

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- 7.1** Define data analysis and data interpretation.
- 7.2** Identify appropriate qualitative data analysis techniques for your action research project.
- 7.3** Identify appropriate quantitative data analysis and interpretation techniques for your action research project.
- 7.4** Identify appropriate qualitative data interpretation techniques for your action research project.

After collecting your data, the next steps in the action research process are to review what you have learned and to draw conclusions about what you think your data mean. This chapter provides guidelines and techniques for data analysis (the attempt to fully and accurately summarize and represent the data that have been collected) and data interpretation (the attempt to find meaning in those data, to answer the question "So what?").

Emphasizing Learning by Deemphasizing Grades

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Lauren Fagel, Paul Swanson, John Gorleski, and Joe Senese are all members of the Action Research Laboratory (ARL) at Highland Park High School (HPHS) near Chicago, Illinois. This project provides a good example of a team approach to collaborative action research and the kinds of analysis and interpretations that can flow from various data sources.

The scene is a common one for teachers: Papers are returned to students, who immediately search for the grade, sigh, take out calculators, tabulate quarter grades, and then compare grades with their neighbors! The rich comments and

constructive feedback on the papers usually go unheeded—the all-important grade is the prime focus of the students' gazes!

This study was conducted at Highland Park High School, one of two large public high schools in Township District 113. Our student population consists of 1,509 students with an ethnic makeup of 3 percent Asian American, 2 percent African American, 13 percent Hispanic American, and 82 percent white. Ninety-two percent of the student body is college bound, and the parent community strongly encourages high student achievement. Many students enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, strive to become members of the Highland Park Honor Society, and compete to become senior class valedictorian or salutatorian. This ARL group, which included an English teacher, a health teacher, and a history teacher, was concerned about the immense amount of pressure placed on students to receive good grades. We questioned the number system teachers use to assign grades, and we wondered whether grades actually represent what students have learned. We discussed the role of the teacher as assessor, questioning whether we act as true evaluators of student work or simply as "sorters" of students. We lamented the all-encompassing role grades play in the HPHS academic environment. We decided to conduct research in this area, investigating how a deemphasis of grades could, in turn, emphasize learning in the classroom. The research questions were as follows:

- 1. How does an elimination of number and letter grades throughout the year (with the exception of quarter and semester grades) affect student attitudes toward learning?*
- 2. How does an elimination of number and letter grades throughout the year (with the exception of quarter and semester grades) affect our teaching styles, use of assessments, and choice of curriculum materials?*
- 3. How does an extensive use of student self-assessment affect student growth, improvement, and achievement over the course of a school year?*
- 4. How does deemphasizing grades allow us to enrich our teaching?*

We began the year by informing students of our involvement in the ARL and presenting a rationale for deemphasizing grades and emphasizing learning. Teachers were still required to assign a grade at the end of each quarter, and students were curious about how their final grade would be determined. We explained how the system would work and followed up by asking students to write down what they thought they would like about the system, what they thought they would not like, and what they did not understand. A letter was also sent home to parents explaining the system and encouraging them to contact us with any questions, concerns, or comments.

Approximately once a month, we met as a team for an entire day of reflection, discussion, brainstorming, and future planning. We quickly found out that certain aspects of our system were working, while others needed refining, and still others needed to be eliminated or replaced.

With the exception of one major project during third quarter, we returned all student work without a number or letter grade. Instead, we used several different

types of markings to indicate to students how well they performed on a particular assessment. On homework assignments, including journal entries, we wrote comments and then assigned a u, u1, or u2. On long-term projects, we either assessed different aspects of the final product on a scale of 1 to 5 and wrote one or two sentences to the student, or we did not use any scale and instead wrote extensive comments. On tests and quizzes we marked objective items wrong when appropriate, assigned a u, u1, or u2 to short-answer and other types of subjective questions, and wrote general comments throughout the test or quiz. Most students were able to tell how well they performed on a particular assessment, and only a very few students persisted by asking us how our comments would translate into a letter grade. In these cases, we found that students were less argumentative than our students had been in the previous year (prior to deemphasizing grades). This year we found ourselves more open to criticism about the way test questions were written and exams were formatted because students seemed to be more genuine in their questioning. They were not arguing for points because there were no points! This created a more community-like setting in the classroom, with all of us aiming for the same goal—learning.

Self-Assessment Worksheet

After some modification during the first semester, we adopted a self-assessment worksheet that encouraged students to reflect on their progress periodically throughout the year. The worksheet included the following headings: Content Mastery, Skill Mastery, Completion of Work, and In-Class Activity. This worksheet evolved into an end of quarter self-evaluation that asked students to select a grade they felt they deserved and then to provide evidence by referring to specific assignments, tests, quizzes, and projects. Finally, by the end of the school year, we were using an end-of-quarter evaluation sheet that listed the student's mid-quarter grade range, the marks they received on specific homework assignments completed since the previous student-teacher-parent conference, and a general comment for each major test, quiz, and project they had completed since mid-quarter. Students' grades were then assigned without holding an end-of-quarter conference.

Another important part of this project was that students accepted responsibility for their grades and participated in developing criteria that would be used to assess the quality of their work. The following criteria are an example of what evolved from involving students in the decision-making process:

"A" Criteria

- Participates actively in class
- Shows a great deal of effort
- Does all homework
- Does well on tests
- Is on time for class

Shows respect and works well with others
Is always prepared

"B" Criteria

Shows good participation
Misses no more than one to two assignments
Has one to two tardies
Shows good knowledge of material
Has no unauthorized absences
Shows some effort
Demonstrates respect for others

"C" Criteria

Demonstrates some knowledge of material and passes all tests
Work is frequently late or not turned in
Rarely participates in class
Shows little effort
Has several tardies
Has unauthorized absences
Is frequently not prepared

"D" Criteria

Doesn't show knowledge of material and performs poorly on tests
Has large number of assignments not turned in
Shows no effort or participation
Shows little respect for others
Has several unauthorized absences
Is disruptive in class
Is often tardy

By using this rubric, students had guidelines they could use as a reference to accurately assess their performance. The onus on defending a grade now became the students' responsibility and not the teachers'. If students could justify their self-evaluation grade, based on the criteria we had agreed to, that was the grade they received. As a result of this ownership, students had few complaints regarding their grades.

Student-Teacher Conferences

Students appeared to have a difficult time assigning and defending their grades during student-teacher conferences. For many years, students had been conditioned to accept the grades given to them by a teacher without question. They had rarely been asked to participate actively in assigning their own grade. The most valuable part of

these conferences was the opportunity to speak with all students and to get a sense of how they were feeling about the class in general. Often the discussion of grades came at the end of the conference and was the shortest part of the conversation. Students were asked to suggest a grade (before the teacher), but there was a sense that a guessing game was in progress as we tried to balance the teacher's expectations with those of individual students.

The data collected from surveys, observations, and interviews with children suggest that the majority of students were either happy with the grading system or neutral about it. A majority of students indicated that the alternative grading system did affect their academic preparation and performance in class (in a positive way) and that they had a more positive attitude toward the class.

Grades

As we reflected on grade distributions, comparing this year to the previous year, there appeared to be a significant increase in the number of students whose grades fell in the A/A minus range (55 percent this year compared with 27 percent last year). There is no way of knowing exactly what accounted for the increase of As and A minuses; however, we believe that students' involvement in deciding their own grade, as well as the less objective nature of the way grades were assigned (i.e., not entirely based on the percentages scored on tests), had something to do with the outcomes. We believe that the increased focus on personal learning, growth, and improvement that evolved from deemphasizing grades made it less likely for students to fail and more likely for students to accept responsibility for their learning and to provide the evidence that they had learned.

The end-of-year survey revealed that 71 percent of students agreed with the following statement: "I feel that the grading practices used in this course helped me to focus more on my learning than on my grade." Seventy-four percent agreed that "they would recommend that this teacher continue using these grading practices because they help students learn better." We believe that these kinds of statements indicate student support for our deemphasized grading practices and that learning can occur in an environment where the pressure to earn grades is reduced. Students made supporting comments such as these:

"I felt I could concentrate on education."

"It helped me concentrate on improving myself."

"It helps you focus more on information and less on what the teacher wants."

"It relieved a lot of stress and I was able to work at my ability without the competition of grades."

"In comparison to the traditional grading system, this system is the most effective way of assessing my level of performance."

"This method helps me perform best because it's personal to my needs."

It was very reassuring to us to see the pride that students showed and the importance they placed on giving accurate self-evaluation grades. The following two comments illustrate the integrity with which the majority of students approached this responsibility.

"I knew I had to be honest with myself."

"Integrity defines you, and if you die tomorrow, people won't remember your grades or your statistics; they remember how true and real you were with yourself."

We learned a tremendous amount through this research, but as with any research, we were left with more questions than we answered. For example:

- *Is the total elimination of letter and number grades (with the exception of quarter and semester grades) the best way to deemphasize grades?*
- *Is there a way to deemphasize grades that requires less paperwork on the teacher's part? (After all, one of the things we learned through the implementation of this intervention is that grades are expedient and convenient for a harried teacher!)*
- *What is an appropriate role for students to play in determining their own grades?*
- *How can we deemphasize grades and still maintain very specific criteria/outcomes for students?*

By far the most rewarding part of working on an action research team was the opportunity to learn and grow with a small group of teacher colleagues. This experience of mutual commitment provided a wonderful staff development experience; by working with these colleagues consistently throughout the year, we were able to explore new ideas and take risks in the classroom with a type of "safety net" in place. For that reason alone, as well as our desire to explore the new questions and challenges raised by our research, we will continue to conduct action research into the effectiveness of our teaching and grading practices.

Giving up grading practices and beliefs that we have held for years can be a very scary proposition. It is not always easy to turn over some of our control to others. Perhaps our first action research steps need to be "baby steps." This action research project freed us from the grading merry-go-round and provided a new way to address assessment issues. By taking these steps, we were able to devote less time to pencil pushing and calculator crunching and to spend more time with our most important job: helping our students reach their full potential as we strive to reach our full potential as teachers.

Perhaps the most difficult part of action research is the process of trying to make sense of the mountains of data collected over the course of the study. This task is often daunting for action researchers who, while engaged in the regular, ongoing collection of data, must change their focus and adopt a more analytical and interpretive lens. They must move beyond the description of the phenomenon they have studied and make sense of what they have learned.

The Highland Park High School example richly illustrates how a team of teachers worked together to increase their understanding of how deemphasizing grades could help reemphasize student learning. In so doing, the teachers were able to encapsulate the "findings" of their research into "sound bites" that could be shared with other teachers and participants.

Considering how to best proceed with data analysis and data interpretation is critical before, during, and after the action research process and will be impacted by

the type of research you have conducted: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. It is important to think “How am I going to make sense of this data?” before conducting the study to avoid collecting data that are not important or that come in a form that cannot be understood. Similarly, during the study, teacher researchers should reflect on what they are finding and how it can inform their ongoing data collection efforts. Finally, as the systematic collection of data concludes, teacher researchers should determine what they want to “celebrate” and share in their findings.

Ongoing Analysis and Reflection

Action research studies provide teacher researchers with data that can be used formatively and summatively; that is, much of the data collected during the study can be used to positively affect teaching throughout the study. For example, teachers have always reflected on their teaching before, during, and after a particular teaching episode—it’s part of our professional disposition. Action research is no different. We can and should take time to analyze our data during the study to decide whether what we are learning is what we had hoped to learn. For example, the Highland Park High School team discovered early in their research that some aspects of their deemphasized grading system were working, whereas others needed to be refined or eliminated. Pausing to analyze and reflect during the action research process is essential.

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) maintained that “it is very important to recognize that at various intervals you must stop gathering data and reflect on what you have thus far” (p. 155). For example, these authors suggested that teacher researchers answer two questions to guide their work and reflections:

1. Is your research question still answerable and worth answering?
2. Are your data collection techniques catching the kind of data you wanted and filtering out the data that you don’t? (p. 155)

Similarly, Hendricks (2017) discusses the importance of *interim analysis*, a step in the action research process that allows the researcher to make changes to data collection strategies during the research based on the kinds of questions and issues that arise during the ongoing data analysis process. Consciously “pausing” during the investigation will allow you to reflect on what you are attending to and what you are leaving out. Such a reflective stance will continue to guide your efforts (in process) as well as allow for early “hunches” about what you are seeing so far. As Anderson and colleagues (1994) suggested,

Stopping periodically in the data collection process also allows you to see if you have any gaps in the data, holes where you need data to answer the questions. Seeing this early on in the research allows you to develop the correct techniques for a complete study. (p. 156)

Another way to think of this is in terms of Lewin’s (1952) original action research model and the attention given to rethinking, reflecting, discussing, replanning, understanding, and learning during the action research process.

Avoid Premature Action

Although ongoing analysis and reflection is a natural part of the action research process, you should avoid premature actions based on early analysis and interpretation of data. Action researchers—especially those who are inexperienced—often make rash or impulsive decisions based on limited or no data. Neophyte teacher researchers engaged in the first systematic study of their own teaching tend to zealously collect, analyze, and interpret data in a rapid-fire fashion. Their efforts go awry as they become their own best informants and jump to hasty conclusions and impulsive actions.

The action research process takes time. Teacher researchers must be wary of the lure of quick-fix strategies and patient enough to avoid the pitfalls of basing actions on premature analysis. Rarely will a few days of observation provide enough insight to enact a quick-fix strategy! Although it is much easier to start a study with a preconceived notion about what you will find, it's a far greater test of patience, endurance, and integrity to let the action research inquiry slowly unfold over the course of a semester or two.

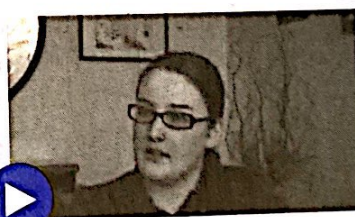
The Role of Analysis and Interpretation

You will reach a point in the research process where you will want to summarize what you have learned and what you think it means for your students. You will want to share your findings without having to share all of your data and use these

Voices from the Field

Avoid Premature Action

In this vignette, our teacher researcher, Rachelle, provides a good example of a neophyte teacher researcher grappling with the competing agendas of trying to find a “quick fix” while staying true to the research process. Rachelle references the temptation to change her data interpretation and to steer it toward outcomes that she had anticipated prior to the study. It is critical to the success of any action research effort that the teacher researcher avoid premature action based on preliminary and/or incomplete data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. Similarly, teacher researchers must remain vigilant about the possible impact of their preconceived notions on the rigorous conduct of the action research process.



ENHANCEDetext
video example 7-1

Rachelle, the teacher researcher in this video, points out the link between early interpretation and researcher bias.

findings to identify what will happen next in the action research process. This critical component of the action research process is called data analysis and interpretation, and it needs to be carefully thought out.

Data analysis is an attempt by the teacher researcher to summarize collected data in a dependable and accurate manner. The type of data you collect will determine the data analysis techniques you will use. For example, if you collect narrative, descriptive, and nonnumerical data, such as field notes from observations or interviews, questionnaires, or pictures, qualitative data analysis will be best suited for your needs. It is not possible to “number crunch” and reduce this type of data to a manageable form, as is the case in quantitative data analysis. Sometimes, however, quantitative data analysis will be the most appropriate way to summarize your findings, such as when you need to summarize test scores. In this chapter, we will discuss how to analyze both qualitative and quantitative data sources.

After analyzing your data, you will be faced with the task of trying to understand it. Data interpretation is an attempt by the researcher to find meaning in the data, to answer the “So what?” question in terms of the implications of the study’s findings. Put simply, analysis involves summarizing what’s in the data, whereas interpretation involves making sense of—finding meaning in—that data.

Data analysis and interpretation are critical stages in the action research process that require the teacher researcher to both know and understand the data. When analyzing and interpreting data, challenge yourself to explore every possible angle and try to find patterns and seek out new understandings among the data. Remember Deborah South from the Chapter 1 vignette on “how to motivate unmotivated students”? At first, she was convinced that the only feasible interpretation of her data was that her class and her teaching were the causes of the dramatic drop in students’ scores. After all, it was the only experience these 18 students had in common during the term! However, as Deborah revisited her data and as her fellow action researchers pushed her to examine other possibilities, it became clear that the homogeneous grouping of “low-achieving” and “unmotivated” students contributed to a “critical mass of negativity” in the classroom. As a result of her commitment to quality data analysis and interpretation, Deborah was able to use her action research findings to make a persuasive argument for the school principal to investigate other “interventions” that might more effectively address the problems of the “unmotivated” student.

Qualitative Data Organization

If data are to be thoroughly analyzed, they must be organized. Ideally, the teacher researcher will have carefully managed notes, records, and artifacts as they were collected; however, as a former classroom teacher, I know sometimes that chaos reigns! So, it is with this sensitivity to the realities of classroom life that I offer some additional organizational tips to “tidy up” your data, ensure their completeness, and make them easier to study. After the data are organized, the analysis can begin in earnest (see Figure 7-1).

figure 7-1 ■ Data Organization Activities

- Write dates (month, day, year) on all notes.
- Sequence all notes with labels (e.g., 6th set of notes).
- Label notes according to type (such as observer's notes, memo to self, transcript from interview).
- Make two photocopies of all notes (field notes, transcripts etc.) and retain original copies.
- Organize computer files into folders according to data type and stages of analysis.
- Make backup copies of all files.
- Read through data and make sure all information is complete and legible before proceeding to analysis and interpretation.
- Begin to note themes and patterns that emerge.

One way to proceed with analysis is to follow three iterative, or repeating, steps: reading/memoing, describing what is going on in the setting, and classifying research data. The process focuses on (1) becoming familiar with the data and identifying potential themes (i.e., reading/memoing); (2) examining the data in depth to provide detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and activity (i.e., describing); and (3) categorizing and coding pieces of data and grouping them into themes (i.e., classifying).

The interrelations among these steps are not necessarily linear. At the start of data analysis, the logical sequence of activities is from reading/memoing to description to classifying and finally to interpretation. However, as a researcher begins to internalize and reflect on the data, the initial ordered sequence may lose its structure and become more flexible. If you've ever driven home pondering some issue or problem and then out of the blue had a sudden flash of understanding that provides a solution, you have a sense of how qualitative data analysis takes place. Once you are *into* the data, it is not the three steps that lead to understanding; it is your ability to think, imagine, create, intuit, and analyze that guides the data analysis. Knowing the steps is not enough; the thinker, imaginer, and hypothesizer—that is, the teacher researcher—is the data analyzer, and the quality of the research analysis depends heavily on the intellectual qualities of the teacher researcher. Let me be very clear about this process: It is a process of digesting the contents of your qualitative data and finding related threads in it. You will not meaningfully accomplish these tasks with one or two or more readings of your data. To make the

kinds of connections needed to analyze and interpret qualitative data, you must know your data—really know it, in your head, not just on paper. The process can be tedious, time consuming, and repetitious; however, the steps can help you understand, describe, and classify qualitative data.

Reading/Memoing

The first step in analysis is to read and write memos about all field notes, transcripts, and observer comments to get an initial sense of the data. To begin, find a quiet place and plan to spend a few hours at a time reading through the data. Krathwohl (1998) wisely pointed out that “the first time you sit down to read your data is the only time you come to that particular set fresh” (p. 309). It is important that you write notes in the margins or underline sections or issues that seem important to you so that you will have a record of your initial thoughts and sense of the data. Later, when you are deeper into the analysis, you may find that many of these early impressions are not useful; however, you may also find that some initial impressions hold up throughout. At this stage of analysis, you should also begin the search for recurring themes or common threads.

Describing

The next step, describing, involves developing thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the participants, the setting, and the phenomenon studied in order to convey the rich complexity of the research. The descriptions are based on your collected observations, interview data, field notes, and artifacts. The aim of this step is to provide a narrative picture of the setting and events that take place in it so you will have an understanding of the context in which the study is taking place. Attention to the research context is a common and important theme in qualitative research because the context influences participants’ actions and understandings. Because meaning is influenced by context, analysis (and therefore interpretation) is hampered without a thorough description of the context, actions, and interactions of participants.

An important concern of teacher researchers is portraying the views of the research participants accurately. The descriptions of the research context, meanings, and social relations can be presented in a number of forms. For example, you can describe events in chronological order, create a composite of a typical day in the life of a participant in the setting, focus on key contextual episodes, or illuminate different perspectives of the participants. Regardless of the form, it is crucial that you describe thoroughly how participants define situations and explain their actions. Also, your descriptions should make note of how interactions and social relations among the participants may have changed during the course of the study.

Classifying

Qualitative data analysis is a process of breaking down data into smaller units, determining their import, and putting the pertinent units together in a more

general, analytical form. Qualitative data are typically broken down through the process of classifying or *coding*; the pieces of data are then categorized. A *category* is a classification of ideas or concepts; categorization, then, is grouping the data into themes. When concepts in the data are examined and compared to one another and connections are made, categories are formed.

As an example, consider a teacher researcher who is conducting a qualitative study on characteristics of fifth-grade students' study methods. Suppose the researcher had collected 20 sets of field notes (i.e., based on observations) or 20 transcripts of interviews. The researcher's task is to read through all the notes or transcripts and categorize the meanings or understandings that emerge from the data. The categories provide the basis for structuring the analysis and interpretation—without data that are classified and grouped, a researcher has no reasonable way to analyze qualitative studies. However, the categories identified by one researcher would not necessarily be the same as those identified by another researcher, even if they analyzed the same data. There is no single "correct" way to organize and analyze the data. Different researchers produce different categories from the same data for many reasons, including researcher biases, personal interests, style, and interpretive focus.

Qualitative Data Analysis Techniques

Picture this: After weeks (months, years) of data collection using a variety of qualitative data collection techniques (observations, interviews, surveys, audio recordings, and the like), you sit in your living room (classroom, faculty lounge) with colleagues (or by yourself, perhaps being observed by a curious significant other!) surrounded by files (boxes) of stuff (data in all shapes and forms). This less-than-romantic image of the teacher researcher is a common one. Having immersed themselves in the systematic study of a significant problem, teachers (individually and collectively) are confronted with the somewhat daunting task of data analysis, engaging in analysis that will represent the mountains of descriptive data in a "correct," "accurate," "reliable," and "right" way. There is no easy way to do this work: It is difficult, time consuming, and challenging. Nevertheless, it is potentially the most important step in the action research process as we try to understand what we have learned through our investigations.

The strategies outlined in the following sections will serve as guideposts and prompts to move you through your analysis as efficiently as possible. There is no substitute for taking time to fully immerse yourself in your data. Literally bury yourself in what you have. Read and reread, listen and relisten, watch and rewatch. Get to know intimately what you have collected. Struggle with the nuances and caveats, the subtleties, the persuasive, the incomplete. Avoid premature judgment and action and try to remain aware of what will ultimately improve the lives of the children in your care. These are lofty goals, but they are at the heart of what we are trying to achieve with data analysis.

Identifying Themes

One place to start your analysis is to work inductively as you begin to analyze the data: consider the big picture and start to list “themes” that you have seen emerge in your literature review and in the data collection. Are there patterns that emerge, such as events that keep repeating themselves, key phrases that participants use to describe their feelings, or survey responses that seem to “match” one another? Consider the Highland Park High School action research team in the opening vignette of this chapter. As they gathered their data, they realized that they were dealing with many recurrent themes in their efforts to deemphasize grades—the stress on students created by grades, the satisfaction gained from the renewed focus on learning, the amount of time it took for teachers to assess student work not using traditional grades, and the issues of honesty and integrity, for example.

Coding Surveys, Interviews, and Questionnaires

One of the most frequent data analysis activities undertaken by action researchers is coding, the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires. Working with these types of data is common because surveys, interviews, and questionnaires are generally accepted as part of the school culture, and they provide a great deal of information in a relatively short amount of time.

As you analyze your data, you may need to reduce that data to a manageable form. One way to proceed when working with field notes, transcripts of taped interviews, pictures, maps, charts, and so on is to try to record data on 3" × 5" index cards so your data will be manageable and allow for sorting. Visual data, such as pictures, maps, charts, and video recordings, may be reduced to a summary statement that captures the themes identified in the data. As you read and reread your data (possibly now reduced to fit on your cards), organize them into categories or themes. Although there is nothing magical about this process, it does take time and a willingness to check that the mountains of descriptive data have been analyzed in a “correct,” “accurate,” “reliable,” and “right” way.

If you can imagine playing a game of cards and not knowing what the symbols on the cards mean, the following analogy might work: You have a deck of cards, each of which contains data. The order of the cards is random. As you initially scan the cards, you have an intuitive sense that the data on some of the cards looks similar to that on other cards. You finish carefully looking at all of the cards and reshuffle the deck. Again you look through the deck, but this time you group together the cards (data) that look alike. You end up with 13 collections of four cards that have some kind of trait in common (the number or face value of the card). Again, you reshuffle the cards. This time as you start to sort through the cards, you notice a different theme (the

suit of the card) and end up with four piles of 13 cards. This is puzzling. Not to be thwarted in your efforts, you again reshuffle the deck and attempt to settle on an organizing theme. You group together cards (data) that have sufficient common characteristics, and you feel confident that your analysis of the data is undeniably accurate. But there is just one problem: What do you do with the Joker that found its way into the pack? And what about that wild card? Where did they come from, and where do they fit? Just when you thought you had it all worked out, in crept something that challenges the themes you have used to organize and represent the data you have collected. The process of shuffling and sorting continues.

A few commonsense guidelines may make this somewhat overwhelming activity of coding mountains of data more manageable:

1. Read through all the data and attach working labels to blocks of text. These labels ought to have meaning for you—a kind of shorthand that will serve as a reference point when you return to the text later in the process.
2. Literally cut and paste the blocks of text onto 3" × 5" cards (similar to the card-playing analogy earlier) so that your data are in a manageable form. Use some kind of numbering system so that you can track the block of text back to the original context in which it appeared. For example, noting date and time (1/26/02, 10:15) will help you to locate the reference in your journal or field notes. Remember: Context is important, and you will want to check that you have correctly labeled the text you are trying to funnel into a category with similar text. Trying to shuffle reams of paper can be a difficult task, so cards are beneficial.
3. Start to group together cards that contain the same or similar labels.
4. Revisit each pile of cards and see whether, in fact, the label still fits or whether similar labels actually warrant their own category. This process is somewhat similar to brainstorming and seeking categories that will encapsulate similar thoughts and ideas.

For example, in my study of school district change (Mills, 1988), I found myself with a large pile of 3" × 5" cards that included some of the following notations:

Card 1. Assistant superintendent urges principals not to reinvent the wheel but to share ideas with each other as they attempt to deal with an identified problem. (In this case, the problem was low test scores on the California Achievement Test [CAT].) The assistant superintendent states to the principals, "I don't want any of you to think that you are alone out there."

Card 2. One of the principals at the meeting comments, "Clearly, the CAT does not test what we teach in our schools. The test was designed for California, not Oregon."

Card 3. The next meeting of principals following the release of the CAT scores, and the directive from the superintendent that “all schools will develop action plans to address areas of weakness identified by the test scores” does not include any discussion of action plan development.

Card 4. A principal sums up his feelings about standardized testing as follows: “The district makes us go through a whole lot of garbage for little outcome or benefit to the teachers and the students.”

Card 5. Principals’ meeting 3 months following the release of test scores and action plan mandate. Action plans were due to the curriculum director 7 weeks ago. Principals are instructed that they can have another 2 weeks to complete the plans.

Card 6. The assistant superintendent announces that he will be meeting with principals on an individual basis to discuss how action plans for school improvement will be implemented. It is 4 weeks before the end of the school year and 16 weeks since the initial directive to develop school improvement action plans.

Card 7. One principal commented on the development of the action plan/school improvement plan, “Do I write plans of improvement just to let the central office know that it has been done so that they are satisfied and can get on with doing whatever it is that they do with all the paperwork? I admit that I have written plans and never followed up on them because I’m too busy getting on with the real business of school.”

By following the four commonsense guidelines presented earlier, the first step of “attaching working labels” to blocks of text that are then “cut and pasted” onto cards resulted in the following grouping of cards: Cards 1, 3, and 5 were labeled “Statement of school district approach to school change”; cards 2 and 4 were labeled “Principals’ challenges to school district approach”; and cards 6 and 7 were labeled “Inaction of school district approach.”

These cards are indicative of the comments that were captured during interviews with individual principals and observations of principals’ meetings; collectively, the comments provided the context and understanding for the analysis that resulted in a statement of a theme titled “inaction.” In writing about school change as it related to the McKenzie School District, I included in my data analysis a “Taxonomy of Managing and Coping Strategies for Educational Change,” which incorporated such themes as “inaction” to describe the change process; that is, one of the ways that the McKenzie School District personnel managed and coped with educational change was to do nothing! Although the story of the change process was fascinating, I have included this example to demonstrate how a theme emerges from the data you collect. I chose the term “inaction” as a theme because it was descriptive (to me) of what was occurring in the district. The same will be true for your own analysis—a

you code your data and reduce them to a manageable form, a label will emerge that describes a pattern of behavior. You will be well on your way to making sense of your data!

Analyzing an Interview

Another common form of qualitative data that action researchers analyze is interview data, most commonly in the form of a transcript from the audio recording of the interview. What follows is an annotated interview between a researcher and a bilingual education teacher as an example of the researcher's analysis of the themes that emerged from the interview.

As this example illustrates, the process of analyzing an interview transcript involves a careful reading of the transcript to identify broad themes emerging from the data that will help answer your research questions. This in-depth, intimate knowledge and examination of the data allows teacher researchers to categorize themes and ideas that will contribute to their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In this bilingual education teacher example, fear of change is a pervasive, recurring theme that contributes to the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon and possibly provides an answer to a research question.

Asking Key Questions

Another approach to data analysis involves the use of key questions. According to Stringer (1996), working through a series of questions can enable action researchers to "extend their understanding of the problems and contexts" (p. 87) they have investigated. These key questions may be the very ones with which you began your action research inquiry, the questions mentioned in Chapter 3 that involve the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the educational process. For example, Who is centrally involved? Who has resources? Which ones? What major activities, events, or issues are relevant to the problem? How do acts, activities, and events happen? When does this problem occur? and so on. Although not all these questions will be applicable to any single situation, they may provide a starting point for teacher researchers who are engaged individually or collectively in analysis.

To illustrate, the Highland Park High School team raised questions such as the following: What is an appropriate role for students to play in determining their own grades? How can grades be deemphasized while teachers maintain specific criteria/outcomes for students? Answers to these and other questions will help extend the team's understanding of the problems associated with deemphasizing grades while emphasizing the importance of learning.

Coding from a Sample Interview Transcript

Codes

Culture

Q: Why do you think that English-only teachers fear bilingual education?

A: I think the fear factor is on a real gut-level and personal level. Teachers feel it's kind of a one-way system in that the teachers who are in the all-English program are fearful at a real basic visceral level that their jobs and their livelihood are at risk. Not to mention their culture, their society, and their known world is at risk by this other language coming into the schools and being acknowledged in the schools. And the teacher might say, "Oh well, because I don't have Spanish that means I am going to be out of a job. Am I going to be replaced by a bilingual teacher? If you have this program in my school that means you're going to need bilingual teachers. I am not bilingual so my job is at risk."

Themes (and Other Ideas)

Fear
Fear of change

Job stability
Fear of new job

Nativistic

movements

Patriotic

Q: Do you think that there is resistance towards expecting all children to learn English?

A: I think that's an interpretation that comes out of a model like a 90/10. When the child needs to come into the first year and has 90% in Spanish and 10% in English, it's easily perceived that we are withholding English from the child. That is a perception. A 50/50 model is a little more amenable to that because it's obvious that 50% of the time the child isn't getting English.

Q: There is the old adage that teachers who oppose bilingual education say, "My ancestors never received bilingual education services in public schools and they did just fine." How do you respond to that kind of attitude toward bilingual education?

A: I say that's old thinking. I think that what your parents or your grandparents had to do when they came here from Italy or Norway, or wherever they came from, to learn another language, the language demand was less than it is today. Employment was easier to obtain, let's say a hundred years ago on a manual labor kind of thing. So a person could come here and speak 80% Scottish and 20% English and still be able to get a job because he could manage to do the labor that was required with that little bit of English. It wasn't an academic level of English that he needed, or that my grandfather needed, coming here speaking Norwegian.

Q: What about the attitude, "Well they are in the United States, and we speak English here, so they can learn English. That's all there is to it." How would you respond to this attitude?

A: That's a big one. That's huge. I think that's a whole cultural, you know, it's based again in fear. Based again in the fact that the

Fear
Fear

United States is a very isolated island in that we are closed in by two oceans and we have never had the habit of stretching out beyond our borders much, or valuing much of what is beyond our borders. We are xenophobic in that sense. So we haven't traditionally learned other languages, or been interested in other languages. "Why bother, we're America, the biggest, the toughest, so why would we value anybody else's culture or language?" And I think that's an old thinking as well. It's an old habit.

Q: Do you think that this attitude is changing?

Nativistic
movements
Patriotic

A: Well, I'm not sure. With September 11th and Homeland Security and all that, I think we have had a big reversal. I think we were going to be able to look at a global perspective and we were on the track of maybe reaching out and saying, "Oh, yeah, this is interesting. Wow, this is great. Look at what we are getting from South America. Look at what we are learning from the Greeks. Look at what we are learning from folks traveling in Africa or traveling in Asia. We are gaining so much. We are taking in so much, it's been great." And then September 11th kind of closed that down and kind of put us back in our cave again and made us a little more fearful. I think the other phenomenon is, and I can speak from the point of view of my father, a good old Idaho boy, you know. Like, "If those folks are coming into our culture and they don't learn English. And they don't learn about Thanksgiving and the 4th of July and how we celebrate Valentine's Day and do it the same way we do, then they are going to change our culture. My culture. And if they change my culture then I won't know how to act. And it's my culture in the first place so if they want to be here they need to accept that."

Fear
Fear

Q: I hear in my class all the time, "If I go to Mexico they aren't going to speak English. They are going to expect me to speak Spanish and adhere to their culture." Why are we different? Why should we be more open?

A: Why should we be? Well, there is a big difference between a tourist going to Mexico and somebody coming here for two weeks, or somebody coming here to spend a lifetime and raise their children. That's a really big different set of elements that we are dealing with. So, one of the things about the United States is that we have always said we are a pluralistic culture. You can come here, settle, raise your family, bring your poor, humble, weak, and we will be collectively a nation. So it starts with the

Fear

idea, the salad bowl idea, that we can all be individuals but we are going to make a collective nation. And the contradiction of that is that we want to all be on the same page because we need to be united. I think the fear that we are not united is seen in the commonly held belief that the word “multicultural” is a nasty word. It’s an eight-letter word or whatever it is, because it means that we are separating out into our little ghettos, into our little cultures, and we’ve got Latinos over here and Russians over here, and we’ve got the Afghans over here and we’ve got the Vietnamese here in San Francisco, and they are going to be separated and not be pulling together in one United States. So that goes for elections and social security and achieving resources and services that are federally provided. Schools for example. The thinking would be “Why would we want all those really diverse thinkers? Like maybe we’ve got a whole bunch of people who are adhering to Islam and they want to come into the public schools and we should educate them? But Islam is apparently against the Anglo-Protestant way of the United States? Why would we let them access our services?” So that is from my father’s point of view. Not from mine. But that is from that conservative, older generation in this country.

Doing an Organizational Review

Another approach that Stringer (1996) suggested is undertaking an organizational review that focuses on the following features of the organization (in this case, a school): vision and mission, goals and objectives, structure of the organization, operation, and problems, issues, and concerns (p. 90). Stringer noted, “As participants work through these issues, they will extend their understanding of the organization and aspects of its operation that are relevant to their problems, issues, and concerns” (pp. 90–91). A review of the school, with these features in mind, may provide insight into the data you have collected.

For example, in the Highland Park High School example that opened this chapter, an organizational review of the school’s grading policies and communication policies with students and parents would include seeking answers to questions such as the following:

- What is the school’s mission and vision?
- What is the school’s policy on grading?
- How is the school organized to provide effective communication with students and parents?
- What issues arise when a change in grading policy is put into effect?

Answers to these questions would provide the teacher researchers at Highland Park High School with additional insights into the data they collected. However, the questions asked by teacher researchers as part of an organizational review will depend on the organization and the area of focus.

Developing a Concept Map

Stringer (1996) suggested that concept maps are another useful strategy that helps action research participants visualize the major influences that have affected the study. For example, what were the perspectives of the students? Parents? Teachers? Administrators? A concept map gives participants an opportunity to display their analysis of the problem and to determine consistencies and inconsistencies that may exist between the disparate groups. The steps for developing a concept map include the following:

1. List the major influences that have affected the study of your area of focus.
2. Develop a visual representation of the major influences (factors) connecting the influences with relationships you know exist (using solid lines) and influences you have a “hunch” about (using dotted lines).
3. Review the concept map to determine any consistencies or inconsistencies that exist among the influences. This forces you back to your data to see “what’s missing.”

For example, Jack Reston at Eastview Elementary School (see Chapter 8) concluded that the following factors were major influences on the success of the school’s absenteeism policy: respectfulness, safety, conflict management, discipline, school rules, behavior, getting along, self-esteem, and academics. Further, Jack believed that some relationships (real and perceived) existed among these factors (see Figure 7-2).

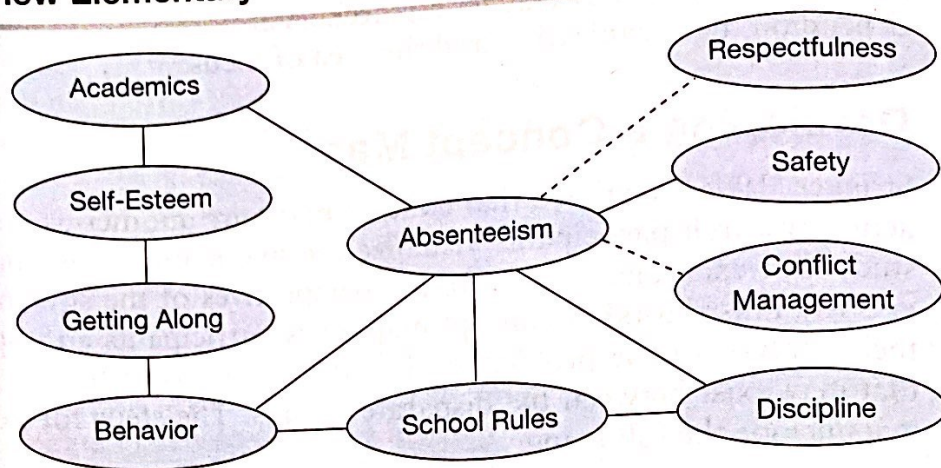
Analyzing Antecedents and Consequences

Stringer (1996) also suggested a process of mapping antecedents (causes) and consequences (effects) to help action researchers identify the major elements of their analysis. Using this framework provides a visual representation of the causal relationships that you, the teacher researcher, now believe exist. It is also helpful to revisit the causal relationships uncovered in your review of the literature to determine challenges and support for your analysis and interpretations.

The steps for analyzing antecedents and consequences are as follows:

1. List the influences that emerged from the analysis for which there appear to be a causal relationship.
2. Revisit the review of literature to determine whether the analysis of the study supports or is challenged by the findings of previous studies.

figure 7-2 ■ Reston's Concept of the Factors Affecting Absenteeism at Eastview Elementary School



3. Revisit your data to determine whether anything is missing and suggest how your findings may influence the next action research cycle.

As an example, in the Eastview Elementary School study, the concept map (see Figure 7-2) could be expanded to include a mapping of antecedents (causes) and consequences (effects) as an outcome of the analysis. In this example, Jack Reston clearly identified (based on his analysis) that a causal relationship existed between absenteeism and academics (student performance) and absenteeism and discipline (student behavior). Based on these relationships, Reston revisited his review of literature to determine if his data analysis challenged or supported the findings of previous studies. Furthermore, Reston could use these reflections to help formulate the next action research cycle focused on another planned intervention to address absenteeism at Eastview Elementary School.

Displaying Findings

The information you have collected should be summarized in an appropriate and meaningful format that you can share with interested colleagues. To do this, teacher researchers should “think display” as they consider how to convey their findings to interested colleagues. You might use matrices, charts, concept maps, graphs, and figures—whatever works as a practical way to encapsulate the findings of your study. I have also witnessed teacher researchers who have made excellent use of other audiovisual media, such as video recordings and computer multimedia presentations (incorporating text, charts, matrices, audio, and video), to represent their findings. These visual displays of data serve an important function for teachers who wish to share findings and celebrate their insights in a public forum. Putting your data into a visual format might also help you “see” new aspects of your data. (See Appendix B for examples of visual displays of data.)

Stating What's Missing

Finally, as part of your full reporting, flag for the consumers of your research what pieces of the puzzle are still missing and identify any remaining questions for which you have not been able to provide answers. Often we find ourselves wanting and needing to provide answers, to move beyond our data with unwarranted assertions that may, in some cases, ultimately lead to embarrassing questions about what we actually did. In keeping with the theme of avoiding premature judgment (arriving at answers to problems without systematic inquiry), the data analysis technique of stating what's missing allows you to hint at what might or should be done next in your quest to better understand the findings of your study. (See Research in Action Checklist 7-1 for a list of data analysis techniques.)

Using Computer Software to Assist with Data Analysis

Increasingly, computer software is being developed to assist with the analysis of qualitative, narrative data. The important word in this sentence is "assist." This software will not do the analysis for you! Novice researchers need to remember that computers alone do not analyze or even code data. They are designed only to expedite these operations when researchers are working with large bodies of text and other kinds of data. The process of coding, retrieving, and subsequently mulling over and making sense of data remains a laborious process completely controlled by researchers. Even if a computer is used, researchers still must go through the process of punching each code into the data on the computer as they

RESEARCH IN ACTION CHECKLIST 7-1



Data Analysis Strategies

- _____ Identify themes.
- _____ Code surveys, interviews, and questionnaires.
- _____ Analyze an interview.
- _____ Ask key questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how?
- _____ Do an organizational review of the school.
- _____ Develop a concept map.
- _____ Analyze antecedents and consequences.
- _____ Display findings.
- _____ State what is missing.

read through their interviews, field notes, and audio and video recordings. Computers are merely handy and extremely fast labeling and retrieval tools. Researchers also must remember that they alone can tell or program the computer to retrieve and count data in specific ways; the machines do not do these tasks automatically. Although computers can enhance and broaden qualitative research analysis, if you are not connected in some way with a research university, it is unlikely that you will have access to the software and the expertise of someone to teach you how to use the software.

To help you with your decision about whether to proceed with locating and learning a qualitative data analysis software package, let's review some of the factors that might affect the decision:

- Are you analyzing large amounts of data (e.g., more than 500 pages of field notes and transcripts)?
- Are you adequately trained in the use of the programs?
- Do you have the resources to purchase a program, or do you know someone who has the program?
- Do you need to be able to capture specific quotes from a large database? (Questions developed from Creswell, 2015, p. 240.)

Remember, computer software will not do the data analysis for you, but it will help retrieve categories from a large amount of narrative (text) data. Given the

Voices from the Field

Qualitative Data Analysis Techniques

The teacher researcher in this vignette provides some good examples of the kinds of data analysis techniques she used to analyze her field notes, observations, and surveys. Specifically, she identified themes from the field notes and observations by coding categories of student engagement (on task, off task, and enthusiastically on task) and applying a frequency count for each of the categories. She also coded student surveys and used descriptive statistical analysis to better understand how student perceptions changed over the course of her technology intervention.



ENHANCEDtext video example 7-2

The teacher researcher in this video organized and coded her qualitative data for effective analysis. As she describes her procedures, try to identify some of the techniques she used.

time (and resources) it takes to learn new software programs and the relatively modest amounts of narrative data you are likely to encounter as a novice researcher, it is likely that you will resort to using the other “old-fashioned” techniques described in this chapter. The Digital Research Tools for the 21st Century feature on the next page discusses three common computer software packages available to assist teacher researchers with the analysis of qualitative data.

Qualitative Data Analysis: An Example

The example that follows is intended to provide a sense of qualitative analysis. A true qualitative study would entail more data analysis than shown here, but the basic ideas represent the process that a qualitative researcher would undertake when analyzing data throughout a study.

In this example, the topics under study are the concerns of parents regarding their first child’s entrance into kindergarten and the kindergarten teacher’s interactions with the students and families. The participants were four parents—three female and one male, representing four families—and the first child in each of the families. The children attend the same school; the kindergarten teacher was also a participant. Data collection procedures included observations and interviews with students, parents, and the kindergarten teacher.

Data analysis would proceed as follows:

1. From the field notes of your classroom observations, you begin to list some common items or topics that you noticed. You recorded in your notes that during classroom instruction, the teacher was using books, videos, and handouts. You also noted that at times, instruction was directed toward individual students, sometimes toward the whole class, and sometimes toward students who were working together in small groups.
2. From your interviews with the teacher, you realize that she gave you information about how she communicated with families about the children. You note that she talked about how she indirectly communicates through grading and report cards and how her lesson plans and tests are related to her overall assessment of the students’ work. She also mentioned that she talks about report cards directly with families during conferences. Additionally, she communicates with families about their children through progress reports and phone calls.
3. From your initial analysis, you group the individual items or topics together into categories that show how the items or topics are related. For example, as shown in Figure 7-3, you could group books, videos, and handouts under a category called “Teaching Materials.” You could group together the ways in which the instruction was carried out—individual, small group, and whole class—and label this category as “Classroom Interactions.” Using information

DIGITAL RESEARCH TOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY



Qualitative Data Analysis Computer Software

Computer software to assist with the analysis of qualitative, narrative data has been available to researchers for many years. The important word in this sentence is *assist*. This software will not do the analysis for you! It is important for novice qualitative researchers to remember that computers do not analyze or even code data. They are designed only to help expedite these operations when researchers are working with large bodies of text and other kinds of data. The process of coding, retrieving, and subsequently mulling over and making sense of data remains a laborious process completely controlled by researchers. Even if a computer is used, researchers still must go through the process of creating codes and labels and keying them into the computer as they read through their interviews, field notes, and audio- and videotapes. Computers are merely handy and extremely fast labeling and retrieval tools. Researchers also must remember that they must program the computer to retrieve and sort data in specific ways; the machines do not do these tasks automatically. Although computers can enhance and broaden qualitative research analysis, if you are not connected in some way with a research university, it is unlikely that you will have access to the software and the expertise of someone to teach you how to use it.

Three common and popular qualitative analysis software packages are NVivo 11, The Ethnograph v6, and HyperRESEARCH 3.7.3.

NVivo 11

NVivo 11 is designed for qualitative researchers who need to work with complex data, especially multimedia data. NVivo is designed to assist researchers with organizing, classifying, and analyzing data and allows the researcher to work with documents, PDFs, spreadsheets, audio, video, and pictures. More information on NVivo can be found on the QSR International website at <http://www.qsrinternational.com>.

The Ethnograph v6

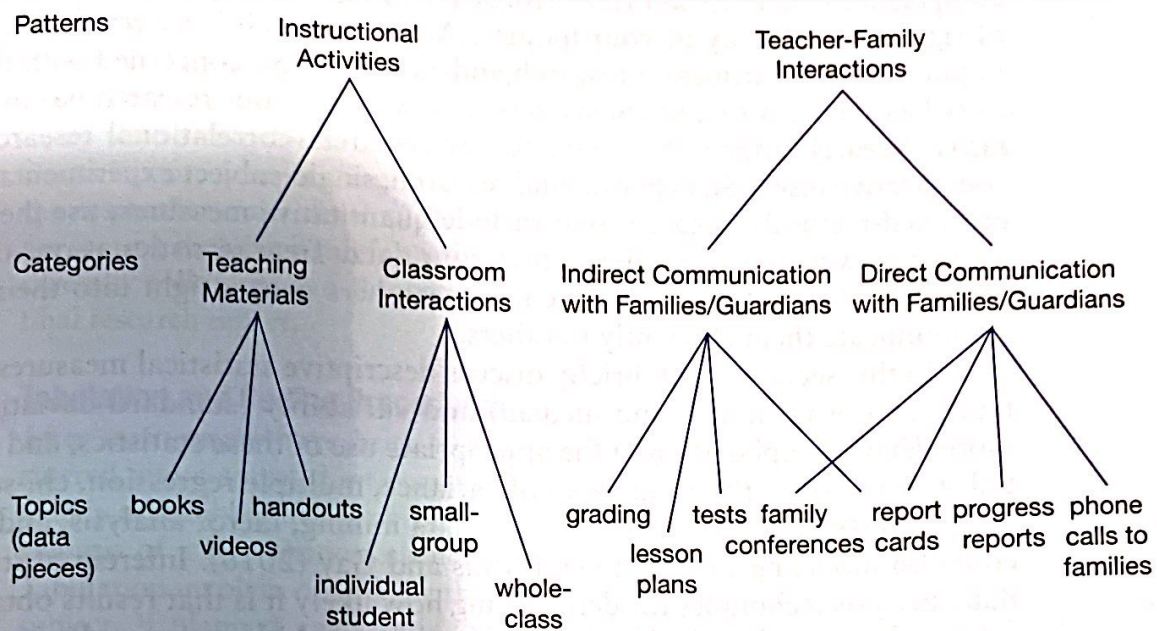
The Ethnograph v6 is a program designed to help qualitative researchers work with text files (in any format) and search for and code segments of interest to the researcher. More information about The Ethnograph can be found on the Qualis Research website at <http://www.qualisresearch.com>.

HyperRESEARCH 3.7.3

HyperRESEARCH 3.7.3 is an advanced software program that allows the qualitative researcher to work with text, graphics, audio, and video sources and to code and retrieve data. More information about HyperRESEARCH can be found on the ResearchWare website at <http://www.researchware.com>.

Remember, computer software will not do the data analysis for you, but it will help you to retrieve categories from a large amount of narrative, audio, video, and photo data (Mills & Gay, 2016, p. 477).

figure 7-3 ■ Diagram of Category Levels and Organization



from the interviews, you could construct the category “Indirect Communication with Families/Guardians” to include grading, lesson plans, tests, and report cards. A category of “Direct Communication with Families/Guardians” could include family conferences, report cards, progress reports, and phone calls to families. Notice that report cards appear in both the indirect and the direct communication categories.

- You organize your four categories into patterns, which are made up of two or more categories. For example, the categories of “Teaching Materials” and “Classroom Interactions” indicate a pattern of “Instructional Activities.” The categories of “Indirect Communication” and “Direct Communication” fit together under a pattern of “Teacher-Family Interactions.”

You then decide whether you need to collect additional data by interviewing students and parents about their experiences of interacting with the teacher to confirm your categories and patterns.

Analyzing and Interpreting Quantitative Data

Data analysis and interpretation can also involve the use of descriptive statistics to help make sense of your quantitative data. My advice here is simple: Count what counts! If it makes sense to tally and count events, categories, occurrences, test

scores, and the like, use an appropriate descriptive statistic. However, do not feel compelled to include elaborate statistical measures simply to add a perceived sense of rigor or credibility to your inquiry. Action research is a very different kind of inquiry from experimental research and as such is less concerned with the statistically based claims that scientists make. However, if your research has used quantitative research approaches (e.g., survey research, correlational research, comparative research, experimental research, single-subject experimental research, or mixed-methods research) that include quantitative measures, use the appropriate statistics to analyze and interpret your data. Treat statistics as one of an array of many tools that can help teacher researchers gain insight into their data and communicate them efficiently to others.

In this section, I will briefly discuss descriptive statistical measures of central tendency (mean, mode, and median) and variability (standard deviation). For a more detailed explanation of the appropriate use of these statistics, and of inferential statistics (e.g., *t* tests, analysis of variance, multiple regression, chi-square, and other investigative techniques, such as data mining, factor analysis, and structural equation modeling), I recommend Mills and Gay (2016). Inferential statistics are data analysis techniques for determining how likely it is that results obtained from a sample or samples are the same results that would have been obtained from the entire population. As stated previously, few (if any) action researchers concern themselves with making claims about the findings of their studies (based on the results obtained in their classrooms) that would generalize to a larger population (e.g., all fifth-grade students in the state).

Many readily available computer programs, such as SPSS for Windows and Microsoft Office Excel, may be accessible for computing statistics at your school or university. Remember, there are many excellent math specialists in your school or district, so don't hesitate to call on those resources with questions.

Preparing Quantitative Data for Analysis

Scoring Procedures

After data are collected, the first step toward analysis involves converting behavioral responses into some numeric system (i.e., scoring quantitative data) or categorical organization (i.e., coding qualitative data). When a standardized instrument is used for data collection, scoring is greatly facilitated. The test manual usually spells out the steps to follow in scoring each test, and a scoring key is usually provided. It is important that data are scored

accurately and consistently; each participant's test results should be scored in the same way and with one criterion. If the manual is followed conscientiously and each test is scored carefully, errors are minimized. It is usually a good idea to recheck all or at least some of the tests (say, 25 percent, or every fourth test) for consistency of scoring. Scoring self-developed instruments is more complex, especially if open-ended items are involved, because the researcher must develop and refine a reliable scoring procedure. Steps for scoring each item and for arriving at a total score must be delineated and carefully followed, and the procedure should be described in detail in the final research report.

Tabulation and Coding Procedures

After instruments have been scored, the resulting data are tabulated and entered into a spreadsheet, usually on the computer. To demonstrate how a readily accessible software program can be applied, I have used Excel for the analysis of a hypothetical elementary school: Pinecrest Elementary School. Tabulation involves organizing the data systematically, such as by individual subject. If planned analyses involve subgroup comparisons, scores should be tabulated for each subgroup. Table 7-1 shows the data for the Pinecrest students, organized in an Excel spreadsheet. Each student's record is listed horizontally by student number, and then codes representing the values for each variable are placed in the vertical columns. For example, reading across the table for Student #1, we find Gender = 1 (male), Ethnicity = 1 (African American), Economic level = 1 (low), and so forth. The score or code for each categorical variable (a variable that has two or more named categories, such as sex (male, female) and ethnicity (African American, Native American, etc.)—should be included in a codebook (see Table 7-2), which serves as the key for the numerical values assigned to each variable. The ratio variables (variables with a true zero point, e.g., achievement scores), such as ReadF (reading score for fall), are defined by their range or maximum score (e.g., student scores can range from 0 to 100 for all the tests at Pinecrest).

Following tabulation, the next step in our analysis is to describe what is happening with our students or, in other words, to summarize the data using descriptive statistics. Choice of appropriate statistical techniques is determined to a great extent by your research design, hypothesis, and the kind of data you collect. Thus, different research approaches lead to different statistical analyses. Note, however, that the complexity of the analysis is not an indication of its "goodness" or appropriateness. Regardless of how well the study is conducted, inappropriate analyses can lead to inappropriate research conclusions. Data analysis is as important as any other component of research, and the statistical procedures and techniques of the study should be identified and described in detail in the research plan.

table 7-1 ■ Excel Spreadsheet of Pacific Crest Elementary Data: Mrs. Alvarez's Third-Grade Class

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I |
|----|----|--------|-----------|------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | ID | Gender | Ethnicity | Econ | ReadLevel | ReadF | ReadS | MathF | MathS |
| 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 52.5 | 68.7 | 54.8 | 55.2 |
| 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 32.5 | 52.8 | 73.2 | 72.8 |
| 4 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 38.4 | 38.5 | 44.9 | 43 |
| 5 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 44.3 | 58.2 | 35.2 | 36.6 |
| 6 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 58.7 | 63.8 | 58.3 | 60.5 |
| 7 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 28.3 | 31.2 | 23.1 | 22 |
| 8 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 43.1 | 53.6 | 52.6 | 53.6 |
| 9 | 8 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 68.5 | 75.5 | 53.8 | 53.3 |
| 10 | 9 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 51.4 | 56.8 | 45.8 | 43.6 |
| 11 | 10 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 38.5 | 41.4 | 46.7 | 47.8 |
| 12 | 11 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 56 | 72.3 | 38.4 | 38 |
| 13 | 12 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 24.5 | 28.4 | 32.5 | 32.6 |
| 14 | 13 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 37.4 | 42.3 | 25.3 | 25.8 |
| 15 | 14 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 28.3 | 34.8 | 18.3 | 19.5 |
| 16 | 15 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 78.4 | 72.4 | 58.3 | 60.3 |
| 17 | 16 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 52.3 | 53.6 | 38.6 | 40.3 |
| 18 | 17 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 58.8 | 64.2 | 67.4 | 68.4 |
| 19 | 18 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 73.2 | 68.4 | 72.4 | 70 |
| 20 | 19 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 47.4 | 65.8 | 53.5 | 52 |
| 21 | 20 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 47.4 | 34.6 | 48.5 | 50.2 |
| 22 | 21 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 53.2 | 58.5 | 36.5 | 38.5 |
| 23 | 22 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 18.4 | 22 | 27.2 | 28 |
| 24 | 23 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 53.5 | 58.4 | 62.4 | 64 |
| 25 | 24 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 46.5 | 52.4 | 38.6 | 38 |
| 26 | 25 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 38.6 | 41.7 | 28.9 | 27 |
| 27 | | | | | | | | | |

table 7-2 ■ Pacific Crest Elementary Code Book

| Variable | Name | Coding Values |
|----------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student ID | ID | 1-25 |
| Gender | Gender | 1 = male, 2 = female |
| Ethnicity | Ethnicity | 1 = African American, 2 = Asian, Pacific Islander, 3 = Hispanic, 4 = Native American, 5 = White |
| Economic Level | Econ | 1 = low (free/reduced lunch), 2 = medium/working class, 3 = middle/upper class |
| Reading Level | ReadLevel | 1 = low, 2 = middle, 3 = high |
| Fall Reading Score | ReadF | 0-100 scale |
| Spring Reading Score | ReadS | 0-100 scale |
| Fall Math Score | MathF | 0-100 scale |
| Spring Math Score | MathS | 0-100 scale |

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Why Use Descriptive Statistics?

Descriptive statistics provide a shorthand way of giving lots of information about a range of numbers using only one or two numbers, such as by using attitude scales (Likert scales and semantic differentials) to measure students' attitudes and other sources of quantitative data available to action researchers (e.g., teacher-made tests, standardized tests, and school-generated report cards). One way to provide a great deal of information about our students' attitudes (as measured by these instruments) is to use descriptive statistics to describe the students' attitudes. For example, we might describe students' attitudes to a new mathematics curriculum (see Chapter 5) by reporting the average response to the following item on a questionnaire:

1. I believe that the problem-solving skills I learn in class help me make good problem-solving decisions outside of school.

SA A U D SD

By assigning point values—SA = 5, A = 4, U = 3, D = 2, SD = 1—and calculating the average response, we would be able to describe, on average, what children believed about the transfer of problem-solving skills to decisions made outside of school. In other words, the use of a number, in this case an average, conveys a great deal of information about students' attitudes and helps us make sense of our questionnaire data. Without the use of numbers, we would be limited to talking about an individual student's response to each question and not in more general terms about the attitudes of all of our students.

Measures of Central Tendency

Simply put, a measure of central tendency is a single number that gives us information about the entire group of numbers we are examining. Three common measures of central tendency are the *mean* (the average), the *mode* (the most frequently occurring score/s), and the *median* (the middle score). In education, perhaps the most common descriptive statistic used by teachers is the mean. It allows us to talk in generalities and to compare how the students in our class have performed "on average" in comparison to other students or over a given time period. As a teacher, you have no doubt calculated many averages, but remember: The **mean** (M) is calculated by adding together all of the scores (observations) and dividing by the number of scores.

Mean = The sum of all the scores divided by the number of scores.

For example, you administer a mathematics test with 100 questions to the 30 students in your class. After grading the tests, you award the following scores: 95, 95, 92, 92, 90, 90, 90, 88, 88, 85, 85, 85, 85, 82, 82, 82, 82, 79, 79, 75, 75, 75, 75, 75, 72, 72, 72, 69, 69, 65.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Mean } (\bar{x}) &= \frac{\sum x \text{ (the sum of scores)}}{n \text{ (the number of scores)}} \\ &= \frac{2,424}{30} \\ &= 80.8 \end{aligned}$$

The mean is greatly affected by extreme scores because it is “pulled” in the direction of the atypical values. For that reason, the median is sometimes a better descriptor of the full range of scores. For the most part, though, the mean (or the average) is the easiest, most familiar measure to use.

The **median** (Mdn) is the middle score in a distribution when the scores are ordered from the highest to the lowest. If there is an odd number of scores (say, 31), then the middle score (the 16th one) is the median. But in the distribution of the math scores above, there is an even number of scores. To find the midpoint in the distribution when there is an even number of scores, we must add the two middle scores in the rank-ordered distribution and divide by two. In this case, we would add together the two scores that are at positions 15 and 16, and divide by two. In this case, it would be scores 82 and 82. Therefore, 82 is the median score.

The **mode** is the most frequently occurring score in a distribution. In the case of these math scores, the mode would be 75 because that score was received by five students in the class. A distribution of scores can have more than one mode (making it bimodal or multimodal) or have no mode at all. The mode is the least useful measure of central tendency in most educational research: It tells us only about the score received most often and doesn't give us any information about the other scores.

Measure of Variability: Standard Deviation

As a teacher, you may have been exposed to standard deviation (SD) but perhaps did not fully understand its meaning. For example, you may have received test scores for your students following administration of a standardized test with individual scores, a class average, and a standard deviation. For our purposes, it is not important to see and memorize the formula for the standard deviation or even to know its origins. It is more important to understand the concepts of variability and standard deviation, to know what they mean, and to recognize when they would be appropriate to use.

A measure of variability tells us “how spread out a group of scores are.” The standard deviation is the most important measure of variability for our action research purposes. Whereas the mean is a measure of a position in a distribution of scores (in this case, 80.8 on a scale of 1 to 100), the **standard deviation** indicates the spread of a set of scores around the mean (Mills & Gay, 2016, p. 247). In essence, the standard deviation helps us to understand approximately how much a particular score deviates from the average score.

As a teacher researcher, I might also be puzzled about whether a relatively large or small standard deviation is “good” or “bad.” Perhaps a better way to think of a standard deviation as it relates to our mathematics test scores is in terms of equity. For example, the mean is 80.8, and the standard deviation is 8.59. (I calculated the standard deviation using SPSS 18.0 for Windows. If you have a larger data set, this is not the kind of calculation you want to do by hand, but for a small data set, you can calculate the standard deviation by hand.) If the data set is too large to calculate by hand and you don't have access to SPSS, you can use computer programs, such as Excel or a calculator with a statistics function, to calculate the standard deviation.

In our example, where the mean is 80.8 and the SD is 8.59, the majority (68 percent to be precise) of the children scored (roughly) between 72 and 89 (± 1 SD from the mean). In short, most of them probably succeeded on the test if, in fact, scoring within this range of scores suggests some kind of mastery of the content. Now, let's compare the standard deviation of 8.59 to a standard deviation of, say, 16. If this were the case, we might conclude that the majority of children scored between 64 and 97. Again the question is one of mastery and whether a score of 64 suggests mastery of the content. The larger standard deviation suggests that the children's scores on the math test are more spread out and, hence, leaves us to question the degree to which the children have achieved mastery on the test. For the classroom teacher seeking to confirm mastery of subject matter on a criterion-referenced test (teacher-made test), a higher mean and smaller standard deviation would be a desirable outcome.

All of this leads us to the question, "So how does this help me understand my students' mathematics test scores?" Armed with the knowledge that the average score for the 30 students in your class is 80.8 and the standard deviation of this distribution of scores is 8.59, you can make the following statements:

- On average, the children in the class scored 80 on the test.
- Approximately two-thirds of the children in the class scored between 72 and 89 on the test.
- The relatively small standard deviation and mean of 80 suggest that approximately two-thirds of the children achieved mastery of the content that the test covered.

Used in conjunction, the mean and standard deviation can provide you and your colleagues with a great deal of information about the data you have collected if you have determined that it is data that can be counted. See Key Concepts Box 7-1 for some of the uses of descriptive statistics.



KEY CONCEPTS BOX 7-1

Descriptive Statistics

Definition of Measure

A measure of central tendency is a single number that gives us information about an entire group of numbers.

A measure of variability tells us how spread out a group of scores is.

Type Used in Action Research

- Mean (the average)
- Mode (the most frequently occurring score/s)
- Median (the middle score)
- Standard deviation (a measure of distance from the mean that helps us understand approximately how much a *particular* score deviates from the *average* score)

An Illustration

In my study of change in the McKenzie School District (Mills, 1988), I administered a survey to classroom teachers. One of the items on the survey focused on the teachers' perceptions of how the district's at-risk program had changed classroom practices. Specifically, teachers were asked to respond to the following statement: To what degree has the at-risk program changed your classroom practice? The survey included an item that required teachers to circle a number between 1 and 5 (1 = no change, 5 = large change). A total of 52 teachers responded to the survey item with the following frequency:

| | No Change | | | | Large Change |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|--------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Number of Respondents | 7(13%) | 18(37%) | 17(35%) | 10(15%) | 0(0%) |

I used the following descriptive statistics to describe the distribution of teachers' responses:

4,4,4,4,4,4,4,4,4,4,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,3,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,1,1,1,1,1,1,1,1

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Mean } (\bar{x}) &= \frac{\sum x}{n} \\ &= \frac{134}{52} \\ &= 2.58 \end{aligned}$$

Mode = 2.0 (most frequently occurring score—it occurred 18 times)
 Median = 3.0 (the middle score in this distribution of 52 responses)
 Standard Deviation = 1.02

However, numbers alone do not tell a complete story. They inform the reader about how a sample responded to a particular item. For example, the analysis of the earlier illustration related to classroom teachers' perceptions of how the district's at-risk program had changed classroom practices is incomplete using only descriptive statistics. To complete my reporting on this item, I included the following representative responses to the question, "To what extent do you think that the at-risk program changed your classroom practices?" The responses were grouped under the categories of "Positive Impact" and "No Impact."

Positive Impact

Reminded me and reinforced the concepts of learning styles and how to provide for them in my classroom.

Having insight to these kids has allowed me to be more sensitive and caring toward them and to act more compassionately.
I am more aware of needs of the “total child” as well as the student.

No Impact

No time to plan and implement all of those ideas!
I feel that the services needed for at-risk students are not available.
I was already using many of the skills.
I have been dealing with at-risk students since becoming a resource teacher, so I was already aware of the problem.
I believe that I have always been aware of the problem. It’s only new at the district level.

The statistical analysis combined with the quotes from the teachers who responded provided me with a good understanding of the teachers’ perceptions of the impact the at-risk program had on their classroom practices.

Be Careful About Your Claims

A final caveat: Be careful about how you “interpret” the descriptive statistics that you use to analyze your data and be careful about the claims you make based on a descriptive statistical analysis. Be clear about the limited significance that can be attached to averages and standard deviations. Remember that these statistics are used for description, not for identifying statistically significant relationships that can be generalized to the larger population.

Clearly, this discussion about descriptive statistics is quite brief. My experiences with teacher researchers is that, like me, they are somewhat math phobic and reluctant to incorporate statistics into their studies. But as Pelto and Pelto (1978) remind us,

In fact, not only humans but also other animals are constantly counting things in the process of adapting to their environments. Basic processes of learning, as described by experimental psychologists, most often imply some kind of counting or measurement that permits an animal (human or other) to distinguish between one condition and another as a relevant stimulus for appropriate action. (p. 123)

If counting things positively contributes to understanding your research or suggests a relationship that warrants further investigation, then use whatever statistic is most appropriate to analyze and interpret your data. Moreover, if you are math phobic but still want to examine whether statistics can give you insight into your data, do not hesitate to call on the skills of your critical friends, colleagues, and university professors.

Voices from the Field

Analyzing and Interpreting Quantitative Data

In this vignette, the teacher researcher shares her analysis and interpretation of her quantitative data collection focused on better understanding how formative assessments (quizzes) changed student attitudes toward the class, learning language, and taking tests. Rachelle ultimately claims that there were some “very, very positive” results from her action research. These results rested with her interpretation of percentages and frequency counts. For example, after the use of formative assessments, the percentage of students who reported “no test anxiety” had gone from 13 to 26 percent. Rachelle’s interpretation of this result was “very, very positive.” This example is a good reminder for action researchers to be modest in their claims and interpretations of numerical data. Further, the example includes times of moving between percentages and numbers of students: quite different measures. Rachelle’s analysis would have benefited from the use of other descriptive statistical analyses, including mean, mode, median, and standard deviation, in order to provide a more detailed analysis on which to base interpretations of the survey data.



ENHANCEDtext

video example 7-3

In this video, Rachelle summarizes some of her findings in her action research project, which focused on whether weekly quizzes changed students’ attitudes toward the class, learning language, and taking tests. How does her presentation of the quantitative data help you to understand and draw conclusions about her students’ test anxiety? Are there other descriptive statistics that you’d like to hear about?

Data Analysis in Mixed-Methods Designs

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, one of the most difficult aspects of any research endeavor is the analysis of data. This problem is showcased when we attempt to analyze quantitative and qualitative data sources concurrently or in sequence and then attempt to find points of intersection as well as discrepancies, as is the case in mixed-methods designs. To refresh your memory, mixed-methods research designs combine quantitative and qualitative approaches by including both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. Many teacher researchers find themselves including both data sources in their studies, especially when capturing student achievement data. Table 7-3 summarizes the type of mixed-methods research designs and examples of data analysis and data interpretation techniques that teacher researchers can use (Creswell, 2015). Many of the suggestions in this table build on the information in the quantitative and qualitative analysis and interpretation sections in this chapter and therefore should be familiar to you. (For a comprehensive discussion of mixed-methods research designs, see Mills & Gay, 2016, Chapter 15.)

table 7-3 ■ Types of Mixed-Methods Designs and Data Analysis/Interpretation Procedures

| Types of Mixed-Methods Designs | Examples of Data Analysis and Data Interpretation Techniques |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Convergent parallel (quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously) | Quantify qualitative data coding by assigning a number to a code and counting the number of times it occurs. Quantitative data are descriptively analyzed for frequency of occurrence. The two data sets are compared. |
| Explanatory sequential (quantitative data are collected first, followed by qualitative data) | Follow up on outliers (extreme cases). Quantitative data are collected and outliers identified. Qualitative data are then collected on the outliers to increase understanding of these cases. |
| Exploratory sequential (qualitative data are collected first, followed by quantitative data) | Qualitative data are collected and analyzed and themes identified. The themes are used as the basis for identifying, or developing, an instrument that can be administered to collect quantitative data to measure the identified themes. |

Source: Adapted from J. W. Creswell (2012, 2015). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*.

Qualitative Data Interpretation Techniques

You may wonder, why bother with interpretation, especially since interpretation involves taking risks and making educated guesses that might be off base? According to Wolcott (1994), qualitative (action) researchers must accept “the risks and challenges of the interpretive mode” because in doing so we can “demonstrate to others (and reassure ourselves) that, in spite of their undistinguished origins, our works and the implications to be drawn from them are socially significant” (p. 258). In other words, Wolcott argues for the importance of interpretation because as teacher researchers, our interpretations matter to the lives of our students. In addition, the process of interpretation is important because it can challenge teacher researchers’ taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about the educational processes they have investigated.

The list of techniques for data interpretation that follow are adapted from Wolcott (1994, pp. 39–46) and Stringer (1996, pp. 87–96) but have been reframed to apply specifically to teacher researchers.

Voices from the Field

Data Analysis in Mixed-Methods Designs

In this vignette, the teacher researcher describes the mixed-methods design he used to study high school student interest and engagement. Doug's study can be classified as a convergent parallel mixed-methods design where he collected simultaneously qualitative and quantitative data and compared the data sets to better understand the impact of his intervention on student interest and engagement. Specifically, Doug used pre- and postsurveys that were analyzed using descriptive statistics (quantitative data) and student essays that were analyzed by coding and identifying themes (qualitative data). Doug characterizes his two data sets as "hard data" (data that can be reduced to numbers) and "affective data" (data that can be reduced to themes). However, Doug's assertion that "numbers reflect the significance of your intervention" should be viewed cautiously. The use of a mixed-methods design is specifically intended to provide the teacher researcher with multiple data sets to compare regardless of whether the data are numerical or narrative, and "significance" is a term best reserved for "statistical significance" and inferential statistical analyses.



ENHANCEDtext video example 7-4

Doug, the action researcher in this video, describes the measures in his mixed-methods study. Which type of mixed-methods design did he use, and what recommendations might you give to him as he begins analysis of his data?

Extend the Analysis

One technique that is low on the data interpretation risk scale is to simply extend the analysis of your data by raising questions about the study, noting implications that might be drawn without actually drawing them. As Wolcott (1994) suggested, "This is a strategy for *pointing* the way rather than *leading* the way" (p. 40, emphasis added). For example, "While it appears as though the teen theater improvisation model positively impacts audience participation, a number of questions are raised by this strategy." In this example from Cathy Mitchell's Teen Theater group's use of improvisation (see Chapter 3), the analysis of data can be extended by raising questions about the intervention that were not asked as part of the original investigation but that may signal the beginning of the next action research cycle.

Similarly, in the Highland Park High School vignette, the research raised questions such as the following: Is the total elimination of letter and number grades the best way to deemphasize grades? Is there a way to deemphasize grades that requires less paperwork on the teacher's part? What is an appropriate role for students to play in determining their own grades? How can grades be deemphasized while teachers maintain specific criteria/outcomes for students?

Connect Findings with Personal Experience

Action research is personal business, so it makes sense to personalize our interpretations. For example, you may present your findings with the following prelude: “Based on my experiences in conducting this study, this is what I make of it all.” Remember, you know your study better than anyone else; after all, it’s been conducted in your classroom or school and focused on your students. You have been there for every twist and turn along the way, trying to make sense of discrepant events just when you thought you “had it right.” Share your interpretations based on your intimate knowledge and understanding of schools and classrooms and teaching and learning. For example, recall that Deborah South (Chapter 1) had experienced the frustration of working with unmotivated children and the apparent futility of a study skills intervention. When faced with the “So what?” question, she based her interpretation not only on the analysis of data (test scores, surveys, interviews, and observations) but also on the memories and emotions of adolescent off-task behavior—a powerful interpretive lens.

Seek the Advice of “Critical” Friends

If you have difficulty focusing an interpretive lens on your work, rely on your trusted colleagues to offer insights that you may have missed because of your closeness to the work. Offer your accounts to colleagues with the request that they share with you their possible interpretations. For example, the group of teachers at Highland Park High School found that their interpretations were enriched by the multiple viewpoints that came as a result of their collaboration. Remember, these colleagues may be people you have never met face-to-face but with whom you

Voices from the Field

Seek the Advice of Critical Friends

The teacher researcher in this vignette provides a simple illustration of the role of critical friends in action research. A “car pool” of other MAT students provided a perfect venue for Rachelle to share her struggles and outcomes and to seek confidential feedback about how to move forward with her action research efforts specifically and her student teaching in general.



ENHANCED text

video example 7-5

Rachelle briefly describes her experience with a group of “critical” friends in this video.

have talked in action research chat rooms on the Internet. Similarly, you may ask your informants (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) for their insights.

But beware! The more opinions you seek, the more you will receive, and often these suggestions come with the expectation that you will accept the advice! Over time, you will develop reciprocity with a cadre of trusted, like-minded colleagues who will selflessly fulfill the role of critical friends. Take the time to build these relationships and reap the rewards they offer. For example, when Deborah South concluded from her data analysis and interpretation that her study skills class was the “cause” of her students’ lack of motivation, her critical friends in her action research class protested that interpretation and provided her with ideas for alternate explanations. What Deborah gained from the feedback of her critical friends was a commitment to change the “intervention” that was being touted as “the solution” to the “unmotivated students” problem in the school.

Contextualize Findings in the Literature

Uncovering external sources as part of the review of related literature is a powerful way for teacher researchers to provide support for the study’s findings. Wolcott (1994) suggested that qualitative (action) researchers “draw connections with external authority. Most often this is accomplished through informed references to some recognized body of theory in one’s special field, or to the recognized classics, in the tradition of the literature review” (p. 34). Making these connections also provides teacher researchers with a way to share with colleagues the existing knowledge base in a specific area of focus and to acknowledge the unique contribution the teacher researcher has made to our understanding of the topic studied.

Turn to Theory

Let me first offer a modest definition of theory as “an analytical and interpretive framework that helps the researcher make sense of ‘what is going on’ in the social setting being studied” (Mills, 1993, p. 103). Theory serves a number of important roles for action researchers. First, theory provides a way for teacher researchers to link their work to broader issues of the day. As Wolcott (1994) suggested, “One interpretive tack is to examine a case in terms of competing theories and then proclaim a winner or, more often, attempt some eclectic resolution” (p. 43). Second, “theory allows the researcher to search for increasing levels of abstraction, to move beyond a purely descriptive account” (Mills, 1993, p. 115). That level of abstraction “allow(s) us to communicate the essence of descriptive work to our colleagues at research meetings” (Mills, 1993, p. 115). Finally, theory can provide a rationale or sense of meaning to the work we do. As educators, we have all been influenced by learning theories that provide a safe haven for our own work. Share the theories that appear to help make sense of your data. For example, Mills’s story of the use of technology to enhance mathematics learning for the students at Billabong Elementary School (Chapter 2) is influenced by theories about how



RESEARCH IN ACTION CHECKLIST 7-2

Data Interpretation Techniques

- _____ Extend the analysis by raising questions.
- _____ Connect the findings with personal experience.
- _____ Seek the advice of critical friends.
- _____ Contextualize findings in the literature.
- _____ Turn to theory.

students best learn math. Some of these theories are evident in the references to how students were using technology for “drill-and-kill” activities and how access to calculators was limited because calculator functions had been removed from the computers. The vignette suggests that other theories explain how students best learn math by challenging the “rote learning” theory that appeared well established at Billabong Elementary.

Know When to Say “When”!

Finally, if you don’t feel comfortable with offering an interpretation, don’t do it. Be satisfied with suggesting what needs to be done next and use that as a starting point for the next action research cycle. Restate the problem as you now see it and explain how you think you will fine-tune your efforts as you strive to increase your understanding of the phenomenon you have investigated. Wolcott (1994) cautioned, “Don’t detract from what you have accomplished by tacking on a wimpy interpretation” (p. 41). (See Research in Action Checklist 7-2 for a list of data interpretation techniques.)

Sharing Your Interpretations Wisely

As educators, we have all, at some time, been exposed to what are variously called “fads,” “the pendulum swing,” the “bandwagon,” and so on. Thus, many of us may hesitate to embrace anything new or different that comes our way in schools, calming ourselves with the mantra “This, too, shall pass!” If we, as professional educators, attempt to use our action research findings only to confirm our beliefs and values, then we risk being alienated by our colleagues. Avoid being evangelical about your interpretations, connect them closely to your data and analysis, and share your newfound understandings with colleagues in an appropriate manner.

data into themes. When concepts in the data are examined and compared to one another and connections are made, categories are formed.

Qualitative Data Analysis Techniques

13. **Identifying Themes.** One place to start your analysis is to work inductively as you begin to analyze the data: Consider the big picture and start to list “themes” that you have seen emerge in your literature review and in the data collection. Are there patterns that emerge, such as events that keep repeating themselves, key phrases that participants use to describe their feelings, or survey responses that seem to “match” one another?
14. **Coding Surveys, Interviews, and Questionnaires.** One of the most frequent data analysis activities undertaken by action researchers is coding, the process of trying to find patterns and meaning in data collected through the use of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires.
15. **Analyzing an Interview.** Another common form of qualitative data that action researchers analyze is interview data, most commonly in the form of a transcript from the audio recording of the interview.
16. **Asking Key Questions.** Another approach to data analysis involves the use of key questions, such as those with which the teacher researcher started the study; they may take form of who, what, where, when, why, and how questions about the educational process.
17. **Doing an Organizational Review.** This approach to data analysis involves focusing on the following features of the organization (e.g., school): vision and mission, goals and objectives, structure of the organization, operation, and problems, issues, and concerns (Stringer, 1996, p. 90).
18. **Developing a Concept Map.** Concept maps are a useful strategy that helps action researcher participants to visualize the major influences that have affected the study (Stringer, 1996). The steps for developing a concept map include the following:
 - a. List the major influences that have affected the study of your area of focus.
 - b. Develop a visual representation of the major influences (factors) connecting the influences with relationships you know exist (using solid lines) and influences you have a “hunch” about (using dotted lines).
 - c. Review the concept map to determine any consistencies or inconsistencies that exist among the influences. This forces you back to your data to see “what’s missing.”
19. **Analyzing Antecedents and Consequences.** A process of mapping antecedents (causes) and consequences (effects) helps action researchers identify the major elements of their analysis (Stringer, 1996). The steps for analyzing antecedents and consequences are as follows:
 - a. List the influences that emerged from the analysis for which there appear to be a causal relationship.
 - b. Revisit the review of literature to determine whether the analysis of the study supports or is challenged by the findings of previous studies.

- c. Revisit your data to determine whether anything is missing and suggest how your findings may influence the next action research cycle.
20. **Displaying Findings.** The information you have collected should be summarized in an appropriate and meaningful format that you can share with interested colleagues. “Think display” as one way to convey your findings.
 21. **State What’s Missing.** Flag for the consumers of your research what pieces of the puzzle are still missing and identify any remaining questions for which you have not been able to provide answers.
 22. **Use Computer Software to Assist with Data Analysis.** Computer software is available to assist with the analysis of qualitative data. This software will not do the analysis for you. It is designed to help researchers who are working with large bodies of text and other kinds of data.
 23. **Three common and popular qualitative analysis software packages are NVivo 11, The Ethnograph v6, and HyperRESEARCH 3.7.3.**

Analyzing and Interpreting Quantitative Data

24. Data analysis and interpretation can also involve the use of descriptive statistics to help make sense of your findings. My advice here is simple: Count what counts! If it makes sense to tally and count events, categories, occurrences, test scores, and the like, use an appropriate descriptive statistic.
25. Descriptive statistics give us a shorthand way of giving lots of information about a range of numbers using only one or two numbers.
26. A measure of central tendency is a single number that gives us information about the entire group of numbers we are examining. Three common measures of central tendency are the *mean* (the average), the *mode* (the most frequently occurring score/s), and the *median* (the middle score).
27. The mean (average) is calculated by adding together all of the scores (observations) and dividing by the number of scores. The mean is greatly affected by extreme scores because it is “pulled” in the direction of the atypical values.
28. The median is the middle score in a distribution when the scores are ordered from the highest to the lowest.
29. The mode is the most frequently occurring score in a distribution. The mode is the least useful measure of central tendency in most educational research.
30. Standard deviation is a measure of variability that tells us how spread out a group of scores are (Mills & Gay, 2016, p. 326). The standard deviation is the most important measure of variability for our action research purposes. The standard deviation helps us to understand approximately how much a particular score deviates from the average score.
31. Be careful about how you “interpret” the descriptive statistics that you use to analyze your data and be careful about the claims you make based on a descriptive statistical analysis. Be clear about the limited significance that can be attached to averages and standard deviations.
32. The challenges of data analysis are showcased when we attempt to analyze quantitative and qualitative data sources concurrently or in sequence and

then attempt to find points of intersection as well as discrepancies, as is the case in mixed-methods designs.

33. Mixed-methods research designs combine quantitative and qualitative approaches by including both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study.

Qualitative Data Interpretation Techniques

34. **Extend the Analysis.** One technique low on the data interpretation risk scale is to simply extend the analysis of your data by raising questions about the study, noting implications that might be drawn without actually drawing them.
35. **Connect Findings with Personal Experience.** Action research is personal business, so it makes sense to personalize our interpretations. Share your interpretations based on your intimate knowledge and understanding of schools and classrooms and teaching and learning.
36. **Seek the Advice of “Critical” Friends.** If you have difficulty focusing an interpretive lens on your work, rely on your trusted colleagues to offer insights that you may have missed because of your closeness to the work. But beware! The more opinions you seek, the more you will receive, and often these suggestions come with the expectation that you will accept the advice.
37. **Contextualize Findings in the Literature.** Uncovering external sources as part of the review of related literature is a powerful way for teacher researchers to provide support for the study’s findings.
38. **Turn to Theory.** Share theories about teaching and learning that appear to help make sense of your data.
39. **Know When to Say “When”!** If you do not feel comfortable with offering an interpretation, don’t do it. Be satisfied with suggesting what needs to be done next and use that as a starting point for the next action research cycle.

Sharing Your Interpretations Wisely

40. Avoid being evangelical about your interpretations, connect them closely to your data and analysis, and share your newfound understandings with colleagues in an appropriate manner.

TASKS

1. How will you analyze each data source that you have indicated in your data collection plan? Remember: Don’t collect data when you don’t know what you are going to do with it. For each data source identified in your data collection matrix, identify appropriate data analysis and data interpretation approaches.