoing conversations that were already underway on certain platforms, even though they are predominantly populated by educators.

Overall, qualitative research designs, alongside the examination of how research is (or is not) being mobilized for the purposes of education improvement, appear to be crucial for those concerned with policy relevance. For researchers who are interested in conducting studies related to knowledge mobilization, qualitative research designs as demonstrated above do provide an opportunity to take close looks into the ways actors in various school-related settings are impacting practice. Fischman and Tefera (2014a) recommend that an important way to move away from the “ivory tower” limitations of research is to “...stop complaining and engage with

knowledge mobilization strategies (KM)” (p. 1; see also, for a related argument, Vasquez Heilig & Brewer, 2019). We agree, and elsewhere Fischman and Tefera (2014b) state:

...we believe it is important to consider how the knowledge produced by qualitative researchers could contribute in more effective ways to the educational policy debate... we do not think that there are universal or magic formulas, but we believe that one of the first steps is to intentionally and deliberately reclaim and become part of the education policy debate. To do this, we believe that explicit strategies aimed at increasing knowledge mobilization (KM) are an important avenue for education researchers to improve the use and impact of research in education policy and practice. (p. 9)

Educational Policy Topics for Qualitative Investigation

We acknowledge that not all educational policy research is necessarily high in policy relevance. That said, we think that, with a concerted effort to better connect research projects using various methodological approaches, we might be able to, as researchers, gain an overall better understanding of a case study, an area, or a topic of concern. Within this concerted effort, there will be studies that are quantitatively focused and those that are qualitatively designed. To be truly relevant, and as argued above, we think that it is imperative to move past debates that suggest any hierarchical positionality of certain methods over others and suggest, instead, that we learn as much as we can from as many angles as we can, and by including as many stakeholders as we can (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012; House & Howe, 1999). The following is a list that is not exhaustive (since possibilities are endless) of areas that we think are particularly in need of further qualitative investigation:

- Stakeholders’ perceptions of education reforms, especially those that are focused on marginalized contexts and groups.

- School choice reforms in local settings.
- School leaders' experiences with education reforms and changes.
- Stakeholders' perceptions of the access to or restriction from research knowledge (accessibility/usefulness).
- District-level studies of policy changes, perhaps especially including those reforms that require extensive cross-sector (including PK-16) collaboration.
- Studies related to higher education educational leadership, educational policy, and teacher/leader practitioner graduate degree and certificate programs' use of existing qualitative literature to encourage critically conscious exploration of education issues.
- More on the socio-cultural contexts of education reforms. (See, for example, a set of articles that examine sociological contributions to school choice policy and politics around the globe in the 2020 Politics of Education Yearbook in *Educational Policy* [Potterton, Edwards, Yoon, & Powers, 2020].)
- International-level studies related to all of the above.

Discussion

Dimensions of education policy, and the sensemaking associated with policymaking and implementation, are complex and reliant on many local variables, including those that are historical, political, social, cultural, and economic (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2011). As we illustrated in this chapter, there are rich possibilities for qualitative research designs when it comes to understanding education policies and practices at the federal, state, and local levels, and much can be gained from exploring local contexts and from communicating with stakeholders. Both evaluation and research have good potential to be policy relevant, and even more so when researchers and evaluators learn from each others' fields. Dumas and Anderson (2014) challenge

researchers to think about policymaking from the “ground up”(p. 6), and conducting qualitative research studies is an excellent first step to better understanding what is happening for people who are experiencing a wide variety of education reforms. Dumas and Anderson (2014) assert that, rather than considering the building of policy as only the work of policymakers,

... policy can sometimes come from the ground up. That is, we may do just as well, if not better, thinking about using qualitative and participatory action research to impact policy by communicating directly with communities, families, teachers and young people... (p. 6)

The real policy experiences that stakeholders make sense of in local settings matter tremendously, and we could do well to qualitatively learn from these communities, families, teachers and young people (Dumas & Anderson, 2014). Indeed, for policy implementation to occur in some form or another, it is dependent upon the actions of those who are affected by many variables and interpretations of policies. As researchers think about the ways in which qualitative research designs might be beneficial for policy-relevant studies, it is necessary to understand the contexts for which the studies have been made in the first place. Of course, the writing of a policy and actual implementation are two different, yet interrelated situations, and, as we discussed in this chapter, it can be argued that the creation of educational policies *actually* occurs in the process of implementation (Datnow et al., 2002). These are also developed in the many, complex ways that knowledge is or is not mobilized. Spillane et al. (2002) explain policy implementation in this way:

What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation,

and the policy signals. How the implementing agents understand the policy's message(s) about local behavior is defined in the interaction of these three dimensions. (p. 388)

Further, Joyce and Cartwright (2019) address the important gap that exists between what works in practice as compared to "what works" in research. Specifically, local "what works" efforts are often disrupted when scaling-up attempts are not fitted to contextual settings (Joyce & Cartwright, 2019). When applying this explanation to qualitative research studies, and while acknowledging that qualitative studies cannot generalize in the traditional sense of the word as pertaining to quantitative methods, there is power and great potential for readers to gain insight from case studies and specific contexts and to consider how findings may have potential for naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

Perhaps this is a better way of thinking about the ways in which we can read, critique, and eventually take action based on what we learn from qualitative research studies and the contexts in which they occur. Stake and Trumbull (1982) state that, "The naturalistic researcher observes and records what readers are not placed to observe for themselves, but who, when reading the descriptive account, can experience vicariously the various perplexities" (p. 3). Likewise, we think that qualitative research can provide a useful springboard for better understanding people's lived contexts. We hope that more researchers and practitioners can engage with the plethora of qualitative research designs that currently exist (or have yet to be designed) for the purposes of increasing policy relevance and for considering the ways in which knowledge can be examined and mobilized for improvement in education.

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Appendix

A Bibliography That Informed Our Chapter: Some Helpful (Not Exhaustive) Qualitative Research Design Resources and Other Chapter-Relevant Resources That Are Not Already Noted in the References

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Table 1

A List (Not Exhaustive, and Alphabetized by Author) Providing 12 Examples of Evidence-Based Charter School Qualitative Studies Published in Peer-Reviewed Journals Between the Years 2016-2019

Author and Title	Peer-Reviewed Journal and Year	Relevant Context	Approach	Sample of Findings
Gawlik, M. A. (<i>Principalship Socialization in Charter Schools</i>)	<i>Journal of School Leadership</i> , 2019	three charter elementary schools in Florida (FL) during the 2012-2013 school year	exploratory qualitative case study (including semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis)	principal transitions into schools and subsequent socialization were varied among the charter school principals, and they differed between network-based and stand-alone charters
Golann, J. W. (<i>Conformers, Adaptors, Imitators, and Rejecters: How No-Excuses Teachers' Cultural Toolkits Shape Their Responses to Control</i>)	<i>Sociology of Education</i> , 2017	"no excuses" charter schools in a northeastern U.S. city	ethnographic	revealed teachers' adaptation strategies in response to school control, wherein they either imitated, conformed, adapted or rejected expected approaches in the schools
Henry, K. L., & Dixon, A. D. (<i>"Locking the Door Before We Got the Keys": Racial Realities of the Charter School Authorization Process in Post-Katrina New Orleans</i>)	<i>Educational Policy</i> , 2016	charter schools and stakeholders in New Orleans, Louisiana (LA)	drawn from two qualitative case studies (2014-2015 in New Orleans, LA and a long-term ethnographic study of community responses to school reform); semi-structured interviews with African American educational stakeholders who applied to open and operate a charter school or who were familiar with the charter context and reforms post-Katrina; critical race theory	the charter the authorization and application process was racialized and reproduced White dominance
Hornbeck, D., & Malin, J. (<i>State Auditors in Education Policy</i>)	<i>Educational Policy</i> , 2019	Ohio and Pennsylvania as state case contexts	multiple-case study design; policy and document analyses	executive-level state auditors' powers have expanded substantially since the proliferation of brick-and-mortar and online charter schools and due to other factors related to political motivations, auditors' power, and auditing oversight

Jabbar, H. (<i>Recruiting "Talent": School Choice and Teacher Hiring in New Orleans</i>)	<i>Educational Administration Quarterly</i> , 2018	New Orleans, LA	94 interviews with principals, district leaders, and charter network leaders	school choice posed challenges for leaders related to teacher recruitment and hiring practices
Marsh, L. T., & Noguera, P. A. (<i>Beyond Stigma and Stereotypes: An Ethnographic Study on the Effects of School-Imposed Labeling on Black Males in an Urban Charter School</i>)	<i>The Urban Review</i> , 2018	"no excuses" charter school	ethnographic	a language of deficit and pathology impacted Black male students' schooling experiences as they negotiated racial stigma as racialized bodies
Potterton, A. U. (<i>Leaders' Experiences in Arizona's Mature Education Market</i>)	<i>Journal of Educational Administration</i> , 2019	one Arizona district public school and its surrounding community, including nearby charter schools	ethnographic	schools leaders' decision-making processes were influenced by competitive pressures, and district public school leaders responded differently to competition than did the charter school leaders
Thomas, K. A., & Lacey, C. H. (<i>A Phenomenological Study of the Leadership Experiences of the Charter School Founder-Administrator in Florida</i>)	<i>The Qualitative Report</i> , 2016	four founder-administrators of charter schools in FL	open-ended interviews	areas of accountability and compliance were common critical factors dictated by districts' and charters' rules for defining quality
Torres, A. C. (<i>Teacher Efficacy and Disciplinary Expectations in Charter Schools: Understanding the Link to Teachers' Career Decisions</i>)	<i>Journal of School Choice</i> , 2016	New York City, New York	interviews with 20 Charter Management Organization (CMO) and non-CMO teachers	strict disciplinary methods may benefit teachers in creating orderly environments but may undermine efficacy and increase teacher turnover
Torres, A. C., & Weiner, J. (<i>The New Professionalism? Charter Teachers' Experiences and Qualities of the Teaching Profession</i>)	<i>Education Policy Analysis Archives</i> , 2018	Northeastern region of the U.S.	interviews with 20 new and novice teachers teaching in high profile charter organizations in the northeast (such as Uncommon Schools, KIPP, MATCH, and Boston Collegiate); 17 different schools represented	teachers embraced managed professionalism ("new professionalism") and spoke positively of climate and colleagues, they felt pressures from competition, and they questioned efficacy
Waitoller, F. R., Nguyen, N., & Super, G. (<i>The Irony of Rigor: 'No-Excuses' Charter Schools at the Intersections of Race and Disability</i>)	<i>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</i> , 2019	Chicago, Illinois Public Schools (CPS)	partnership with a law advocacy group; in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 24 parents (83% Black, 17% Latinx, and all women); document reviews of students' Individual Education Plans	"no-excuses" charter schools in the study utilized mechanisms that excluded students with disabilities, and in particular Black and Latinx students

			(IEPs) and other charter school documents	
Weixler, L. B., Lincove, J. A., & Gerry, A. (<i>The Provision of Public Pre-K in the Absence of Centralized School Management</i>)	<i>American Educational Research Journal</i> , 2019	charter school leaders in New Orleans, LA	mixed methods (longitudinal student enrollment and performance records) and interviews with school leaders from 10 case studies	Pre-K seats substantially fell as budgeting and decision-making mechanisms were decentralized, there were few benefits for charter schools to offer Pre-K programs since Pre-K graduates are very mobile, and there was an observable disinvestment in Pre-K programs which are intended to advance social goals for education systems

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	Bridges in Mathematics		<input type="checkbox"/>
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Figure 1. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2020.