

4-10-2016

Whose Reality? A Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Research in International and Comparative Education

Romina B. da Costa

University of Maryland - College Park, rcosta2@umd.edu


Stephanie M. Hall

University of Maryland - College Park, halls@umd.edu

Anne Spear

University of Maryland - College Park, aspear26@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [International and Comparative Education Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

da Costa, R. B., Hall, S. M., & Spear, A. (2016). Whose Reality? A Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Research in International and Comparative Education. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(4), 661-676. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact mgibney@nova.edu.



Whose Reality? A Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Research in International and Comparative Education

Abstract

This meta-analysis seeks to critically examine the qualitative research being published in influential journals in the field of international and comparative education in order to determine whether qualitative research has remained true to the constructivist paradigm and its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. Decades after the heated paradigmatic debates within the field of education in the 1980's, we seek to examine whether predictions that the constructivist paradigm would be pushed out by the call for post-positivist, quantifiable, data-driven research have come to fruition. Based on a review of all qualitative research published in the past three volumes of five influential journals in the field, we conclude that while qualitative articles are represented in approximately equal numbers as quantitative articles, there are key elements of the constructivist paradigm that are largely absent from these qualitative articles. In particular, our conclusion attempts to address the concern that qualitative researchers are failing to address the issue of researcher positionality in their qualitative work.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Comparative and International Education, Research Paradigms, Research Methodology, Paradigm Wars

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Whose Reality? A Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Research in International and Comparative Education

Romina B. da Costa, Stephanie M. Hall, and Anne Spear
University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

This meta-analysis seeks to critically examine the qualitative research being published in influential journals in the field of international and comparative education in order to determine whether qualitative research has remained true to the constructivist paradigm and its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. Decades after the heated paradigmatic debates within the field of education in the 1980's, we seek to examine whether predictions that the constructivist paradigm would be pushed out by the call for post-positivist, quantifiable, data-driven research have come to fruition. Based on a review of all qualitative research published in the past three volumes of five influential journals in the field, we conclude that while qualitative articles are represented in approximately equal numbers as quantitative articles, there are key elements of the constructivist paradigm that are largely absent from these qualitative articles. In particular, our conclusion attempts to address the concern that qualitative researchers are failing to address the issue of researcher positionality in their qualitative work. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Comparative and International Education, Research Paradigms, Research Methodology, Paradigm Wars

The landscape of global educational reform in the last thirty years is characterized by the push for quantifiable, outcome-based objectives that lend themselves to data collection and statistical analysis. This trend has led to an overwhelming emphasis on research that is based on a scientific, data driven approach that allows for easily definable and measured conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). As a result, many qualitative researchers have warned about quantitative work being upheld as the golden standard in building and justifying education policies, at the expense of qualitative research methods. Even where qualitative methods are employed, they might not remain true to their constructivist origins, and instead may become yet another methodology in the toolbox of post-positivist researchers (Firestone, 1987; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). This meta-analysis examines recent qualitative research in the field of international and comparative education and assesses the extent to which this research remains true to the constructivist paradigm and the worldview it espouses. The main questions we seek to address are:

Has the push for scientific standards in education research led qualitative research published in comparative and international education journals to align itself with a post-positivist rather than constructivist paradigm?

Is the constructivist paradigm still adequately represented in the qualitative research published in influential journals in the field of comparative and international education?

Is there cause for concern that the post-positivist paradigm has come to dominate qualitative research in the comparative and international education field, and may thus be limiting the scope of research produced?

Meta-analysis is most often defined as a quantitative synthesis of information from several studies (Trikalinos et al., 2008). However, a qualitative meta-analysis can allow for the systematic review of qualitative studies in a way that is more interpretive than aggregative (Ke, 2009). While the term meta-analysis typically invokes the process of combining findings across studies to determine the effect of some experimental or quasi-experimental treatment (Glass, 1976), in this case we used the term to describe the selection of studies with a common trait (i.e., qualitative methods) and the examination of their use of the qualities associated with the constructivist paradigm. The interdisciplinary nature of the field of comparative education, as mentioned above, opened this analysis up to the *apples and oranges* and *file drawer* validity threats recounted by Sharpe (1997) in his discussion of the problems of conducting meta-analyses. We delve into this in more detail in the discussion section.

Our qualitative meta-analysis seeks to address the extent to which the most recently published qualitative research does in fact contribute an additional paradigmatic perspective, thus benefiting the field by offering a more in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. This study contributes to paradigmatic debates within the field of comparative and international education by examining how bias toward any particular approach is evident through publication of research in some highly recognized journals. In addition, this review attempts a critical, nuanced examination of the types of qualitative studies that are accepted into these journals. This meta-analysis looks at the influences that contribute to the research design of today's qualitative theorists. Challenging unfair and potentially harmful biases within the academic world, this research allows for continued advocacy and discussion about the vital contributions of work from the constructivist realm.

Conceptual Framework

Since the mid-1980's, various voices in the broader educational community have expressed concerns about the ways in which the post-positivist paradigm and the scientific standards it espouses were coming to dominate discourse in education research (Firestone, 1987; Smith & Heshusius, 1986). More recently, the *evidence-based movement* that accompanied President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has made a push for a *gold standard* in education research that espouses an experimental, quantitative model for producing knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). This is potentially problematic since it could narrow the scope of the research methods applied to educational research and, as a result, the scope of the research being produced in the field. While individuals within the research community disagree regarding the extent that this constitutes a threat to the quality and diversity of educational research, there are reasons to believe that a narrowing of the paradigmatic approaches framing educational research could be detrimental to the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Canella, 2004). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the current state of qualitative research in the field of international and comparative education, in order to assess whether a full range of paradigmatic possibilities is present in the research being produced and published.

As incipient scholars in the field of comparative and international education policy, the authors of this study feel invested in understanding the current research climate and the type of research that peer-reviewed journals in the field are favoring. As scholars, we each grapple with competing priorities: producing research we are passionate about, securing funding and support for projects, and succeeding in the publishing of our work, both for purposes of career

advancement and in order to contribute positively to our field. It would be of concern to us, especially those of us coming from a constructivist, qualitative research practice, to find that our approach to research could be disfavored in the world of academic publishing. More broadly, the potential for bias at the level of publication could shape the way we choose to approach research at this early stage in our careers, something that could be limiting to the field overall.

In this analysis, we work with the belief that it is important for qualitative research to move beyond post-positivist assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the preferred methods of inquiry in education, and contribute new perspectives to research in the field of international and comparative education (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Qualitative research should embody a broad range of theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods, to ensure that a true diversity of approaches to research continues to exist in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Koro-Ljunberg & Douglas, 2008). Access to a full range of perspectives and research methodologies will better equip scholars to tackle the truly difficult questions and challenges that persist in education.

Defining the Field

Though it is highly interdisciplinary, comparative and international education stands alone as an established field of study. It is concerned with the study of educational issues through comparative measures or the use of international perspectives. Arnove (2013) defined the field as the comparative study of education that attempts to explain the role of schooling in contributing to economic, political, and social stability or progress. As such, comparative and international education is a vast and varied field. Scholars who concern themselves with education policy on a global level represent an array of disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of the field poses challenges to attempts at comparing research, since a considerable portion of the knowledge produced is published in journals catering to other fields, not necessarily appearing in comparative education journals. However, keeping in mind Torres' (2013) statement that comparative education is now in its *fourth stage* of development as a field, as well as his call for scholar activists in the field to push for *better informed and more enlightened educational policy*, we selected five comparative and/or international education journals to use as a frame from which to analyze three years' worth of qualitative studies (Torres, 2013, p. 470).

Methodological Approach

Our meta-analytical design involved a systematic review of all articles published in five selected journals of comparative and international education. Beyond having been published in one of these five journals in the past three years, our inclusion criteria for this review was simply that the article be the product of original, qualitative research. Once the article was established as representing qualitative research work, the authors qualitatively analyzed different factors within the article to determine whether they aligned themselves most closely with a post-positivist or a constructivist research paradigm. These steps are explained in more detail below.

The five journals selected represent a sample of internationally minded publishers of new knowledge for the comparative and international education field. The journal *Comparative Education Review* is the official journal of the Comparative and International Education Society, a society that touts itself as being the oldest such society in the world. Its editorship is spread across North America and Europe, and its stated interest is in the social, economic, and political forces that are connected to education. The *Comparative Education Review* almost

consistently publishes a balance of qualitative and quantitative research. The *International Review of Education: Journal of Lifelong Learning* is the official journal of the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UNESCO ILL). Its editors are centered in Germany, at the UNESCO ILL headquarters, and they rely on other editors from all over the world. This journal gradually shifted from a comparative education focus to an adult learning focus. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* is the official journal of the British Association of International and Comparative Education. *Compare's* stated concern is in highlighting case studies of under-researched aspects of the field, and it covers all levels of education. The *International Journal of Education Development* has editors spread through North America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The journal is concerned with economic growth, poverty reduction, and the policy impact of education and development assistance, and explicitly publishes work that is relevant to policy. The *International Journal of Education Research* has editors in North America and Europe and prioritizes work that makes recommendations for policy and practice.

The three authors of this study read and analyzed all qualitative research articles published in the five journals between 2012-2014, with a total of 530 articles being examined for inclusion. The authors chose to exclude quantitative articles, articles employing mixed methods and reviews, and analyses based on existing research literature. Based on these criteria, the authors included a total of 216 qualitative research articles in this review across all five journals in the three-year time frame.

Our goal was to assess the qualitative research articles based on the extent to which they are representative of the constructivist paradigm, as opposed to the post-positivist paradigm. We acknowledge that this binary construction is limiting and that most research falls within a spectrum that lies between a purely post-positivist and a purely constructivist approach. However, this binary set-up was useful in helping us to determine whether the full spectrum of paradigmatic approaches is being employed, or whether one side of the spectrum is being systematically favored over the other.

Our approach for evaluating the research articles was qualitative, and relied on our examination and assessment of the following seven factors:

Research Goals

The goal of qualitative research is often to “illuminate and better understand in depth the rich lives of human beings and the world in which we live” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 2). More often than not, this entails studying a subject in depth and getting to the details and nuance of experience, emphasizing “processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured” rather than generating data that can be generalized regardless of context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 8). Qualitative research is “concerned with *understanding*” while quantitative research often “seeks to explain the *causes* of changes...through objective measurement” (Firestone, 1987, p. 16). Generalizability is more aligned with the post-positivist assumptions about the nature of truth and knowledge as being largely independent of social and historical context. In looking at the stated goals of the articles included in this review, we hope to assess the extent to which the research aims to generate objective data that can be generalized and transferred. In contrast to the constructivist approach that qualitative research assumes in its study goals, post-positivist research attempts to describe causes and changes through objective measurement and to generate generalizable conclusions based on data.

Research Questions

In searching for deeper understanding of the human condition, research that adheres to the constructivist paradigm should seek to explore questions pertaining to experiences, processes, and other phenomena that lend themselves to this construction of truth. As such, constructivist research should, more often than not, ask questions about *why* and *how* rather than *how many* (Koro-Ljunberg & Douglas, 2008). The questions that post-positivist research attempts to tackle, on the other hand often pertain to measurable outcomes, e.g., *how much* (Koro-Ljunberg & Douglas, 2008).

Sample Selection

Post-positivist research stresses objective sampling, randomization, and other experimental or quasi-experimental procedures. In contrast, the constructivist approach can allow for purposeful sampling, a focus on *information rich* participants, or other forms of sampling that rely on the researcher's discretion in selecting participants (Mertens, 2010).

Data Collection

Post-positivist research often focuses on measurable, quantifiable data, in the form of numbers. Data collection is the result of detached observation that is seen to promote objectivity. In contrast, a lot of constructivist research employs data in the form of words and language in various forms. Observations are not fully detached; for example, researchers in the constructivist paradigm often engage their subjects as participant observers. As summarized by Koro-Ljunberg and Douglas (2008), the post-positivist paradigm lends itself to the following data collection methods: observation (of an objective, detached nature), survey and questionnaires, document/archival research, and visual materials/video. The constructivist paradigm lends itself to data collection in the form of: observation (less detached in nature, e.g., participant observation, used to *facilitate individual and/or collective meaning making* (Koro-Ljunberg & Douglas, 2008, p. 167), individual interviews, focus group interviews, document/archival research, and visual materials/video.

Structure of Write-Up

Post-positivist research emphasizes methodological rigor in the sense that repeatable experiments are seen as criteria for trustworthiness. In the write-up, this means that a great emphasis is placed on detailing the methodology, so that future researchers can repeat the data collection and hopefully obtain similar results. In the constructivist paradigm, methods are very context-specific, and emerge as the research and relationship to research subjects develop. Therefore, the emphasis in the write-up is more often than not on a rich description of the research observations, as well as lengthy discussion and interpretation of the data as criteria for trustworthiness (Firestone, 1987).

Positionality

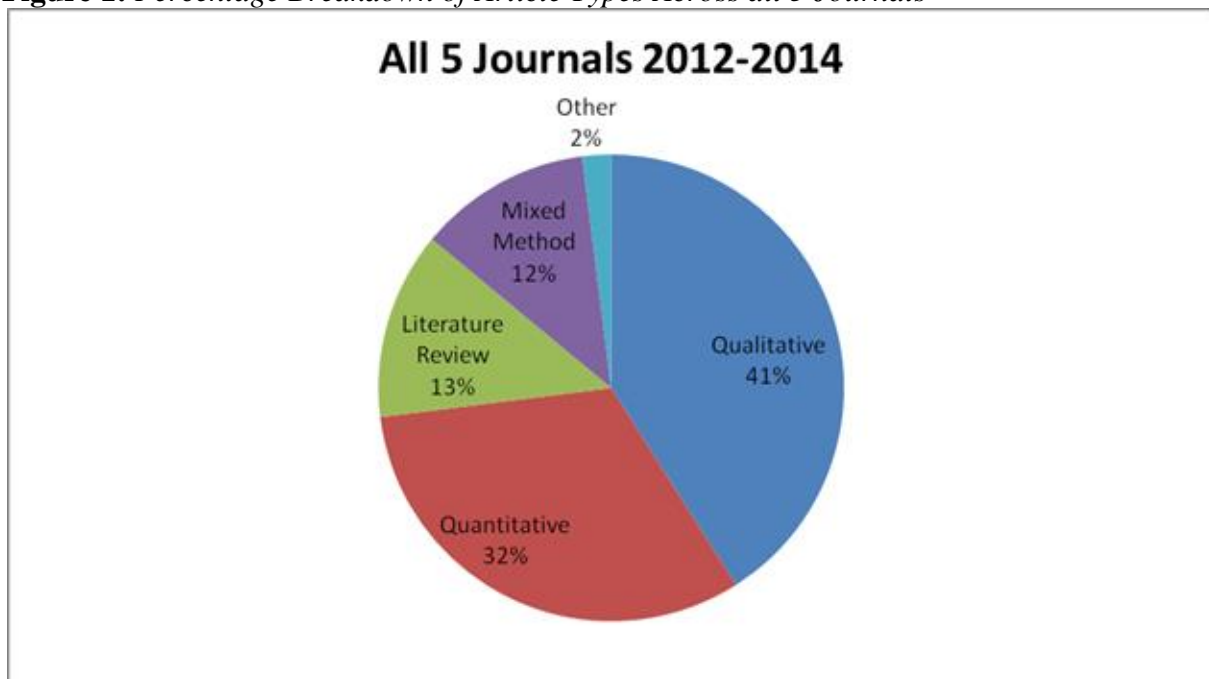
The post-positivist paradigm's assumptions about the nature of truth and knowing call for a more detached relationship between researcher and subject, as well as an objective stance on the part of the researcher, who shows a disengagement from the subject (Firestone, 1987). The constructivist paradigm, on the other hand, views truth as a subjective construction and acknowledges the existence of multiple *truths*. As such, the relationship between the researcher

and the subject of investigation is more fully acknowledged and the researcher's inclinations and biases are included as part of the mutual construction of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher may demonstrate an awareness of his/her own subjectivity (Peshkin, 2001). In a similar vein, post-positivist research may make a more clear-cut distinction between facts as being separate from value judgments and the beliefs of individuals (Firestone, 1987). On the other hand, constructivist researchers are more likely to look at how facts are inherently wrapped up in value judgments and beliefs about what constitutes knowledge and learning.

Nature of Rhetoric

Firestone (1987) proposes that the kind of rhetoric used in quantitative and qualitative methods is different, and that as a result, *each method type uses different techniques of presentation to project divergent assumptions about the world and different means to persuade the reader of its conclusions* (p. 16). Post-positivist research allows for the use of decisive language and the making of forceful claims that are based on highly reliable, objective, and quantifiable data. In contrast, constructivist research often allows for a higher degree of ambiguity as researchers acknowledge the limitations of the data and the difficulty in making generalizable claims (Firestone, 1987). In examining the articles selected, we pay attention to the overall tone and decisiveness of the language used, with the expectation that the more forceful claims stem from a post-positivist paradigm perspective, while constructivist approaches demonstrate a higher degree of ambiguity. Each journal article included in the review was evaluated in terms of the seven factors listed above, and for each of the factors it was assessed whether the article presented a stronger post-positivist or constructivist tendency.

Figure 1: *Percentage Breakdown of Article Types Across all 5 Journals*



Analysis

Of the 530 articles published in the five journals in the three-year timeframe for the study, 216 articles used a qualitative approach, thus representing 41 percent of all articles (See Figure 1). The remaining articles were composed of literature reviews, quantitative research, mixed methods research, and other publications such as speeches and book reviews. For the

purpose of this paper, only the 216 qualitative articles were analyzed based on the constructivist paradigm criteria outlined above.

Each peer reviewed journal varied greatly in the number of qualitative articles published between 2012-2014 (See Table 1). The journal *Compare* had the highest number of qualitative articles published during this time at 74 (70 %) while the *International Journal of Education Research* only had 7 (14 %) qualitative articles published within the three-year period, the least out of the five journals. Table 1 shows the total numbers of articles representing different types of scholarly approaches for each of the five journals.

Table 1: *Number of Article Types by Journal*

Journals	Research Articles employing Qualitative Methods	Research Articles employing Quantitative Methods	Literature Reviews	Research Articles employing Mixed Methods	Other Articles	Total
International Journal of Education Research	7	22	1	19	0	49
Comparative Education Review	34	27	0	8	0	69
Compare	74	8	2	20	1	105
International Review of Education	32	25	25	4	4	90
International Journal of Education Development	69	89	41	13	5	217
Total	216	171	69	64	10	530

Source: Author

Using seven factors to examine how constructivist elements were represented in the qualitative articles, this paper analyzed the 216 articles qualitative nature (See Table 2). Overall, the research questions and article write-up were the strongest qualitative elements. Only 30 percent of articles included a discussion of *Positionality*. The journals *Compare* and *International Journal of Education Development* published articles that aligned most closely with the constructivist paradigm. The *International Journal of Education Research* had the lowest percentage of qualitative articles that followed a constructivist approach.

Table 2: *Percentage of Qualitative Articles Adhering to Constructivist Paradigm by Journal*

Journals	Percentage of Qualitative Articles	Percentage of Articles Conforming to Constructivist Criteria						
		Goals	Questions	Sampling	Data	Write-up	Positionality	Rhetoric
International Journal of Education Research	14%	71%	14%	0%	0%	71%	0%	29%
Comparative Education Review	49%	71%	79%	76%	68%	65%	62%	62%
Compare	70%	77%	96%	77%	81%	91%	12%	91%
International Review of Education	36%	71%	94%	52%	48%	81%	9%	75%
International Journal of Education Development	32%	88%	90%	93%	88%	93%	46%	86%
Total	41%	78%	87%	76%	74%	86%	30%	80%

Source: Authors

Findings

Qualitative Research is Well Represented

Overall, in the five journals included in our review, qualitative research work is being fairly well represented, though there is considerable variation in the amount of qualitative work being published. The journal *Compare* had a very high percentage of original, qualitative research with 58 out of 105 articles included in the final review. In contrast, on the other end of the spectrum, the *International Journal of Education Research* had only one qualitative research article published in the three years included in our review— out of a total of 48 articles. The lack of qualitative research in this latter journal may be due to its focus on business education and the leanings of the people and institutions that this research seeks to inform. Overall, qualitative research made up roughly 40 percent of articles in the research journals included in our review. While this representation seems adequate, this does not mean that the constructivist paradigm was fairly represented in the ways the research was set up and pursued.

Research Goals

Almost 20 percent of the qualitative articles included in the review presented goals that were more aligned with the post-positivist paradigm. Such goals included an expressed desire to generate generalizable conclusions that can be employed far beyond the context in which the study was undertaken, and inform policy in a broader sense. For example, in Hayashi and Tobin's (2014) study of three types of Japanese preschools, the authors maintained great alignment with a more constructivist paradigm, especially in their data collection and the rich description in the write-up of the results. However, the suggested implications of the study's results hinted at a more post-positivist philosophy of how to use what was learned:

...we see Meisei as a useful case for bringing out core issues in Japanese deaf and early childhood education, as well as for making larger arguments about the contribution of what we call *implicit pedagogical practices*. (Hayashi & Tobin, 2014, pp. 24-25)

Rather than keeping the study within the realm of understanding the nuances of experience (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005; Firestone, 1987), Hayashi and Tobin straddled the paradigm divide to use their main case study of one private, deaf-serving preschool as evidence of needed changes in teacher practice for all of deaf education in Japan. As many qualitative researchers who work in settings influenced by policy decisions, the authors no doubt faced a difficulty in disentangling their investigation with broader policy problems and solutions. This is evidenced by the fact that they included with their case study of a unique deaf-only preschool, observations and interviews at a number of other types of preschools, so as to compare practices, and explore how those are in alignment with or in contradiction to cultural practice as well as written policy. Further, the study was published in *Comparative Education Review (CER)*, a journal which seeks submissions that *situate educational phenomena within their...national...context* and *that explore major issues...that have...relevance for policy and practice* (CER Statement of Policy). This departure from the constructivist paradigm and the attempts to use qualitative research to uncover one underlying *truth* that is common across contexts, seems to support the idea of qualitative research coming to represent a research method rather than an alternative paradigmatic approach.

Research Questions

Despite having stated goals to generate generalizable conclusions, a much higher percentage (87 %) of the articles reviewed posed questions of *how* and *why* that sought to understand complex phenomena and align themselves more closely with the constructivist paradigm. This suggests that qualitative methods are still preferred when tackling questions and problems that seek at a deeper understanding of observed phenomena, and that the use of these methods does not necessarily mean a constructivist tendency in the philosophy underlying the research. For example, Shoko Yamada's (2014) study of community participation in Ethiopian schools sought to identify what motivated people to participate in education. Despite aiming to generalize the study's findings to other settings, the research was approached through quite constructivist-leaning means, as the lines of inquiry that guided the work were:

Do local people have previous experience of working for schools and of children's education?

In what way have their commitments changed, if at all, after SMCs were introduced?

Are there other factors that could determine their commitment, rather than the institutionalised mechanism of SMCs?

Similarly, Mark Wyatt's (2013) study of teacher motivation in Oman explicitly aimed to apply findings to the developing world in general, while the study itself was closely structured along the constructivist paradigm, exploring how teacher motivation had been addressed in Oman and what evidence of intrinsic motivation could be found through qualitative case study methods. Inspection of the alignment of studies and their write-ups warrants a reminder that researchers face a choice with where to publish, and often their publishing options limit their paradigmatic liberties. Wyatt's study was published in the *International Review of Education*, a journal which explicitly seeks to serve policy makers and practitioners. This is interesting, as it once again indicates that qualitative research is sometimes being employed as a methodology belonging to the post-positivist paradigm, rather than aligning itself with a different, constructivist worldview.

Sample Selection & Data Collection

In terms of sample selection and data collection, we once again see a strong influence from the post-positivist paradigm. Only 76 percent of sample selection strategies and 74 percent of data collection relied on approaches that were strictly constructivist. The influence of the post-positivist paradigm was seen in attempts to randomize study participants, employ experimental techniques in setting up study populations, and in attempting to generate large sample sizes by employing questionnaires and surveys that could be distributed to a large number of participants. As an example, Gozik's (2012) study approached the issue of cultural transmission through schooling in Martinique by randomly sampling 40 *lycée* teachers. While this may seem like a trivial detail, it seems at odds with the study's goal of examining complex issues regarding teacher identity and the interplay between national and regional cultures. A more constructivist approach to sampling may have allowed the researcher to purposefully compare and contrast teachers with certain regional or national characteristics. This preference for more post-positivist sampling procedures may be indicative of the pressures faced by qualitative researchers to produce more *robust* and *scientifically sound* data, and to attain reliability through statistical and numerical predictability of research results, rather than via the more constructivist approach that entails a deeper engagement with and understanding of research subjects.

Structure of Write-Up

A majority of the articles reviewed (86 %) presented a write-up structure that is consistent with the constructivist paradigm. The qualitative articles reviewed did, to a large extent, emphasize a detailed, descriptive account of the data collected and lengthy discussions in which the researchers presented their interpretations based on their in-depth knowledge of the context they encountered. Klymenko's (2014) examination of Ukrainian history textbooks is an example of the ways in which rich descriptive detail can serve to corroborate the findings of a qualitative analysis. In this particular study, quotes from history textbooks serve to illustrate the complex ways in which the discourse and semantics used in academic texts can be used to create particular narratives and tellings of history that serve to preserve national

memory. The wealth of qualitative data in this study and the ways in which this data contributed to analysis were consistent with the constructivist paradigm.

Positionality

Of the original, qualitative research articles included in the final review, only 30 percent dealt explicitly with the issue of positionality, the influence of the researcher's own background, and value-laden beliefs on the participants themselves and on the results of the research. The issue of positionality is an important one within the constructivist paradigm, as the researcher seeks to situate him or herself in the research context and acknowledge their subjective role in shaping the *truth* and the research outcomes.

The majority of qualitative research articles that did not address positionality simply did not include any mention of the researcher's potential influence on the data collection, analysis or conclusive findings. For example, Thomsen et al.'s (2013) excellent study on Danish students in higher education did not include a single mention of the researchers' positionality when interviewing 60 university students.

Other researchers identified their position, but did not incorporate insight into how said position contributed to the research study. To illustrate, while Sultana (2014), published in the *International Review of Education*, acknowledged that his employment at a governmental organization allowed him access to the field site, he did not analyze the nature of his position and the influence of his association with the organization, status, or other issues of positionality. He writes only:

Finally, I served as an advisor to a major Save the Children *School-to-Careers* (STC) project sponsored by the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and coordinated and implemented by Leaders-Palestine – a local NGO working closely with Birzeit University. ... My engagement in this project – which required two visits to Palestine between April and July in 2011, over and above mentoring support offered at a distance – served to deepen my appreciation of the issues involved in developing CEG services in Palestine (Sultana [2011b](#)).” (Sultana, 2014, pp. 188)

It is unclear why so many authors fail to include a section on positionality in their discussion of the methodology, research approach or analysis, but possibilities include a lack of understanding of the constructivist paradigm and the importance of the researcher in shaping results. Related to this is the idea that qualitative methods may be being applied as part of a larger methodological *toolbox* rather than as a set of methods that are accompanied by a distinctive paradigmatic approach. This is concerning, as it could indicate a narrowing of the paradigmatic spectrum defining research approaches. This narrowing may or may not be symptomatic of a desire to project a more objective stance as a researcher and increase the generalizability of results— another potentially concerning indication that the push for so-called scientific standards in educational research may be detrimental to the variety of research approaches financed and employed in the field.

Rhetoric

Approximately 14 percent of the qualitative articles reviewed made use of forceful rhetoric in making their conclusions and claims, and were considered to be more in line with the post-positivist paradigm in this regard. This seemed especially significant because the use of this forceful rhetoric did not seem to be in line with these articles' original goals, or the tone

of the write-up overall. Pherali and Garratt's (2014) article, published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, demonstrates how a qualitative study employed a more post-positivist rhetoric. Despite having a constructivist research question and the structure of the write-up being aligned with the constructivist paradigm, the rhetoric of this particular article attempted to place a wider generalization more aligned with post-positivism. This excerpt of the article's conclusion shows how broad conclusions are brought out of qualitative interviews:

The very concept of national identity is hence defined within the realm and parameters of social justice and not in the web of political myth-making, the volatility and vagaries of which can often overlook fundamental problems in people's lives. This is the reality of peace building, citizenship and contemporary educational reform in Nepal. (Pherali & Garratt, 2014 p. 49)

While 14 percent of 530 articles reviewed is not a huge percentage, it does beg the question of why a number of qualitative researchers are finding it necessary to do away with ambiguity in their findings and seem uncomfortable handling the ambiguity that is characteristic of qualitative data.

Discussion

Donald Sharpe (1997) reviewed the common validity threats to meta-analyses and suggested ways of dealing with them. One threat he reviewed is called *apples and oranges*, which is present when literature reviews or meta-analyses are conducted by combining studies that measured different variables. Though this is most often talked about with regard to statistical combinations in quantitative meta-analyses, it could be seen as a threat to the validity for our study in trying to determine the presence of paradigms in qualitative research. To counter this threat, we framed our study around a specific definition of comparative and international education, and considered research within this definition to be of a similar enough category to warrant comparison.

Another threat to validity reviewed by Sharpe was labeled *file drawer*. The file drawer problem results in a reviewer not having access to, or knowledge of, unpublished research being conducted in his or her field. It is a problem because the unpublished work is often equally important to gaining insight into the subject of the analysis, yet it is nevertheless excluded, albeit due to technical constraints of the publishing industry. In quantitative meta-analyses, this may result in the over-representation of statistically significant findings. This problem is present in this qualitative meta-analysis because of the difficulty in obtaining a representative sample of all qualitative inquiry conducted in the comparative and international education field. Though we pulled articles from a wide and long-reaching sample, the sample does not represent everything actually being done by scholars in the field. To fairly assess the limitations of our study, we must acknowledge that the post-positivist paradigm might have been more present in our review because of reasons other than the type of work actually being conducted by researchers.

Meta-analyses by nature combine studies that measure different things. To counter the apples and oranges threat, our analysis considered the overarching category of qualitative studies in an international setting to be the connecting category that made comparison appropriate. However, the file drawer problem persists, though it is the result of the nature of the comparative education field and not of the design of the present meta-analysis. It is not likely that a representative sample of the qualitative literature being conducted in the field was culled from the five journals selected. Instead, it is likely that a great deal of research is being

conducted from a truly constructivist paradigm, but is not being published in the types of journals chosen for this study, a consideration which is discussed below.

Overall, our findings suggest that qualitative research in comparative and international education has not strictly aligned itself to any particular paradigm. However, across journals, a clear trend was seen in which the researcher remained a neutral, non-participant. This seems to be the strongest post-positivist influence in qualitative work done in the field of international and comparative education, and may reflect a perceived need for objectivity, or the view that qualitative methods are simply a part of the researcher's methodological toolbox, and not necessarily aligned with any given paradigm. Qualitative researchers may be under pressure to conduct work in certain ways to gain legitimacy; alternatively, it is possible that qualitative researchers do not find it necessary to fully situate themselves within the constructivist paradigm.

The constructivist paradigm is present in the field's most recent research, but not consistently, nor to an overwhelming extent. In fact, this reality appears to depend upon which journal, under which editorship, and for any given year. Volumes devoted to special topics, limitations in page numbers, pressure on researchers to produce quickly, and agendas on the part of editors are included in the multitude of reasons for inconsistent findings. It is of note that the journal editors themselves discuss many of these explanations periodically when they have an opportunity to insert commentary into the journals. For example, UNESCO's journal *International Review of Education* made great attempts at thematic cohesion in each issue and the articles selected by the editors were introduced in positive tones that showed support for the organization's agenda. This type of management did not always line up with representative showcasing of the diversity of qualitative inquiry being done in the field, though it is justified by the organization's overall goals and purposes. Additionally, *Comparative Education Review's* editorials took the opportunity to periodically address dilemmas and issues in the field. In the time period of the sample, one editor shared that the previous ten years had seen subscriptions double and citations increase dramatically. Editorial focus appeared to be in line with staying relevant to the wide variety of interests in the field, a feat that would make displaying diverse qualitative work difficult. The editors placed value outside of impact factors and citation rates; instead, they called on readers to determine the value of a piece of writing for themselves. The time period in the sample ended with *Comparative Education Review* calling for *methodological innovation*; it will be interesting to look for evidence of this in future volumes of this publication.

Conclusion

Our meta-analysis uncovered some interesting patterns in the qualitative research being published in the field of international and comparative education. Specifically, we have found that while a substantive amount of qualitative research is being published, this research does not often align itself fully with the constructivist paradigm. While it could be argued that most research falls on a spectrum and lies somewhere between paradigms, today's qualitative research shows post-positivist tendencies, particularly with regard to researcher positionality. This is in conflict with the idea of the researcher as an important instrument in qualitative research, as well as with what Creswell (2013) cites Wolcott in describing as the readers' *right to know* about the researcher (Creswell, 2013). This is because in interpreting qualitative data, a researcher's own background, experiences, and personal history with the subject of the study all work to color the interpretation, and are thus central to gaining a full understanding of the study results.

It is beyond the scope of our analysis to provide explanations for the phenomena observed, or to determine whether the absence of the constructivist paradigm in its fullest

expression is detrimental to research in the field of international and comparative education. However, to the extent that strong post-positivistic influences were observed in the research, it may be worthwhile for future studies to try to address some of these questions that remain. *To what extent do paradigms matter in shaping research questions and study outcomes? What does the field of international and comparative education stand to lose with the edging out of fully constructivist research approaches? What aspects of a qualitative study are we missing out on when we are not afforded a view of the researcher who is interpreting the data?* All of these could be questions for future inquiry.

References

- Arnove, R. F. (2013). Reframing comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local. In R. F. Arnove, C. A. Torres, & S. Franz (Eds.), *Comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local* (4th ed., p. 1-25). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Paradigms and perspectives in transition. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 157-162). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Firestone, W. A. (1987). Meaning in method: The rhetoric of quantitative and qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 16(7), 16-21. doi: 10.3102/0013189X016007016
- Glass, G. V. (1976). Primary, secondary, and meta-analysis of research. *Educational Researcher*, 5(10), 3-8. doi: 10.3102/0013189X005010003
- Gozik, N. J. (2012). Teaching national and regional cultures: The role of teacher identities in Martinique. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 42(1), 5-25.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ke, F. (2009). A qualitative meta-analysis of computer games as learning tools. In R.E. Ferdig (Ed.), *Handbook of research on effective electronic gaming in education* (pp. 1-32). Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.
- Klymenko, L. (2014). World War II in Ukrainian school history textbooks: Mapping the discourse of the past. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 44(5), 756-777. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2013.812431
- Koro-Ljungberg, M., & Douglas, E. P. (2008). The state of qualitative research in engineering education: Meta-analysis of JEE articles, 2005-2006. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 97(2), 163-175. doi: 10.1002/j.2168-9830.2008.tb00965.x
- Lather, P. (2004). This is your father's paradigm: Government intrusion and the case of qualitative research in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, 15-24. doi: 10.1177/1077800403256154
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Cannella, G. S. (2004). Dangerous discourses: Methodological conservatism and governmental regimes of truth. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(1), 5-14. doi: 10.1177/1077800403259717

- Mertens, D. M. (2010). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peshkin, A. (2001). Ten common issues for the beginning researcher. In S. McKinty (Ed.), *The politics and machinations of education research: International case studies* (pp. 3-19). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Pherali, T., & Garratt, D. (2014). Post-conflict identity crisis in Nepal: Implications for educational reforms. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 34, 42-50. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.12.004
- Sharpe, D. (1997). Of apples and oranges, file drawers and garbage: Why validity issues in meta-analysis will not go away. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 17(8), 881-901. doi:10.1016/S0272-7358(97)00056-1
- Smith, J. K., & Heshusius, L. (1986). Closing down the conversation: The end of the quantitative-qualitative debate among educational inquirers. *Educational Researcher*, 15(1), 4-12. doi: 10.3102/0013189X015001004
- Sultana, Ronald G. (2014). Livelihood planning and career guidance in Palestine and the broader MENA region. *International Review of Education*, 60(2), 177-197. doi: 10.1007/s11159-014-9405-5
- Thomsen, J. P., Munk, M. D., Eiberg-Madsen, M., & Hansen, G. I. (2013). The educational strategies of Danish university students from professional and working-class backgrounds. *Comparative Education Review*, 57(3), 457-480. doi:10.1086/670806
- Torres, C. A. (2013). Comparative education: The dialectics of globalization and its discontents. In R. F. Arnove, C. A. Torres, & S. Franz (Eds.), *Comparative education: The dialectic of the global and the local* (4th ed., pp. 459-484). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Trikalinos, T. A., Salanti, G., Zintzaras, E., & Ioannidis, J. P. (2008). Meta-analysis methods. *Advances in Genetics*, 60, 311-334. doi:10.1016/S0065-2660(07)00413-0
- Wyatt, M. (2013). Motivating teachers in the developing world: Insights from research with English language teachers in Oman. *International Review of Education*, 59(2), 217-242. doi: 10.1007/s11159-013-9358-0
- Yamada, S. (2014). Determinants of 'community participation': The tradition of local initiatives and the institutionalisation of school management committees in Oromia Region, Ethiopia. *Compare*, 44(2), 162-185. doi:10.1080/03057925.2012.746899

Author Note

Romina B. da Costa received her BA in Anthropology from Yale University in 2007 and her EdM from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2012. She is currently a PhD student in International Education Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. Interested in issues of intersectionality of race and gender, Romina seeks to apply qualitative methods in education research, so as to better understand the underlying complexities behind observed social phenomena. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: rcosta2@umd.edu.

Anne Spear is a PhD student in the International Education Policy program at University of Maryland. Her research interests are gender and education, literacy curriculum development, global leadership and social change. She completed an US Peace Corps assignment as a Girls' Education and Empowerment Volunteer in Burkina Faso as part of a Master's Degree in International Studies at University of Wyoming. In addition, Ms. Spear is a certified teacher and holds a M.S.ED in Education and Social Change at the University of Miami. Ms. Spear can be contacted at aspear@umd.edu.

Stephanie M. Hall is a PhD student at the University of Maryland College Park. She holds an MA in Educational Leadership and Administration from the George Washington University and a BS in Middle Grades Education from Reinhardt College. Her research focuses on higher education access and teacher education policies in both Brazil and the United States, with particular interest in the role of privatization in the higher education sector. Contact: halls@umd.edu.

Copyright 2016: Romina da Costa, Stephanie M. Hall, Anne Spear, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

da Costa, R. B., Hall, S. M., & Spear, A. (2016). Whose reality? A meta-analysis of qualitative research in international and comparative education. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(4), 661-676. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss4/5>
