

THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: CHARACTERISTICS, USES AND POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT: The central theme of the research was to highlight some contributions of theoretical-scientific knowledge on educational research using qualitative methodology. Thus, the main objective of the work was to investigate, through a bibliographic review and qualitative descriptive approach, aspects considered relevant to the proposed theme, emphasizing the current context of scientific research related to the field of education and teaching practice. Thus, the study sought to demonstrate methodologically how phenomena that occur in the school environment can be researched, in connection with the broader social context. It is also worth noting that notes were raised in order to characterize the methodology of scientific work and the communication of the knowledge produced. In this direction, the theoretical framework of Lüdcke, Severino, Martins, Godoy, among other scholars on the subject, was sought.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative Research. Education. Methodology. Scientific Dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

It is interesting to note that this theoretical investigation aimed to develop a bibliographic study on qualitative research in the educational field, from an analytical and interdisciplinary perspective. According to Godoy (1995, p. 21), it is worth noting that, nowadays, “qualitative research occupies a recognized place among the various possibilities for studying phenomena involving human beings and their intricate social relationships”.

It is, therefore, an interpretative approach that is based on descriptive data. To this end, the researcher goes into the field, according to Godoy (1995), seeking to capture the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the people involved in it, considering all relevant points of view. Therefore, two qualitative research methods

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recurrently found in the specialized literature in the area were chosen, namely, participant observation and documentary analysis.

In this sense, according to Marconi and Lakatos (2017, p. 300), “in qualitative research, samples are reduced, data are analyzed in their psychosocial content and collection instruments are not structured”. In view of this, regarding the methodological procedure, it is worth highlighting that theoretical support was sought, through a bibliographic review regarding the work of scholars on this topic.

In this way, with the aim of delimiting the scope of the investigation, the study attempted to show that the qualitative research approach is a research method that focuses on understanding phenomena and behaviors, rather than just quantifying them. In view of this, “the use of one methodology or another will depend greatly on the type of problem posed and the objectives of the research” (Martins, 2004, p. 2). In view of this, the delimitation of the theme and the problem made it possible to formalize the objectives of this research.

In view of the above, since this study does not intend to exhaust the possibilities for discussion on the subject, some points were highlighted and aspects considered relevant regarding the descriptive qualitative methodology of educational research were raised. From this perspective, the results of this investigation are materialized due to the analysis and in-depth study of the theme.

METHODOLOGY

The central theme of this study was to examine theoretical lines of investigation on the qualitative approach to educational research, based on the concept that qualitative methodology, “more than any other, raises ethical questions, mainly due to the proximity between researcher and researched” (Martins, 2004, p. 3). From this perspective, it is worth highlighting that notes were raised in order to characterize this research methodology in the field of education.

Qualitative research is defined as that which privileges the analysis of microprocesses, through the study of individual and group social actions, carrying out an intensive examination of the data, and characterized by heterodoxy at the time of analysis (Martins, 2004, p. 1).

In this way, with the aim of discussing the characterization of the research, the presentation of the object of analysis and the methodological procedures and techniques used, in the understanding of Severino (2007, p. 121), this stage of the exploratory process that is configured by a methodology of treatment and analysis of information focuses on the need to carry out an adequate selection of data and analysis and justification of the discourses. In this sense, it is worth emphasizing that the management of a set of analysis techniques becomes a pivotal point in this process, shedding light on the debate around the idea of critically understanding the meaning of what one intends to investigate.

In view of this, the importance of choosing research procedures related to qualitative research and organizing research data that are aligned with the theoretical assumptions analyzed was observed. Without disregarding the process of scientific dissemination of the research findings, which, according to Mueller (2003), consists of a set of activities that enable the researcher to transmit the results of the research developed. Medeiros (2013, p. 205) adds that the dissemination of research results. These presentations of research findings almost always lead to the communication of studies in scientific publications.

It is important to note that documentary research has much in common with bibliographic research, with the type of sources used being what differentiates them. Bibliographic research is based on registered, legitimized knowledge, whereas documentary research uses material that has not yet been analyzed, or that can be reinterpreted, depending on the objectives that the research hopes to achieve (Gil, 2008).

In light of this analytical basis, qualitative research assumes that the researcher questions the target audience, whose aspects are intended to be investigated. In this case, information is requested directly from a relevant sample of people about the issue under study, using complementary data for quantitative analysis, in order to elucidate the conclusions regarding the data collected (Gil, 2008).

In this context, seeking methodological rigor, we chose to use the literature review, above all, because it is a mode or type of investigation, as pointed out by

Galvão and Pereira (2014, p. 183), “focused on a well-defined question, which aims to identify, select, evaluate and synthesize the relevant evidence available”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to present and analyze the data found, with the appropriate analyses and inferences, it is important to note that in order to conduct scientific research, it is necessary to promote the confrontation between the data, evidence, information collected on the subject and the theoretical knowledge accumulated about it. In this sense, research is to study a problem that arouses the researcher's interest and limits his/her research activity to a certain portion of knowledge.

The present study assumes a broad understanding of methodology, which should be understood as “the critical knowledge of the paths of the scientific process, which inquires and questions about its limits and possibilities” (Martins, 2004, p. 1). For Creswell (2007), quantitative research, which is not the object of analysis in this study, uses various types of knowledge and procedures aimed at collecting and analyzing data. Although the processes of quantitative research are similar to those of qualitative research, the appropriate caveats should be observed.

In this regard, as “qualitative procedures are based on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis and use diverse research strategies” (Creswell, 2007, p. 184), qualitative research combines thought and action in order to develop knowledge of certain aspects of reality that should serve to provide solutions to problems. According to Lüdcke (1986, p. 1-2), such issues and aspects identified as central to qualitative research are “necessarily marked by the signs of their time and committed to their historical reality”.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

In order to answer the questions posed by the current challenges of educational research, research methods different from those traditionally employed began to

emerge. Thus, the new questions came from an investigative curiosity awakened by problems revealed by educational practice.

When beginning this reference, it is essential to present that it starts with broad questions that become more specific as the investigation progresses, so that the paths to be followed in this process are varied when the study is guided by the qualitative methodology (Godoy, 1995, p. 21).

In this sense, Lüdcke (1986) highlights that the qualitative approach emerges, strongly influenced by a new research attitude that places the researcher in the middle of the investigated plot, that is, participating in it and taking sides in the researched environment (p. 7). In this context, regarding qualitative research, it is worth highlighting that “various types of data are collected and analyzed to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon” (Godoy, 1995, p. 21).

Qualitative research involves obtaining descriptive data, obtained through direct contact between the researcher and the situation studied, emphasizes the process more than the product and is concerned with portraying the perspective of the participants (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 13).

In view of the above, regardless of the methodological choice and the type of research to be carried out, whether qualitative or another approach, it is necessary to consult the appropriate material to define the conceptual framework of the research and its theoretical foundation, which becomes the touchstone in relation to scientific research. It is also necessary to consult previously published material, reviewing and revisiting authors who are references in a given theme, thus being the closest to the state of the art in terms of the theoretical advancement of a theme, “with a view to identifying the stage at which knowledge on the theme being investigated is found” (Gil, 2008, p. 60).

From this angle, qualitative research is approached, characterized by having the natural environment as its direct source of data and the researcher as its main instrument. Furthermore, according to Lüdcke (1986), this research process assumes close, direct and prolonged contact between the researcher and the environment and the situation being investigated, that is, in the locus where the phenomena occur naturally. Thus, through intensive and constant work in the field, we seek to understand the

particular circumstances in which a given object is inserted, referencing the situations to the context in which they appear (p. 11).

In this context, the focus of qualitative research is the process experienced by the subjects, configuring itself as a possibility of studying phenomena that involve human beings in interaction. Since the phenomenon must be analyzed from an integrated perspective, the researcher goes into the field seeking to capture the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the people involved in it, considering all relevant points of view. Various types of data are collected and analyzed in order to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon. In this regard, qualitative research

emphasizes interpretation in context; it is necessary to take into account the context in which the object of study is situated. Likewise, it seeks to portray reality in a complete and profound way; the researcher seeks to reveal the multiplicity of dimensions present in a given situation, focusing on it as a whole, emphasizing the natural complexity of situations. They use a variety of sources of information, a variety of data collected at different times, in different situations, and with a variety of types of informants, being able to cross-reference information, confirm or reject hypotheses, discover new data, rule out assumptions or raise alternative hypotheses (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 18-19).

In line with the quote above, the meaning that people give to things and their lives is the focus of special attention by the researcher, trying to capture the perspective of the participants. Because of this, different points of view must be considered, allowing for the internal dynamism of situations. Consequently, data analysis follows an inductive process, so that at the beginning of the investigation there are broad questions or focuses of interest, which at the end become more direct and specific. It is worth noting that the data collected by qualitative research are predominantly descriptive, for this reason, the material obtained is rich in descriptions of people, situations and events.

It is also worth noting that the basic and initial resource of this type of research is description. According to Fazenda and Martins (2010, p. 53-56), description is therefore of significant importance in the development of qualitative research. Thus, all data from reality are considered important and, for this reason, the researcher must pay attention to the greatest possible number of elements present in the situation investigated. Regarding the qualitative approach, which has an exploratory character, as reinforced by Lüdcke (1986, p. 12), the aim is to understand a singular instance, in

which the object treated is considered unique, that is, a particular representation of reality that is also very particular.

In this regard, participant observation and document analysis are two important tools for qualitative research, as they have a set of procedures that configure a process of intervention in a given reality. Therefore, they will be addressed in this chapter in two well-defined topics. Participant observation and document analysis are two techniques that have proven to be effective, complementary and useful for supporting research, when using the qualitative approach for scientific understanding of the educational phenomenon.

Therefore, they are two techniques used to support qualitative studies as methods that help to have a more comprehensive view of the research problem, involve direct contact with the object of analysis and provide a differentiated approach for understanding reality, allowing the understanding and interpretation of phenomena based on their context. From this perspective, the qualitative method, by establishing the researchers themselves as an instrument, provides a rich and detailed investigation of practices and subjectivities in the field.

The concern with the process is much greater than with the product; the researcher's interest is to verify how a given problem manifests itself in activities, procedures and daily interactions, systematically portraying the complexity of everyday school life (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 12).

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AS A TECHNIQUE AND AS A DIRECT METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

It is interesting to point out that the act of observation is one of the means most frequently used by human beings to get to know and understand people, things, situations and events, as well as to obtain certain information about some aspect of reality. It is worth noting that observation becomes a scientific technique when it goes through a process of systematization, planning, and control of objectivity. To this extent, participant observation allows the reaffirmation of facts facilitated by the experience of specific situations.

According to authors such as Godoy (1995), participant observation is a method that brings together some basic characteristics found in studies called qualitative. According to this perspective, “a phenomenon can be better understood in the context in which it occurs and of which it is a part, and should be analyzed from an integrated perspective” (Godoy, 1995, p. 21).

In this way, according to Lüdcke (1986), observation must, above all, be controlled and systematic in order to become a valid and reliable instrument of investigation. Therefore, it requires careful planning of the work and rigorous preparation of the observer (p. 25). In view of this, the first task of the observer corresponds to the delimitation of the object of study, clearly defining the focus of the investigation and its space-time configuration.

In this sense, in order to understand the complexity of situations, direct participation and participant observation can be a good method, considering that observation allows the researcher to have close and personal contact with the phenomenon being researched. It is pertinent when the aim is to capture the maximum dynamic knowledge of a given reality, situation or phenomenon. Thus, the observer is in a face-to-face relationship with those being observed, in constant interaction with the subjects. This method is characterized, therefore, by the presence of the researcher in a social situation with the purpose of conducting a scientific investigation.

Thus, as it is a technique previously systematized according to the research objectives, it enables knowledge through the interaction between the observer and the environment, in a personal involvement with the object, providing a broad and detailed view of reality, by capturing the meanings and experiences of the subjects.

In this aspect, according to Lüdcke (1986), the content of the observations must involve a descriptive part and a more reflective part, so that the descriptive part comprises a detailed record of what occurs “in the field”, that is, it presents a description of the subjects, the aspects that distinguish them from others, such as reconstruction of dialogues, words, gestures, testimonies, in addition to the description of places.

On the other hand, the more reflective part encompasses the researcher's

personal observations, their speculations, feelings, problems, ideas, impressions, doubts, uncertainties, surprises and disappointments, in order to exemplify. This same author states that participant observation is a “field strategy that simultaneously combines documentary analysis, interviewing respondents and informants, participation and direct observation and introspection” (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 28).

The process of participant observation follows well-defined steps, from the researcher's approach to the group studied, in an effort by the researcher to obtain an overall view of the community under study, to the systematization and organization of the data. From this perspective, participant observation can be understood as a technique and a method; it is a systematic observation technique that allows the researcher to participate as intensely as possible in the experiences of groups and events considered important to better understand them. And it is a qualitative method of investigation that allows the experience of the reality of the facts to better represent it, observing in search of certain specific events.

In this line of interpretation, the closer to the moment of observation, the greater its acuity and, as an elucidation of practical reality, it makes it possible to obtain information exactly during the spontaneous occurrence of the phenomenon in question.

Participant observation (...) is a strategy that involves, therefore, not only direct observation, but a whole set of methodological techniques that presuppose a great involvement of the researcher in the situation studied (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 28).

It is worth noting that direct experience is undoubtedly the best test for verifying the occurrence of a given phenomenon. From this perspective, direct observation also allows the observer to get closer to the “subjects’ perspective”, an important element in qualitative approaches to educational research. Thus, in Lüdcke’s (1986) view, observation techniques are extremely useful for “discovering” new aspects of a study problem, in addition to allowing data collection in situations where other forms of communication are practically impossible (p. 26).

That said, it is concluded that participant observation is a very broad and comprehensive method for analyzing social reality, and for this purpose, it is necessary for the observer to become part of the universe under investigation in order to understand the context of the actions, from a perspective of greater proximity between

the researcher and the phenomenon studied, that is, with the context of the group being researched.

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS AS A TECHNIQUE AND METHOD FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

It is important to consider Lüdcke's (1986) understanding that documentary analysis is a technique that does not alter the environment or the subjects, and is also a fixed source of data, presupposing a series of procedures for processing the material with a specific objective in mind, generally that of facilitating the understanding of information and establishing relationships with the context. In light of Godoy's (1995) contributions, "in documentary research, three aspects should deserve special attention from the researcher: the choice of documents, access to them and their analysis" (p. 23).

In the same way, documentary analysis is understood as a method of understanding documents as a basis for studies according to the researcher's interest regarding the methodological treatment of documents. According to Godoy (1995), "once the documents have been selected, the researcher should focus on coding and analyzing the data" (p. 23). In fact, these are situations in which the use of documentary analysis is appropriate, for example, when access to data is problematic, when the aim is to ratify and validate information obtained through other collection techniques or when the researcher's interest is to study the problem based on the individuals' own expression.

Given the above, document analysis aims to treat the information contained in the materials, being a description and representation of the documents in a systematic way, allowing their recovery. One advantage of this technique is that it is generally low cost. It consists of treating the content in order to facilitate its consultation and extract an objective reflection of the original source. In view of this, it is important to characterize the type of document that will be used or selected. The choice of documents is not random. After selection, the analysis itself will proceed.

Document analysis seeks to identify factual information in the documents based on questions or hypotheses of interest (...) a source so full of information about the nature of the context should never be

ignored, regardless of the other investigation methods chosen (Lüdcke, 1986, p. 28).

In this sense, document analysis as a technique includes the study of documents as a research possibility, through the examination of materials with the aim of identifying, verifying and evaluating certain documents with a specific purpose. From this perspective, documents constitute a rich source of data, serving to complement the information obtained by other methods, hoping to find useful information for the object of study. In addition to being a source of contextualized information, as it arises in a certain context and provides information about that same context. From this perspective, according to Godoy (1995), “documents are normally considered important sources of data for other types of qualitative studies, therefore deserving special attention” (p. 23).

It is worth noting that documents are written records that provide information for understanding facts and relationships; from this perspective, they constitute records of aspects of the social life of a certain group. Documents constitute a stable and rich source, persisting over time, as they can be consulted several times. In this sense, based on Godoy's (1995) analytical construction, “documentary research represents a form that can be innovative, bringing important contributions to the study of some themes” (p. 23).

In this sense, it complements the information obtained by other techniques by revealing new aspects of a topic or problem. They constitute a powerful source from which evidence can be obtained to support the researcher's information and statements, and they also represent a “natural” source of information. Therefore, documents are considered, as Lüdcke (1986, p. 38) emphasizes, “any written material that can be used as a source of information about human behavior”.

In this sense, it was emphasized in the research that the collection of documents is a step in the data analysis method, so that the data will provide sufficient information for the research problem if organized and manipulated. It should, therefore, allow the location, identification, organization and evaluation of the information contained in the document. There is, therefore, an interpretative process in this type of research.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, with the aim of presenting the considerations elaborated based on the verification of the research question and what was intended to be achieved regarding the results of the sample analyzed, it is necessary to remember that the main objective of this study was to highlight the importance of the qualitative approach, as a research methodology, looking to understand the implications of this intervention in the educational field, thus not presenting itself as a rigidly structured proposal, but raising dialogic possibilities that value imagination and creativity, and can lead researchers to propose works that explore new approaches (Godoy, 1995, p. 23). This is one of the main motivations for carrying out this research.

In this line, the research also brought to light that the mechanisms for disseminating scientific knowledge are constituted by a broad process and, as pointed out by Targino (2010), are characterized by the exchange of information and ideas between individuals. This interaction is fundamental for the advancement of scientific knowledge and its publication.

There is no doubt that defining the theoretical and methodological framework is one of the most fundamental stages of qualitative research, since it explores the theoretical-conceptual foundation of the study and presents the theoretical and methodological contributions that guide the work. Furthermore, this understanding is important in order to understand and elucidate aspects related to the scientific dissemination of the research findings.

In this regard, in light of the research results, it is understood that, based on the indicated structure, it becomes possible to understand the way in which ideas were systematized to conduct the study. Thus, it was clear that this will enable improvements in the understanding of what is being developed and the respective results evidenced throughout the research process, signaling possibilities for further study, with the suggestion of future studies resulting from this investigation.

For all these reasons, without intending to exhaust the alternatives for studying this subject, which proved to be very vast and rich, the data on educational research was formed based on the data from the literature review in light of the key concepts

analyzed in the study. In this light, it is important to note that research methods are gaining increasing importance and were used to ensure greater consistency in the data analysis process and to better assess the results and, therefore, achieve the proposed objectives.

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