

Qualitative Inquiry in Education



T h e o r y & P r a c t i c e

e-issn 3023-5650

**EDU**  
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Edu Publishing Eğitim, Danışmanlık, Proje Yönetimi, Organizasyon, Yazılım, Reklam San. Tic. Ltd.  
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**Printing Date:** 03 August 2024

**Broadcast Type:** Local Broadcast

**Typesetting and Design:** EDU Yayıncılık

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*Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice [QIETP]* with an e-issn 3023-5650 is an open access, online, peer reviewed, and free of charge scholarly international journal. It is published bi-annual (December and June).

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## Editorial

Ali Ersoy<sup>1</sup> 

### To cite this article

Ersoy, A. (2024). Editorial. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.1>

Dear readers,

I am delighted to share the second issue of the *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory and Practice* (QIETP) journal. This issue includes five articles: two research articles and three review articles. I am grateful to our esteemed authors and referees for their contributions to QIETP.

The first study in this issue is a research article derived from a doctoral thesis. “A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experience of Not Realizing Our Ideal Teaching” was written by Aslı Özaslan and Ömer Bayhan. This study is significant as it demonstrates how teachers’ experiences of not achieving their ideal teaching can be methodologically addressed using heuristic inquiry. Therefore, it offers a good example for those interested in conducting thesis research with heuristic inquiry. I believe the study will be useful both methodologically and in terms of its findings.

The second study, based on a master’s thesis, is titled “Investigation of Activities Related to Specific Days and Weeks in Life Science Course in the Context of Classroom Teachers’ Opinions.” This study conducted by Lokman Tekin and Uğur Gezer examines classroom teachers’ experiences through a case study design, linking specific days and weeks celebrated in schools with the life sciences course. It serves as an example of how to use case study design to examine activities within a course.

In the third study, Yılmaz Soysal and Salih Türkmen reinterpret the member-checking strategy in qualitative research from a hermeneutic perspective in their review article titled “Reinterpreting the Member Checking Validation Strategy in Qualitative Research through the Hermeneutics Lens.” This study contributes to qualitative methods by evaluating the member-checking validation strategy from a hermeneutic perspective in light of current literature. It will be particularly useful for those looking to holistically understand the member checking strategy in qualitative research.

The fourth study, “Content and Thematic Analysis Techniques in Qualitative Research: Purpose, Process, and Features,” by Muhammet Özden, compares content and thematic analysis techniques, often confused by newcomers to qualitative research, with the current literature. This review will benefit doctoral students and those new to qualitative research.

The fifth study is a review article by Sadegül Akbaba Altun titled “Development and Use of the Alphabetical Analysis Technique in Qualitative Research.” Akbaba Altun introduces the alphabetical

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analysis technique developed for qualitative analysis.

The study explains the need for the alphabetical analysis technique, its stages, and its application using literature and examples. This study is valuable for developing and introducing a new method in qualitative data analysis.

We invite you to submit your research articles using qualitative methods and review studies related to the qualitative paradigm to QIETP. We look forward to seeing you in the next issue. Happy reading!

Professor Ali Ersoy  
Editor-in-Chief

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory and Practice, editorial, heuristic inquiry, specific days and weeks, member checking, content analysis, thematic analysis, alphabetical analysis

## A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experience of Not Realizing Our Ideal Teaching<sup>1</sup>

Aslı Özasan<sup>2</sup>  Ömer Beyhan<sup>3</sup> 

### To cite this article

Özaslan, A., & Beyhan, Ö. (2024). A heuristic inquiry into the experience of not realizing our ideal teaching. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.2>

### Article Info:

Received: 04.05.2024

Revised: 19.07.2024

Accepted: 31.07.2024

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The inability of a teacher to realize their ideal teaching is a phenomenon that is obviously experienced but has not yet been clearly researched. Research on this topic has generally focused on teachers' working conditions, teacher identity change, autonomy, disempowerment, and deskilling. It is apparent that no research has yet been conducted to explain this phenomenon experienced by teachers based on their experiences without the limitations of theoretical frameworks. However, making this phenomenon, its experiences, and understandings visible from the perspective of those who experience it will make significant contributions to the literature. The purpose of our study is to understand and explain to the readers the essence and significance of the experience of "not realizing one's ideal teaching" based on the statements of a group of teachers, including the first author.

**Method:** The participants in this study, which was based on a heuristic research design, were 11 teachers, diversified by gender and teaching field, who felt that they could not realize their ideal teaching.

**Findings:** When the experiences of the participating teachers are analyzed, three themes emerge: "I feel blocked," "I lose motivation," and "I am in despair."

**Implications:** The results of the research provided data for a better understanding of the impact of the physical conditions, insufficient equipment of schools, and educational stakeholders on the teaching process, for planning measures to increase teachers' autonomy, for a better understanding and review of the impact of the examination system on the teaching process and for planning qualified training for teachers on the issues with which they have professional difficulties.

### Keywords

ideal teaching, teachers, heuristic inquiry

<sup>1</sup>This research article is based on the heuristic research section of the first author's doctoral dissertation, supervised by the second author, entitled "Understanding and Describing Our Experience of Not Realizing Our Ideal Teaching: A Phenomenological, Phenomenographical and Heuristic Inquiry."

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## **Introduction**

A review of the literature on the working lives of teachers shows that the increasing trend toward standardization in education systems has led to conditions that adversely affect teachers. Teachers have lost their autonomy, their notions of professionalism have changed, and they have been deskilled and disempowered. The conditions that have led to this have presumably developed in a social structure dominated by 21st-century free market ideals (Nunez, 2015). With the effects of increasing standardization and accountability criteria, teachers are working under conditions in which their work is more standardized and intensified (Ramirez et al., 2018). Education policies shaped by neoliberalism, the implementation of state accountability measures based on customer satisfaction and market expectations (Apple & Jungck, 1990), standardized curricula guiding instruction, instructional materials determined by central authorities, and the dominance of standardized assessment procedures in the education sector have driven teachers into a corner (Ömür & Bavlı, 2020).

In the last quarter of the 20th century, efforts were made to design education in line with the needs of the economy and designing education policies in line with the labor needs of industry became part of the strategies to achieve countries' development goals (Lundahl, 2006). It is common and desirable for education to supply the labor market with qualified workers and to serve the development of the country by educating people to become citizens (Apple, 1982). However, demands for better education, a safe educational environment, and accountability have led to a trend towards standardization of the educational process (Ramirez et al., 2018), as young people seek documents that prove their competencies and achievements in the knowledge that this competitive new order, in which increases in production and higher profits are sought (Lakes & Carter, 2011). This trend toward standardization of both the teaching process and assessment methods has transformed education into a task-oriented enterprise in which students are forced to learn more information to earn more, are in constant competition with each other, and must acquire the skills and competencies to meet the changing workforce demands of countries (Apple & Teitelbaum, 1986).

Believing that education plays a role in training a workforce that can make the country more competitive in the international marketplace, key policymakers have developed ready-made teaching materials, a detailed planned and prescribed curriculum, and standardized tests based on the measurement of behavioral skills to verify that they are optimally implemented by teachers (Apple & Jungck, 1990). This drive to increase productivity has been compared to the Taylorist management model in industry which provides for greater control over workers to achieve higher profits (Nunez, 2015). Taylorist management model requires that a complex job be broken down its simplest components by management experts in order to increase productivity, reduce inefficiency, and keep both cost and efficiency under control (Apple, 1982). Aforesaid control model is an existing but less visible control practice where the control mechanism is implanted within the physical structure of the work.

In technical control, the control mechanism is embedded in the work process to ensure that employees maintain a high level of performance. For example, the work of a worker in an automobile factory is controlled by the uniform and repetitive sequence and speed of the



production line (Pratte & Rury, 1988). The basic limits of the workers in the factory are set by the production process itself. In this way, the worker has become part of the functioning machine (Baumann, 1992). In educational systems dominated by technical control, teachers do not determine their curricula, the classrooms in which they teach, or the content of their lessons. Furthermore, educational goals are set by central administrations, and teachers have no say in matters that determine the quality of the educational process, such as standardized tests and high-stakes examinations. For this reason, teachers have been likened to assembly line workers (Gitlin, 2001; Pratte & Rury, 1988).

The primary purpose of the central administration's step-by-step preparation of curricula and the central administration's establishment of instructional materials and standardized assessment procedures is to prevent individual or institutional maverick behavior by providing teachers with step-by-step guidance and holding schools and teachers accountable for achieving performance standards established for students. The instructional practices prescribed to teachers are designed to ensure that they maintain a high level of work performance at all times and to ensure synchronization among all educational institutions (Kauffman, 2005). However, this restricts teachers' instructional freedom and causes them to lose control over the teaching process (Apple, 1982). Focusing the instructional process on competencies, planned step by step by central administration and measured by standardized tests, alienates teachers from their work as they implement the plans of others and do not know what they are doing and why (Apple & Jungck, 1990). Unforeseeable problems can arise in the teaching process. A teacher who has a high level of professional competence can continue the teaching process by analyzing the conditions and restructuring the process according to the needs and characteristics of his or her students in a way that is beneficial to them because his or her work is different from that of a mechanic who follows a fixed procedure (Pratte & Rury, 1988). However, since teachers who are prescribed step-by-step prepared curricula and held responsible for their students' high-stakes test results, are disempowered in the dimension of planning, and structuring the teaching process, they lack the necessary flexibility (Apple, 1982).

Another factor that has a major impact on teachers' work is high-stakes examinations. These are examinations whose results are used to make important decisions for students' lives, such as assessing their learning outcomes and determining their conditions for admission to higher educational institutions. These examinations also influence the updating of educational decisions and the formation of educational policy (Wong, 2006). Large-scale testing has been used for more than a hundred years to hold teachers accountable for their student's learning, to ensure that students have acquired certain desired skills, or to set better performance standards of performance. Since then, education policymakers recognizing that they have limited ability to intervene directly in the classroom used state-mandated tests to hold students and schools accountable and responsible for the functioning of the learning process (Madaus & Russel, 2010). Since all the teachers who participated in the present study work in secondary schools, the most important exam that affects their professional life is the high school entrance exam (LGS). In order for students to be enrolled in these high schools that accept students with LGS exam scores, they must take the exam and achieve a sufficiently high score according to the schools' quotas. The qualitative differences between secondary

educational institutions lead to the expectation that studying at a high school that accepts students with high scores is a pathway to a good degree program in higher education (Özkan & Turan, 2021).

High-stakes examinations also have an impact on the teaching process and learning practices, as they can affect the future of candidates. The fact that the priority is to achieve high scores on the tests means that teaching methods are designed accordingly (Abrams et al., 2003). Teachers teach according to the test technique by focusing on the exam topics (Çetin & Ünsal, 2019) and resorting to lecture-based methods rather than time-consuming practices that they consider worthless in their exam preparation efforts. The school administration's desire for students to achieve high scores on the exam (Büyükoztürk, 2016) and the expectations of students' parents along the same lines make teachers feel pressured by these exams (Acar & Buldur, 2021).

When pre-service teachers begin a teaching degree program, they have pedagogical beliefs based on their own experiences as students. Their teaching practices are shaped by their perceptions arising from these beliefs, by what they learn during their student teaching, and by the experiences they have while practicing their profession (Hollingsworth, 1989). Even when teachers design instruction in line with their perspective, their beliefs about education, and their goals, there can be discrepancies between what they plan and what is implemented. It can be demoralizing for teachers when the teaching they envision and the teaching they are able to implement differ (James, 2002).

The inability of a teacher to realize his ideal teaching is a phenomenon that is obviously experienced but has not yet been clearly researched. Research on this topic has generally focused on teachers' working conditions, teacher identity change, autonomy, disempowerment, deskilling, and teacher empowerment. A review of the literature that can be used to explain teachers' inability to realize their ideal teaching reveals a clear problem. It is apparent that no research has yet been conducted to explain this phenomenon experienced by teachers based on their experiences without the limitations of theoretical frameworks. To make this phenomenon more relevant in educational research, the first step could be to make visible the experiences and understandings of this phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it. Therefore, the aim of our study is to understand and explain to the readers the essence and significance of the experience of 'not realizing one's ideal teaching' based on the statements of a group of teachers, including the first author. Since the first author, myself (A.Ö.), was also a teacher who could not realize her ideal teaching, we considered the heuristic research design, which falls within the scope of qualitative research methodology as a research design, to be the most appropriate research method to provide an in-depth understanding of the topic.

## **Method**

Before I go into the details of the research methodology, I would like to clarify one point. In this study, as a qualitative researcher with a post-positivist orientation and following the heuristic tradition, I have used the pronoun "we." On the other hand, the pronoun "we" in

this paper does not refer to the second author of the study (Ö.B.) but to the participants of the study, including myself. Although we conducted this research together, the second author (Ö.B.) is not a participant who provided data for the research, but the author who made it possible to write the research in its current form by supervising the research process and providing the necessary guidance and corrections.

## Design

Heuristic inquiry, whose name derives from the Greek word *heuriskein* (to find, to discover), is a design in which the researcher explores their own experiences of a phenomenon together with the participants (co-researchers) in a flexible research framework and attempts to discover the essence of these experiences together (Sultan, 2018). The special feature of this research design developed by Clark Moustakas is that it is not possible for the researcher to completely exclude themselves from the topic under investigation. Researchers cannot pretend that they are not part of what they are researching (Sultan, 2020), but they can position themselves within the research by clearly defining their role (Moustakas, 1990).

Beginning with an inner quest for discovery, an intense thirst for knowledge, and a desire to investigate a problem that the researcher has experienced, heuristic inquiry is the process of discovering the truth about the phenomenon that is the subject of research by combining the experiences of others with the researcher's own experiences (Moustakas, 1990). There is not just one reality. There are several realities. The goal of the heuristic researcher is to uncover the reality and essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of each member of the research team (Sultan, 2018). Heuristic research is a research process in which the researcher lives with the research question at every stage of the process (Hiles, 2001) and engages fully with the phenomenon being researched by keeping their senses and intuitions open and ready to learn at all times (Moustakas, 1990). It requires co-researchers (in this design, participants are referred to as co-researchers) to share knowledge with others and the world in a warm, non-judgmental, empathic, and authentic interaction.

Heuristic research is a design developed based on phenomenology. They differ in that a phenomenologist suspends all their values, opinions, feelings, and assumptions about the subject during the research process, which is called "epoché," whereas a heuristic researcher embraces their own experiences without isolating themselves from the research. This should not lead to the misunderstanding that heuristic research is weak in terms of the objectivity of the researcher. Heuristic researchers extend the boundaries of their transparency when trying to understand the experiences, knowledge, thoughts, and feelings of their co-researchers, and they do not privilege their own experiences over those of others (Sultan, 2018).

Heuristic research begins with the discovery of a problem, the so-called initial engagement phase, in which the researcher feels interest and the desire to uncover the underlying meanings. This encounter is followed by the immersion phase, in which the research question haunts the researcher every moment of the day, and almost everything relevant becomes data or information that can help the researcher. The phase in which knowledge, which expands over time, is distilled and intuition gradually clarifies understandings is called

incubation. This is followed by the illumination phase, in which experiences are thoroughly understood and essences and themes are discovered. The research is concluded with explication, i.e., the elucidation and the complete and detailed description of what has been aroused in consciousness, and finally with creative synthesis, which is the reporting phase (Moustakas, 1990). In all these six phases, the researcher can sometimes have the feeling that he or she is getting lost in the process and that he or she will never be enlightened. At such moments, it makes sense to take a step back, take a break, and let their thoughts steep (Sultan, 2018).

Heuristic research does not follow a linear process; it has a cyclical structure, which Sultan (2018) likens to a labyrinth. During the time we spend in this labyrinth, during the six phases of research mentioned above, we need some methods to get to the result. These are self-dialog, the lead author's reflection on their relationship to the phenomenon; tacit knowing, the knowledge he or she uses to bring together the different dimensions of research; indwelling, turning inward to gain insight, looking at one aspect of the experience with intense attention and concentration; focusing, the researcher's constant reflection on the experience to see something as it is and to maintain insight and awareness; internal frame of reference, intuition and understanding of the experience from another's perspective (Moustakas, 1990). Intuition is important for the researcher to develop a deeper understanding by weaving together both their own experiences and those of co-researchers. It is also valuable for knowledge that is not verbalized but revealed through symbols, allusions, sayings, and images that are perceived through the senses. Intuition makes it possible to see things as a whole (Sultan, 2018).

I, the lead author (A.Ö.), am a twenty-three-year experienced teacher who could not realize her ideal teaching practice, and the second author (Ö.B.) is a faculty member who has trained many teachers. We both knew from our conversations with teachers that there were others who could not realize their ideal teaching practice for various reasons. Since I, have personally experienced the phenomenon that is the subject of the research, we used my own experiences as data for the research, which is one of the characteristics of heuristic design.

### **Participants in the Study**

A prerequisite for the heuristic research design is that the researcher and co-researchers are people who personally experience the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). A participant group of 10-15 people is sufficient for heuristic research (Sultan, 2018). To diversify the co-researchers' experiences of the phenomenon we focused on in our research as much as possible, we used maximum variation sampling by selecting each co-researcher from a different teaching field by considering gender balance. In addition, we thought that a teacher can clarify the experience of not being able to realize the ideal teaching in their mind by gaining professional experience in their profession. Therefore, we preferred to interview teachers with at least five years of teaching experience in their teaching field by including the practice of criterion sampling. Thus, the study group consisted of 10 teachers, 5 female, and 5 males, each from a different teaching field, who volunteered to participate in the study, and a total of 11 teachers, including me (A.Ö.), all of whom believe that they cannot realize their



ideal teaching. As a delimitation, we would like to note that we did not include teachers from schools at other educational levels such as elementary or high schools, as well as private middle schools and Imam Hatip middle schools, because we had to conduct the study with participants working under similar conditions to the school (public middle school) where I worked according to the research design. All participants were from a different teaching field, except for English, in which I was involved. Table 1 shows the distribution of co-researchers on the dimensions of variation.

**Table 1**

*An Overview of the Distribution of Co-researchers on the Dimensions of Variation*

Teaching Field	Seniority	Gender
English	25	English
Turkish	16	Turkish
Social Studies	28	Social Studies
Mathematics	9	Mathematics
Science	26	Science
Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge	10	Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge
Music	17	Music
Physical Education	23	Physical Education
Information Technologies	20	Information Technologies
Visual Arts	18	Visual Arts
English (A.Ö.)	23	English (A.Ö.)

### **Data Collection**

I collected the data for this study by conducting semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions that allowed co-researchers to provide detailed descriptions. I started the interviews after obtaining permission from the Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University and Konya Provincial Directorate of National Education and completed the interviews in May and June 2023. Based on the research partners' preferences, I conducted nine interviews online via the Zoom platform and one in-person interview at the school where the research partner worked. I took notes during the interviews. In addition, as a participating teacher, I wrote down my thoughts to clarify them. Before the interviews, I sent consent forms and interview questions to the participants so that they could clarify

their thoughts before the interview. I recorded all interviews with the permission of the co-researchers and then transcribed them using the audio file transcription function in the online Word program Microsoft 365.

## Data Analysis

I conducted the data analysis based on the analytical approach of Moustakas (1990) and used MAXQDA 2022 software for qualitative data analysis. I began the analysis with a detailed and repeated reading of the data set, which consisted of transcripts and notes that I had taken during the interviews and sorted them so that each participant's story became visible. This reading crystallized themes that emerged from the significant statements and perceptions of the participants. I finished writing the findings section after creating individual portraits of the co-researchers. After this phase, the second author (Ö.B.) checked my analysis by reading the coded sections, and so, as a validity measure, we conducted peer debriefing. As a further validity measure, we conducted member checking by sending our findings to each of our co-researchers so that they could assess whether our conclusions about their perceptions and understandings were accurate, indicating that they could make changes if necessary. None of our participants requested changes, confirming the accuracy of our analysis.

## Findings

When we examined our research partners' experiences of not being able to realize their ideal teaching, we found that some of the experiences that shaped their perceptions caused teachers to feel frustrated, others reduced their motivation, and the common perception that emerged from all these experiences was the feeling of helplessness.

### I Feel Blocked

Our first experience of this theme is the overcrowded classrooms in which we teach. Overcrowded classrooms interfere with the content of the lesson by preventing us from doing activities that require students to change their seating arrangements or that require open space. In addition, we do not have enough time to give each student an equal opportunity to participate in class.

In other words, I must answer the students' questions about math. If they get stuck at any point, I should help them one-on-one. There shouldn't be a student who doesn't understand something, but I have problems here because the classes are too full. There are teaching methods that I would like to use, but the environment doesn't allow it. [...] The environment is not good. The light is insufficient, and the ventilation is inadequate. (Mathematics/Female)

The high number of students in schools means that more classrooms are needed. Due to the high number of students, all suitable rooms are converted into classrooms, which has a negative impact co-researchers who need special art studios or classrooms for their subjects.

Most of the schools I've worked in didn't have an art studio, and this school doesn't either. I mean, the school administration says there's no space, and they are right; if there was space, they'd make a classroom out of it. The class size has gone up to fifty. Not having a painting studio is a big disadvantage because the child can't find a free environment in the classroom. It's difficult to work at the desk, painting is difficult in terms of cleanliness and order, the child spills, and the classroom gets dirty. If there was a painting studio, there would be a sink. (Visual arts/Male)

The experiences of some co-researchers show that economic conditions are another obstacle to the realization of their ideal teaching. The teachers stated that there are insufficient funds to purchase the materials needed in the school and to replace broken or missing materials on a regular basis and that this situation affects the content of the lessons. In addition, due to the low purchasing power of parents, teachers do not buy the materials they consider necessary and even avoid giving homework.

Financial power is also effective in our classes. Some students don't have a computer at home. For example, I've problems with homework. Some children have a phone at home but no computer. [...] I felt guilty and thought about not giving homework because those who wanted to do homework but couldn't were upset. That's why I don't give homework anymore, but the most important thing in our field is practicing. (Information technologies/Female)

In addition to the fact that physical conditions in schools make it difficult for us to realize our ideal teaching, we see other factors, such as high school entrance exam and exam-oriented educational policies, as obstacles. The expectations of school administrators and parents to teach in such a way that students prepare better for the exams and achieve high scores in the exams make us feel pressured. Although we are not satisfied with this situation, it is obvious that we cannot ignore the expectations of parents and school administrators.

For example, I'd like to teach idioms and proverbs with a charades game, or I'd like to teach synonyms, homonyms, and homophones with a game. I've already done that, but I've gotten reactions from parents saying, "You didn't teach a lesson today. You played a game." Both parents and students think that this isn't the right way to prepare for exams. (Turkish/Male)

The restrictive attitudes and behaviors of school administrators regarding instruction are another obstacle cited by some co-researchers. For example, when the school administration hinders or even prohibits teaching outside the classroom, teachers feel restricted and hindered.

Speed is one of our topics. I took the children to the schoolyard, had them run a certain distance one after the other, and calculated their speed. They were happy when they saw their speed. From then on, we would move on to calculating the speed of cars. I got a warning from the administration. They said, "What are you doing in the yard? Is this a physical education class?" For example, if there's an eclipse, they don't like it when we take the students outside either. (Science/Female)

## I Lose Motivation

While it is not possible to completely remove the obstacles that stand in the way of realizing our ideal teaching, it takes motivation to look for solutions, to not give up, to explain to those involved in the teaching process what we are trying to do, and to be willing to move forward, even if only a little. After analysis of the data, we (A.Ö and Ö.B.) concluded that teachers'

relationships with students, parents, school administrators, and colleagues had an impact on their motivation. Students' unwillingness to learn is the most difficult and demotivating factor for the teachers involved in the study.

The child finds it unnecessary to learn English. He thinks he doesn't need it. He hasn't built his life on it; he doesn't see the necessity. Especially in low-performing classes, I ask myself why I make such an effort. They don't know what it means to study or learn. They don't make the slightest effort. That demotivates me so much. (English/Female)

Another point that has a negative impact on our motivation is the attitude of parents towards the teaching process. We complain that parents do not support us enough in their children's academic processes and do not take our professional opinions into account.

The parents' attitude lowers my motivation. The parents who are supposed to look after their children are causing us problems. Her child hasn't done her homework, she calls me in the middle of the night and says the homework is too much. They don't come to talk about their child's progress, but they are always ready to cause problems. (Mathematics/ Female)

In addition, parents' endless demands and attempts to intervene in lessons can be frustrating for us. For example, we often encountered parents who demanded changes in seating arrangements because their children had problems with every desk mate they sat with, who were irritable and threatening because their children were not being cherished, and who interfered with the materials to be used in class. We (A.Ö. and Ö.B.) have seen that this situation sometimes exhausts teachers' patience and makes our (A.Ö. and co-researchers) lose motivation.

On April 23, a parent lodged a complaint with CİMER [Presidency's Communication Center in Türkiye] about the song I was teaching. It was "Sanki Her Tarafta Var Bir Düğün". You know it's a very well-known children's song thought in schools since our childhood. That parent was unhappy with the words in the song about the expulsion of the sultan after the establishment of the republic. This complaint was made solely because of his own political views. I didn't do anything wrong. Many parents complain about teachers at the school with unfounded accusations. It's demotivating. (Music/Male)

The fact that the school administration does not provide sufficient support also reduces our motivation to make efforts to realize our ideal teaching.

I told the school principal that we had come third in the province. I said, "We've made it to the Turkey final, can we use the hall more?" He said, "No need, you didn't come first." Is it easy to be one of the thirty-two best in Turkey? Your success doesn't matter to him. He only cares about academic success. (Physical Education/Male)

It turns out that the judgmental and critical attitude of the colleagues with whom we work also reduces our motivation.

If you do something different, something special, you fall out of the system in the eyes of your fellow teachers. If you try something new, it's like committing a crime. They immediately say: "What's the point? We'll see you in a few years." (Turkish/Male)

In addition, the perception of not being financially self-sufficient, not being seen as such by others, not receiving enough financial reward for our efforts and not being able to participate



enough in social and cultural activities outside of our work life, which we believe will improve ourselves and become better role models for our students, also has a negative impact on our motivation.

Teachers should be able to go to the theater, to the cinema, or a concert. They should be able to take vacations to stay motivated. They should be able to attend courses to improve themselves, but our salaries are not enough. I haven't been going to these courses for years. We barely cover our compulsory expenses. (Mathematics/Female)

### **I am in Despair**

We (A.Ö. and Ö.B.) have seen that the physical conditions that co-researchers cannot change, the limited economic opportunities, and some chronic problems resulting from the functioning of the school system leave teachers with a very narrow margin of maneuver. We (A.Ö. and co-researchers) do not feel free and are trapped in a monotonous and uncreative work routine. In the words of one research partner, the ongoing “fabricated education” makes it difficult for us to bring creativity to our work, reduces the meaning we attach to our work, and leaves us dissatisfied. The factors that cause our motivation to decline keep us from trying harder and looking for other solutions to realize our ideal teaching. In the picture that emerges from our experiences, the common meaning of not being able to realize our ideal teaching is helplessness. The despair is underlined by the fact that we know that we cannot do anything on our own under all these conditions, feeling powerless, thinking that our hands are tied, and believing that we are not free.

Among the above reasons for the formation of thoughts and beliefs that reinforce the perception of helplessness, the one most emphasized by the co-researchers was the high school entrance examination awaiting their students. Both the existence of this examination and the practice examinations that regularly take place in schools lead to an examination-oriented understanding of education in schools and influence teaching practice in this direction. We, the teachers, are also expected to teach in such a way that our students can achieve high scores in examinations. This situation forces us to teach for the test, even if we do not want to or do not think it is appropriate. The fact that teachers whose students achieve high test scores are considered good teachers leads us to fulfill expectations. In addition to the expectations of school administrators and students' parents, the resulting competitive atmosphere can make us feel angry, unhappy, frustrated, and stressed.

Your hands are tied, and you feel helpless. You don't want to be condemned to having only four choices, but you must. If you don't, you're a bad teacher, a bad teacher who does nothing. That's helplessness, I feel helpless. (Turkish/Male)

I feel that I've not taught as well as I should have. I do tests and exams and the students do well. That's good, but there's still something missing. I feel that it has become a routine and that creates boredom in me, but I can't do anything about it. (Science/Female)

Out of despair that we could not realize our ideal teaching, we developed different attitudes. Some of us were not pessimistic despite the negativity we experienced in our working environment. However, it should not be understood that we were trying with all our might

to realize our ideal teaching and overcome the difficulties we encountered. These co-researchers, including myself, seem to have accepted the obstacles to fulfilling our potential as teachers, but we are happy and content to do as much as we can, even if the number of our students who benefit and improve from our current performance is small. The fact that we have lowered our expectations prevents us from being constantly disappointed.

I've lowered my expectations. There are things the children can't overcome, and there are things we in the system can't overcome. What can I do? I think if I can plant a seed here in a classroom, that's already a win. That's what I focus on so that my motivation doesn't wane too much. (English/Female)

Some of the co-researchers took a defensive stance. This was due to expectations, and the attitude of the school administration, but also because they were trying to avoid potential problems with the parents. A defensive attitude manifests itself in not being able to afford to give homework as the teacher sees fit, abandoning educational activities outside the classroom, ignoring undesirable student behavior by not warning them, assessing, and grading according to the high-grade expectations of the school administration and parents rather than as the teacher sees fit, and abandoning efforts to improve instruction.

We can do great things. We can go to great places, but we have shackles on our feet. These shackles aren't exclusively due to external factors but also a little bit to ourselves. I can take them off if I want to, but if I ignore what's being said, that neighborhood pressure, those comments, I can break them, but I can't. That's my fault. (Turkish/Male)

Some of the co-researchers have expressed that they have lost some of their teaching skills due to the working conditions and exam-oriented school policies they face. In addition to all the factors that they perceive as obstacles and factors that cause their motivation to decrease, teachers say that some of their professional skills have atrophied due to the relatively low expectations of them in the work environment. These co-researchers explain that they are stunted in using different teaching methods and techniques and designing original course content, mainly due to the dominance of the examination-oriented teaching approach in schools.

The activities I mentioned, debates, and drama activities, for example, that I did with my students, have also helped me move forward. But now, what I'm expected of and the path I am on is to be a good test specialist. I feel that my ability to think differently and my ability to create creative teaching environments have been weakened. (Turkish/Male)

While some of the co-researchers said they were deskilled professionally, others said they had acquired new skills. We (A.Ö. and Ö.B.) heard from co-researchers who were uncomfortable that they could not realize their ideal teaching at school, that they developed themselves in various subjects to do international project work, produced content for the digital material platform, and acquired new skills to be useful to their students outside their classroom practice. To achieve this, they learned English, took part in various training courses for project work, and learned how to use various computer programs to make better use of technology, in short, they improved themselves.

Those of us who had acquired new skills reported that although they initially felt they were losing their professional skills, they felt happier and more productive, and their confidence

was boosted by the work mentioned above. They felt happier when they were reaching a wider range of students, not just those in the classes they were teaching, and they felt happier when they were doing work that they believe will be useful to them in a way that they found meaningful.

## Discussion

Our perception of teachers who are not able to realize our ideal teaching is that we feel frustrated, demotivated, and helpless. We found that we felt frustrated and helpless when we could not teach the way we wanted to because of the conditions in the school we worked in. We have found that our motivation wanes when we do not receive the necessary support from our colleagues and administrators in our professional lives, when our parents do not respect our professional abilities and interfere in our work, when they behave in a threatening way and, above all, when our students are not willing to learn. In our interviews, we realized that our work has become a monotonous, colorless routine because we cannot freely plan our teaching process due to the LGS exam, which is a high-stakes exam. However, we know that we cannot change anything by our own efforts, we consider ourselves powerless and feel that we are not free. We have concluded that this is driving us to despair.

We have concluded that the overcrowded classroom is one of the most important obstacles to realizing our ideal teaching. An overcrowded classroom is a common problem that causes difficulties in teaching practice (Deveci & Aykaç, 2018). Teachers cannot get to know their students better (Kara, 2020), and the time they can spend per student is very limited (Sabancı & Gök, 2015). The high number of students in the classroom causes concentration problems and reduces students' motivation to learn (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2020). Cemaloğlu and Şahin (2007) found a significant correlation between the average number of students in classes taught by teachers and their level of emotional burnout. Overcrowded classrooms are more physically demanding, and teachers expend more energy in such classrooms and become emotionally exhausted. The fact that they are less able to deal with their students due to overcrowding desensitizes teachers over time, and they begin to see themselves as failures when they cannot achieve the desired efficiency. Our results are in line with those of the researchers mentioned above. The number of students in classes is a problem over which teachers have no control. We found that this situation, in which they are not involved in the decision-making process but have to deal with the consequences and the resulting problems, creates a feeling of frustration and helplessness among teachers.

We have seen that the high number of students in schools leads to a shortage of classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms lead to a need for classrooms. For this reason, we have heard from co-researchers that all suitable rooms in school buildings are being converted into classrooms and that music, painting studios, and IT classrooms are being closed due to the need. For us, the question of classrooms is an insoluble problem characterized by a sense of despair. The study by Deveci and Aykaç (2018) also shows that the lack of classrooms is one of the most important problems in education. The closure of art studios and IT classes due to the need for classrooms has a negative impact on education (Akbaba & Turhan, 2016).

This research is consistent with other research on the effect of the closure of music, painting and IT classes on teaching. The point that our research wants to emphasize is the effect of this situation on teachers' perceptions.

The lack of materials is one of the obstacles to the realization of our ideal teaching. The problems mentioned by the co-researchers are that the teaching materials that should be available in schools at all times cannot be provided due to the financial hardships of the school and that parents do not buy the necessary materials due to their economic circumstances or lack of interest. Insufficient, old, or unusable teaching materials and technical equipment disrupt teachers' work. This situation causes stress among teachers (Sabancı & Gök, 2015), and our findings are consistent with the results of this study.

We have concluded that the quality of our relationships with parents influences our motivation. Teachers' motivation is also negatively affected by parents' excessive involvement or lack of interest in their children's and teachers' education. Parents' excessive interference is manifested by their meddling in teachers' work, giving them advice, adopting an accusatory attitude towards teachers, and making special requests. Their indifference, on the other hand, is defined by their lack of interest in their children's educational process, their inability to teach their children responsibility, and their disregard for their children's expectations (Ünsal & Görücü, 2023). The results of Akıncı et al., (2015) are not consistent with our findings, as they show that excessive parental interest is not a challenging factor for teachers' work. The statements of the teachers who participated in the study by Sabancı and Gök (2015) revealed that parents were not sufficiently interested in the general needs and learning situations of their children and that healthy relationships could not be established between them and the teachers. In the above-mentioned study, it was found that parents can display biased, hurtful, and oppressive attitudes towards teachers. These results are consistent with the results of our study.

It is the wish of all those involved in education that students are admitted to schools that accept students with good examination results. If a large number of students achieve high scores and gain the right to enroll in these schools, the school, its administrators, and teachers are considered successful. To better prepare the students at the schools where we work, practice tests for the LGS (high school entrance examination) are held at the schools at regular intervals. These exams are like rehearsals for students, teachers, parents, and school administrators, reminding them of the existence of the LGS exam. This constant focus on testing leads teachers to reinforce curriculum subjects with tests during lessons. This is also the expectation of parents and school administrators. It is also evident from the narratives of the co-researchers that students have also become accustomed to this type of teaching and are skeptical and averse to any other practice. I have also heard from the teachers of these teaching fields that the students and their parents consider the lessons that are not included in the examinations as unimportant. One of the most important problems of the Turkish education system is the excessive focus on academic performance and an examination-oriented approach to education. Schools do not give enough importance to activities that promote students in social, sporting, and cultural areas (Kara, 2020). Exam results have almost become the ultimate goal of education. School administrators and parents hold

teachers directly or indirectly responsible for students' exam results. Therefore, teachers focus on exam content and exam-oriented teaching practices instead of spending time on teaching knowledge and skills that they consider necessary and useful for their students, but which fall outside the scope of the exam (Wong, 2006). School administrators pressure teachers to get students to perform well on centralized exams (Abrams, 2004). Although we do not think it is right to emphasize test-based instructional practices, we feel safer that way. Because we do not have enough autonomy in our teaching practice, we feel that our hands are tied.

The negative effects of high-stakes tests on the instructional process are that high-stakes tests limit teachers' instructional creativity, cause them to spend more time preparing for exams, and begin to emphasize breadth rather than depth of instruction (Clarke et al., 2003). The widespread exam-oriented approach in education causes teachers to feel pressured (Acar & Buldur, 2021), and teachers teach by emphasizing exam subjects and exam techniques (Çetin & Ünsal, 2019). Teachers must work within the curriculum set by the central administration and use a limited range of instructional materials set by the administration. This type of accountability deprives teachers of the creativity and flexibility they need to do their jobs better, leading to demotivation (Ingersoll, 2007). High-stakes testing does not encourage teachers to use new teaching methods but rather puts pressure on them, which stifles their creativity and reduces the quality of instruction (Au, 2010). Teachers apply the knowledge, values, and attitudes emphasized in the curriculum, which is particularly important for examinations, without questioning them or developing alternatives (Pratte & Rury, 1988). In such an environment, teachers have become practitioners alienated from their work (Giroux, 2010).

This situation, which is referred to in the literature as deskilling, was first addressed by Apple (1982). Deskilling is a situation in which employees who lose control of their own work processes atrophy over the years and gradually lose some of their skills. Over time, employees whose ability to grasp the entire work process is taken over by management perform simple tasks over and over again. Some of the partners in this study reported that some of their professional skills atrophied as they taught in a repetitive routine. For example, one science teacher said that he was no longer able to set up and run a laboratory from scratch but could only conduct experiments with simple materials.

The other part of our research partners acquired new skills due to the problems they faced in their professional lives, their working conditions, and some of their experiences. For example, one social studies teacher learned to use new computer programs to create content for the Ministry of National Education's Education Information Network (EBA) in order to reach and encourage more students and continuously improve his skills in this area. This so-called reskilling is, resulting in many different classes of skills. This means that employees develop new specializations and learn new skills while performing their tasks (Apple, 1982). Deskilling and reskilling are situations that occur together (Gitlin, 2001). Our research findings confirm this statement.

## Implications

Overcrowded classrooms prevent teachers from devoting equal and sufficient time to their students and make it difficult for them to respond to students' individual learning needs. It has also been observed that overcrowded classrooms affect the teaching methods used by teachers. As there is not enough space in the classrooms, teachers avoid interactive, fun activities and group work and tend to lecture. Reducing the number of students per classroom can, therefore, bring good results.

The statements of some co-researchers indicate that the necessary equipment is not available, especially in the science laboratories and IT rooms, and that worn or broken materials and equipment are not replaced. To ensure better quality educational conditions, more funding should be provided for the material needs of education, and it should be ensured that teaching materials are fully and continuously available in schools.

One of the factors that shape parents' expectations of schools and their relationships with teachers is the high school entrance exam. The existence of this exam has a significant impact not only on the relationship between parents and schools but also on secondary education as a whole. It shapes the content and quality of teaching and puts a certain amount of pressure on teachers and students. We understand that parents' desire for their children to attend a high school that admits students with high test scores puts pressure on teachers of the subjects that are included in the exams, while the subjects that are not included in the exams are relegated to the background and considered unimportant. This is an obstacle to the holistic development of students. Furthermore, the inequality created by the creation of quality gaps between schools and the resulting disadvantage for students with insufficient financial means to access quality education contradicts the principle of equality in education. The current system should be revised, and a solution found where all students can receive a quality education under equal conditions in a fair system where students are not segregated.

What the co-researchers see as problematic and express their dissatisfaction about is the students' lack of motivation to learn. Although the co-researchers are experienced teachers, it was difficult for them to motivate the students sufficiently to achieve their learning goals. This situation also has a negative impact on their motivation and becomes a vicious circle. This vicious circle can be broken by providing teachers with well-planned motivational training to arouse students' curiosity and encourage them to ask questions, research, and learn. Regardless of their service seniority, providing teachers with qualified in-service trainings with scientific content on developing motivation in students will be useful in overcoming this problem.

The expectations of parents and school administrators for student success, the measurement of that success through test scores, and the impact of expectations for success on the instructional process are multidimensional issues. What needs to be clarified, however, is how success is perceived. A phenomenographic study of how many different ways success is understood by teachers, parents, school administrators, and students could be helpful in closing the knowledge gap in this area.

The issue of deskilling and reskilling is worthy of further investigation. In the research data, we found that under the current conditions, teachers lose some of their professional skills while acquiring new ones. Under the conditions of the Turkish education system, it can be investigated which skills of teachers are most atrophied and which skills they gain. The results will provide data for planning more qualified and interesting in-service training.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Funding**

The author(s) declared that this study has received no financial support.

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## Investigation of Activities Related to Specific Days and Weeks in Life Science Course in the Context of Classroom Teachers' Opinions<sup>1</sup>

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### To cite this article

Özkan, G., & Gezer, U. (2024). Investigation of activities related to specific days and weeks in life science course in the context of classroom teachers' opinions. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 23-41. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.3>

### Article Info:

Received: 14.06.2024

Revised: 23.06.2024

Accepted: 20.07.2024

### Abstract

**Purpose:** Life science course is one of the courses in which students acquire essential life skills at the primary school level. Students acquire many skills, such as being aware of what is happening around them, having knowledge about cultural life, social participation, personalizing basic human values, being sensitive to the natural environment, and adopting a healthy lifestyle. Since life studies is a course that focuses on human and social life, activities related to specific days and weeks are significantly associated with the life studies course. This study aimed to examine the practices related to specific days and weeks within the scope of life studies course in line with the opinions of classroom teachers.

**Method:** The research was designed as a case study, one of the qualitative research methods. The participants were 20 classroom teachers selected according to the criterion sampling technique. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the data obtained were analyzed using the content analysis technique.

**Findings:** As a result of the research, it was determined that the activities related to specific days and weeks contribute to the course's importance in raising awareness in students, strengthening national unity and solidarity, and being sensitive to social events. It was determined that teachers did not find the activities related to specific days and weeks in the textbooks sufficient. Teachers stated that activities such as ceremonies and celebrations for specific days and weeks are not effective for students when they are unplanned and out of necessity, but more effective results are obtained when they are processed with active learning activities in the classroom. The teachers expressed problems such as lack of materials and resources and physical impossibilities as problems that prevented more effective handling of specific days and weeks.

**Implications:** Based on the results of the research, suggestions can be made for life science textbooks to reflect specific days and weeks more effectively, to increase the variety of resources and materials related to specific days and weeks, and to carry out activities related to specific days and weeks within good planning.

### Keywords

life science, specific days and weeks, textbook, classroom teachers

<sup>1</sup>This research article is based on first author's master thesis, supervised by the second author.

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## Introduction

The successful adaptation of children to their environment and social life constitutes the main purpose of education systems. Life science is one of the most important courses that enable children to exhibit positive attitudes and behaviors and to acquire knowledge about social life. Life science teaches the information necessary for individuals to solve the problems they may encounter in daily life and to live in a healthy way. In this way, individuals develop self-sufficiency skills and can live their lives independently (Şiringel, 2006).

Life science is a course that aims to contribute to primary school children's social, cultural, and individual development. Life science course aims to raise students as individuals who can communicate effectively in society, empathize, and work in cooperation by providing them with social skills. It raises awareness of moral and ethical behavior by teaching students basic values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility. Develops skills to cope with situations encountered in daily life, such as personal care, health, nutrition, and traffic rules. Raises awareness about environmental sensitivity and sustainability and provides information on issues such as the protection of natural resources and environmental pollution. It provides information about different cultures, traditions, and lifestyles, enabling students to understand and respect cultural diversity. Develops problem-solving skills and encourages independent thinking by providing students with information about decision-making processes. It helps students to learn about themselves, express their feelings, and set personal goals. It provides information on building interpersonal relationships, ranging from family to social relationships. It raises students' awareness of active citizenship through topics such as democracy, human rights, and civic responsibilities. These aspects of the life studies course contribute to the healthy development of children both individually and socially. Thanks to this course, students can become better equipped and ready to live.

Education and training processes aim not only to equip students with academic knowledge but also to provide them with social, cultural, and social nourishment by providing them with social heritage, cultural values, and national consciousness. When considered in this context, activities for specific days and weeks constitute an important part of the education and training process. Students gain awareness in various fields through these special days and contribute to their personal development. Specific days and weeks are celebration activities that create important opportunities for students to acquire knowledge under teachers' guidance and transform the acquired knowledge into continuous behaviors that require different knowledge, skills, and behaviors (Kurtdele Fidan, 2017). In addition to acting in accordance with the purpose of the day to be celebrated, specific days and weeks provide important opportunities for students to reveal and develop their different talents (Göçer, 2004). Celebrating specific days and weeks effectively and within a specific plan contributes significantly to creating a typical school climate by developing common language, feelings, values, and ways of thinking among teachers, students, school administration, and parents (Bozak & Özdemir, 2011). Life studies course is one of the important courses in which specific days and weeks are covered. One of the reasons why specific days and weeks are emphasized more frequently in life sciences lessons is the compatibility of specific days and weeks with the subjects and achievements in the life sciences curriculum. When the units and learning

outcomes in the life studies curriculum, such as life in our school, life in our home, healthy life, safe life, life in our country, and life in nature, are examined, it is seen that they reflect specific days and weeks.

Students better understand social events and phenomena through activities related to specific days and weeks in life studies lessons and make connections with the subjects they learn in the lessons (Gürdal, Şimşek, & Üredi, 1998). Specific days and weeks to be celebrated or commemorated in schools are included in life sciences lessons for purposes such as focusing the student's attention on that subject, making him/her understand its importance, providing him/her with comprehensive information about the subject with experiences appropriate to his/her level, and ensuring that he/she gains a positive attitude (Şiringel, 2006). Some positive individual and social developments can be achieved through the teaching of specific days and weeks with a wide range of topics such as human rights, independence, animal rights, understanding the importance of cultural and historical heritage, health, disaster and first aid. The teaching of specific days and weeks is an important part of developing civic awareness. By celebrating national and religious holidays, days and weeks that have spiritual importance for the society, it is possible to develop social and human characteristics and relationships, and to enable individuals to integrate with each other and the society (Gürdal, Şimşek, & Üredi, 1998). In the 2009 life science curriculum, 20 specific days and weeks were identified, and it was clearly stated which specific days and weeks would be addressed in which class according to grade levels. These 20 specific days and weeks are; Primary Education Week (first week of school), Animal Protection Day (October 4), World Children's Day (first Monday in October), Atatürk Week (November 10-16), Teachers' Day (November 24), October 29 Republic Day, Red Crescent Week (October 29-November 4), Human Rights Week (one week after December 10), Attitude, Investment and Turkish Goods Week (December 12-16), Energy Conservation Week (week starting on the second Monday in January), Green Crescent Week (March 1-7), Forestry Week (March 21-26), Libraries Week (the week starting on the last Monday in March), World Theater Day (March 27), April 23 National Sovereignty and Children's Day, Traffic Week (the week starting on the first Saturday in May), Mother's Day (the second Sunday in May), Museums Week (May 18-24), May 19 Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day, and Environmental Protection Week (the week starting on the second Monday in June) (MEB, 2009). Monday of June) (MEB, 2009). In the 2018 life science curriculum, specific days and weeks are not specified individually, but it is explained that some of the acquisitions in the program should be taught by teachers in time periods corresponding to specific days and dates (MEB, 2018).

As can be seen from the explanations, activities related to specific days and weeks are important in life study lessons. Therefore, clarifying what kind of practices teachers carry out for specific days and weeks in life studies lessons will contribute to realizing more qualified practices in life studies lessons. In this context, the main purpose of this study is to examine the situation of specific days and weeks in life studies lessons based on the opinions of classroom teachers. In line with this purpose, answers to the following research questions were sought:

1. What are the general opinions of classroom teachers about specific days and weeks?
2. How do classroom teachers evaluate including specific days and weeks in life science textbooks?
3. What are the activities and practices of classroom teachers regarding specific days and weeks in life studies lessons?
4. What are the problems that classroom teachers face in the teaching of specific days and weeks?
5. What do classroom teachers suggest in order to teach specific days and weeks more effectively?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study aimed to examine the practices related to specific days and weeks within the scope of the life studies course in line with the views of classroom teachers. For this purpose, the study was conducted according to the basic interpretive qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009). The basic interpretive design focuses on the meaning-making process and is a type of qualitative research in which the researcher tries to understand the experiences, perspectives, and practices of the participants in-depth (Merriam, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize that qualitative research has a wide methodological range in understanding and explaining the social world. Researchers use qualitative research methods to examine social phenomena and human experiences in depth.

### **Study Group**

The research study group consists of 20 classroom teachers working in Yozgat province in the 2023-2024 academic year. Participants were determined according to criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling types. Criterion sampling involves selecting situations that meet some predetermined importance criteria. Although there are many different purposive sampling strategies, it is seen that criterion sampling is widely used in qualitative research as it offers the chance to obtain in-depth data (Patton, 2001). The main criteria for determining the participants were having at least five years of seniority and working in schools in different socioeconomic environments. Each participant was given a code as T1, T2, ..., T20. Participant information is presented in Table 1.



**Table 1**

*Personal information of the participants*

Variables	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Female	10
	Male	10
Seniority	5-10 years	8
	11-15 years	8
	15 years and above	4
Degree of learning	Undergraduate	12
	Postgraduate	8
Total		20

As seen in Table 1, 10 of the participants were female and 10 were male. Eight of the teachers have a professional seniority of 5-10 years, 8 have a professional seniority of 11-15 years, and 4 have a professional seniority of 15 years or more. In terms of education level, 12 of the participants were undergraduate graduates and 8 were postgraduate graduates.

### Data Collection Process

The research data were collected with a semi-structured interview form developed for teachers. In line with the research objectives, a draft interview form consisting of 14 questions was prepared by reviewing the studies in the literature. Then, the interview form was given to two experts to be examined in terms of content and construct validity. Two experts, one of whom completed his/her doctorate in life science education and the other with a high level of qualitative research experience, examined whether the questions were appropriate for the research purposes. As a result of the feedback from the experts, 4 overlapping questions were combined with other questions and the number of questions was reduced to 10. Then, the interview form was given to a Turkish language expert to be examined in terms of language and expression, and after some minor expression corrections in the questions, the interview form was piloted with 2 classroom teachers. After the pilot study, the interview form was finalized and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 classroom teachers.

### Data Analysis

The data obtained during the research process were analyzed using the content analysis technique. Content analysis is used to determine the presence of specific words, themes or concepts in some given qualitative data. Using content analysis, researchers can measure and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such specific words, themes or concepts (Krippendorff, 1980; Morgan, 2022). Prior to the analysis, the data in the form of

audio recordings were transcribed by the researchers. Afterwards, all interview transcripts were transferred to NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software for analysis. Then, all data were coded line by line in the context of the research questions and themes were reached.

### **Credibility and Research Ethics**

In qualitative research, the strategies and some of the ways followed to increase the credibility of the research ensure that the data obtained are scientific, valid, and reliable. Within the scope of the credibility of the research, it is important to collect data with valid and reliable tools. In this context, while developing the semi-structured interview form, the opinions of various experts were obtained, and the pilot application was carried out with two teachers in the last stage.

In qualitative research, obtaining participant confirmation after collecting the research data and reaching the main findings is an important element that increases the credibility of the research in terms of internal validity (Merriam, 2009). In this context, after the interview data were transcribed and macro-analyzed, tables with participant statements and coding were e-mailed to each participant. The participants were asked for feedback on the coding and interpretations presented and were asked to evaluate the accuracy of the interpretations and whether there were any missing or incorrect inferences. Coding and interpretations were revised in light of the feedback received.

Expert review is one of the strategies used by researchers to increase credibility in qualitative research. Since the researchers examine the data from a perspective from within the research, this may lead to misinterpretation of the data obtained from the participants, jeopardizing the research's credibility (Creswell, 2003). In order to prevent this limitation, two experts with high qualitative research experience were given approximately 20% of the data of the 2 participants coded by the researchers. Whether the researchers' coding was similar to the experts was calculated using Miles Huberman's (1994) formula for agreement and disagreement. As a result of the calculation, the agreement index was found to be 92%.

The researchers took care to act in accordance with ethical principles in all research processes. Before starting the research process, ethical approval was obtained from the Yozgat Bozok University Ethics Commission (Date: 30.03.2023, Decision No: 01/07), and then research permission was obtained from the Yozgat Provincial Directorate of National Education (Date: 11.05.2023, Number: E-55005497-20-76096590). An information form reflecting the purpose and process of the research was prepared by the researchers and in this form, it was committed that the participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. After the information about the research process, a consent form was obtained from the participants indicating that they voluntarily participated in the research.

### **Results**

In this section, the research findings are obtained as a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the classroom teachers in the context of the research purpose, and questions are given.



## Classroom Teachers' General Thoughts on Specific Days and Weeks

In the context of the first research question, it was tried to understand classroom teachers' perspectives on specific days and weeks and how they perceive these special days. The codes reflecting teachers' general thoughts about specific days and weeks are given in Figure 1.

When Figure 1 is examined, it is seen that the most emphasized point about specific days and weeks by teachers is sensitization to social events. They stated that many special days emphasized in the calendar year draw attention to social problems. T6's views on the subject are as follows:

When we talk about specific days and weeks, from time to time, we emphasize many problems such as protecting the natural environment, children's rights, animal protection, organ donation, which are our bleeding wounds in society. In this respect, I think it is important for children to do activities for these days in terms of both raising awareness of social problems and finding solutions to these problems.  
(Teacher 6)

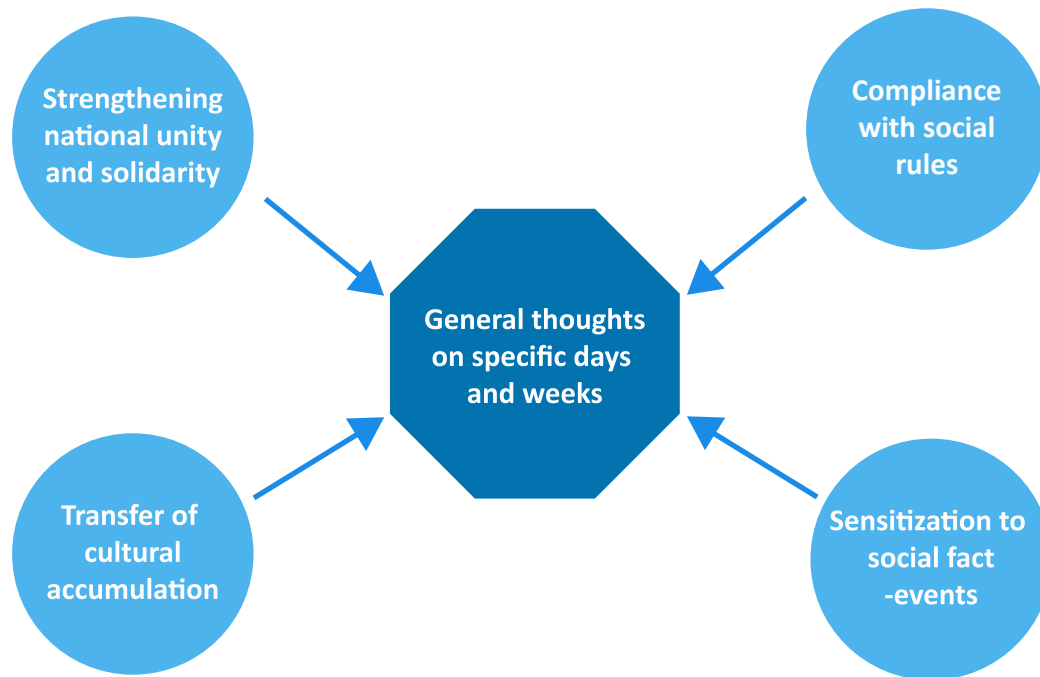
Another point emphasized by the teachers about specific days and weeks was that these special days contribute to national unity and solidarity. "When I think of specific days and weeks, I primarily think of activities that give a certain national consciousness. Whether it is our national holidays or national holidays, on these days we unite as a society and experience our national feelings intensely." T3 expressed that specific days and weeks are activities that provide national unity and solidarity. Similarly, T19 expressed his views as "Specific days and weeks are activities that provide national unity and solidarity not only for students but also for the whole nation and even the world".

As a general idea about specific days and weeks, teachers stated that these days contribute to obeying social rules and gaining some social norms. The opinions of T2, who associates certain days and weeks with social rules, are as follows:

As a general idea, I think that certain days and weeks instill social rules in children. We often discuss in educational environments that children are degenerating in terms of values and that social traditions and norms have lost their importance. Certain days and weeks remind children of these degenerating norms and rules. (Teacher 2)

**Figure 1**

*Teachers' general thoughts on specific days and weeks*



Similarly, the views of T14, who emphasized social rules of behavior and ethical values, are as follows: “Specific days and weeks concern the whole society. Because these times regulate the rules of behavior and ethical values of the society”. Another situation that teachers drew attention to in the context of general thoughts was the transfer of cultural accumulation. One of the participants, T11 stated that “Specific days and weeks are the transfer of the cultural elements that a nation and even the world humanity has created with the accumulation of years to future generations, and various activities are organized in schools in order for children to care about this cultural accumulation”.

#### Classroom Teachers' Opinions on the Inclusion of Specific Days and Weeks in Life Science Textbooks

The codes obtained from teachers' views on how specific days and weeks are covered in life science textbooks are presented in Figure 2.

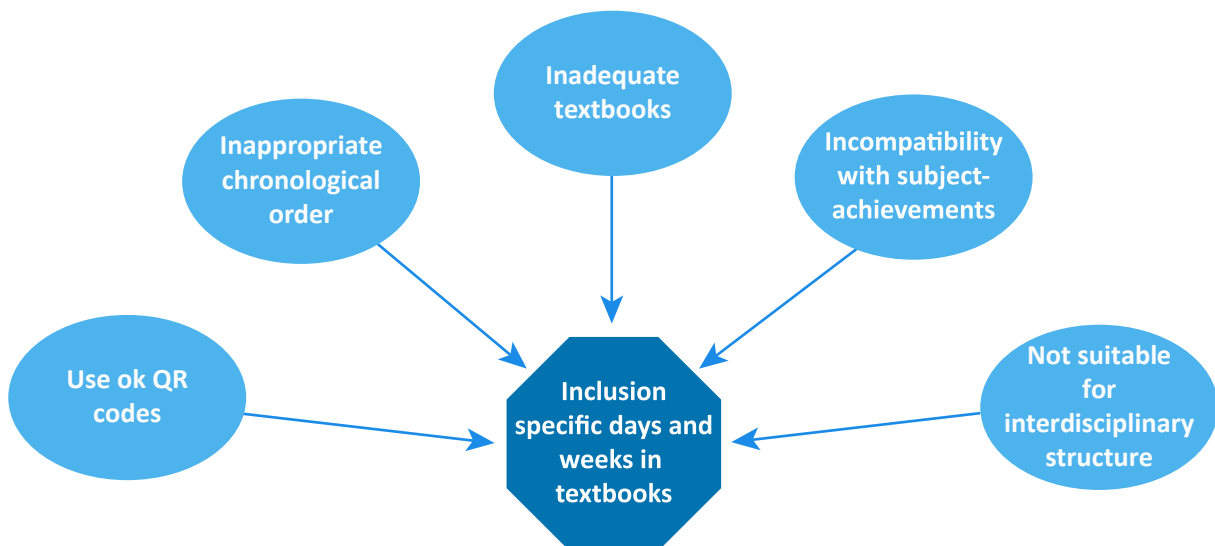
When the opinions of classroom teachers on the inclusion of specific days and weeks in life studies textbooks are analyzed, it is seen that five main emphases are made. The most frequently emphasized situation is that the life studies textbook is insufficient in terms of including specific days and weeks. The views of T18 on the subject are as follows: “We do not find any information about specific days and weeks in our textbook. When we look at

the annual plan of the course, there is a lot of information about the subject, but I do not understand why it is not reflected in the textbook at all.” T1, who shared a similar opinion, said “Textbooks are not enough. The specific days and weeks are indirect and very superficial. This shows that not enough importance is given in the books.” S12 also drew attention to the same issue and explained the inadequacy of the textbooks as follows:

I think the content in the book is not sufficient. If we say that our aim is to teach life science lesson, our aim should be to make students gain these. Because there are a lot of days with universal and national values in specific days and weeks. We should protect these values and emphasize them in the life sciences lesson. Unfortunately, the books do not reflect this importance. (Teacher 12)

**Figure 2**

*Teachers’ opinions on the inclusion of specific days and weeks in life science textbooks*



T4, who gave examples of some important specific days and weeks missing in the textbooks, expressed the inadequacy of the textbooks with the following words:

In the “Life at School” theme, which covers the month of September, activities related to the primary education week could have been placed here. Again, in the second theme, while the national struggle and Kemalism are expected, there is no activity in the “Life at Home” theme that touches on days such as Republic Day, Atatürk Week, Forest Week. The 3rd theme, “Healthy Life”, does not mention the days that need to raise awareness as of December. In this theme, the topic of being a conscious consumer was covered, but there was no activity related to the Domestic Goods Week. December 3rd Disability Week was not included as if it did not exist. Green Crescent Week was also ignored. While the theme of “Safe Life” was covered in January-February, February 9, Safe Internet Day was also ignored. As you can see, the teacher neglected certain days and weeks in the life science book. However, if free texts about the days that should be commemorated and celebrated in that month were placed at the end of each theme, if the existing theme texts were selected to cover these days and if awareness was created in students with 1-2 activities, the books would be much more nutritious. (Teacher 4)

Another point frequently emphasized by the teachers who expressed their opinions about the textbooks was the use of QR codes in the textbooks. T10, who stated that the QR codes in the life science textbook did not work, explained his views as follows:

There is a QR code in the book about specific days and weeks, and when you scan this code, you cannot access the relevant page. Actually, that QR code is supposed to direct us to EBA. I think this was not successful or there is a technical glitch but it could not be fixed. When we want to use it with students, we cannot use it for this reason. (Teacher 10)

The views of another participant T13, who stated that the QR code does not work in the books, are similar to T10:

A QR code is given for specific days and weeks. If this QR code escapes the eyes of fellow teachers, there are no activities that they can mention specific days and weeks. One day we tried to try it with the children in the classroom and nothing came out. Then, when I inquired from friends, it turned out that there were only QR codes and they didn't work either. (Teacher 13)

In line with the opinions of the participants, another striking situation about the textbooks is the lack of chronological order of the specific days and weeks and their incompatibility with the learning outcomes. The views of T14 on the subject are as follows: "The contents related to specific days and weeks do not follow a certain order in the books. There is no systematicity. The date of the day on which we explain the importance of the day is different from the date on which the subject is covered." Regarding the subject, T8 expressed his opinion as follows: "The subjects and achievements and the specific days and weeks are not parallel in terms of order. For example, while Primary Education Week and Atatürk Week are parallel, other weeks and important days may be irrelevant to the objectives of the textbook." Similarly, T4 drew attention to this incompatibility and supported his opinion with the following examples from the textbook:

The subject of "Republic and Kemalism", which should have been covered in October, was included in the March-April theme "Life in our country". Moreover, in March, the topic of July 15 was included instead of March 18, Çanakkale Martyrs' Remembrance Day, and March 18, one of the most important days of Turkish history, was ignored where it should be. (Teacher 4)

Another point emphasized by the teachers about the textbooks is that the textbooks do not provide an interdisciplinary structure related to specific days and weeks. The opinion of T5 on the subject is as follows: "It is difficult to find anything proper in the book. There is no interdisciplinary association anyway. It is a big deficiency." T2, who had a similar opinion, expressed his opinion as follows: "I also did not come across any interdisciplinary association that attracted my attention. Normally, textbooks give importance to interdisciplinary approach, but I can say that I came to the conclusion as if the textbook did not explain the specific days and weeks at all and did not establish a connection with the structure of life science."

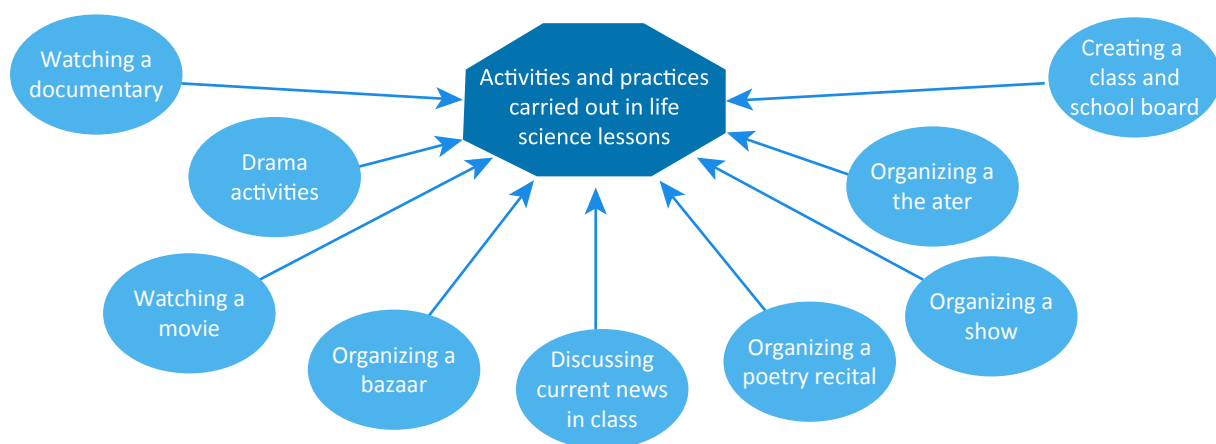
### **Classroom Teachers' Opinions on Activities and Practices in Life Science Lessons**

Another issue examined within the scope of the research is to find out what kind of activities and practices classroom teachers carry out related to specific days and weeks in life studies

lessons. As can be seen in Figure 3, it was observed that teachers carried out practices related to specific days and weeks such as organizing theater, organizing bazaars, performing drama activities, organizing poetry recitals, creating classroom and school boards, organizing field trips, watching movies, and bringing current news to the classroom.

**Figure 3**

*Teachers' views on the activities and practices they carry out in life science lessons*



One of the practices frequently carried out by teachers related to specific days and weeks is to create school and classroom boards. Regarding the subject, T12 explained their activities as follows:

We decorate our class board together with our students. The children collect an article or visuals indicating the meaning and importance of the day. Sometimes we prepare them together and create our board with them. I think it is effective in grasping the meaning and importance of the day because children encounter that board for a while. (Teacher 12)

Another issue mentioned by teachers was the performances organized on national holidays. Many teachers stated that they contributed to the shows organized in the school garden on national holidays with their students. T13 expressed her opinion on the subject as follows: “We organize celebrations and dance performances on national holidays. We also have activities in the school garden or in our classroom on various commemoration days.” Similarly, T15 expressed his views as follows: “There are activities such as our national holidays that should be celebrated by the school. We organize activities in the garden with a large group of people all together. We celebrate with various poems, dances and shows in our school garden.”

Another practice of the participants was to show videos such as movies, documentaries and animations related to specific days and weeks. Teachers stated that they used these kinds of videos in the classroom to emphasize the meaning and importance of the day. T7’s opinion on the subject was as follows: “I use movies and short videos very often in the classroom. Because it attracts children’s attention. For example, there was a short movie about the

acceptance of the National Anthem in third grade. Again, we recently watched a very nice animated movie about Koca Seyit, the hero of Çanakkale.” Another practice carried out by teachers is organizing theater. The opinion of T2 on the subject is as follows: “I organize theater activities for my students, including some special weeks and days. First, we have a study and preparation process. Then we exhibit our play with the participation of our parents.” Some participants stated that they organized drama activities and poetry recitals related to specific days and weeks. Regarding these activities, T12’s opinion was as follows: “We have the opportunity to act out a sample event related to the day we are dealing with in the classroom, to bring live objects or models to the classroom to attract more attention of the students.”

T20, one of the participants, stated that bazaar activities arouse interest especially on some days such as the local goods week. T20’s opinion on the subject is as follows:

Among the activities I do, my students like bazaars the most. For this reason, when I start the bazaar work in every activity, I choose enthusiastic parents and students from other classes. There is a distribution of tasks among us, who will prepare what. Then we combine them all and exhibit them in our bazaar. When we did it for the local product, we received very good feedback from both parents, students and other teachers. (Teacher 20)

Another practice carried out by teachers is to bring news about specific days and weeks to the classroom. Regarding the subject, T17 stated the following opinion:

I follow the agenda and news closely. If there is a current news about the days we celebrate on certain days and weeks, if something catches my eye, I talk about it in the classroom that week. We discuss it together with the children. When you ask for an example, for example, there was a news article about Istanbul’s water problem, and then an expert said that Turkey is becoming a desert and will be a country with a serious water problem in 20 years. Since it was World Water Day, I shared this news with the children in the classroom and we talked about whether they use water sparingly. (Teacher 17)

### Classroom Teachers’ Opinions on the Problems They Encountered While Teaching Specific Days and Weeks

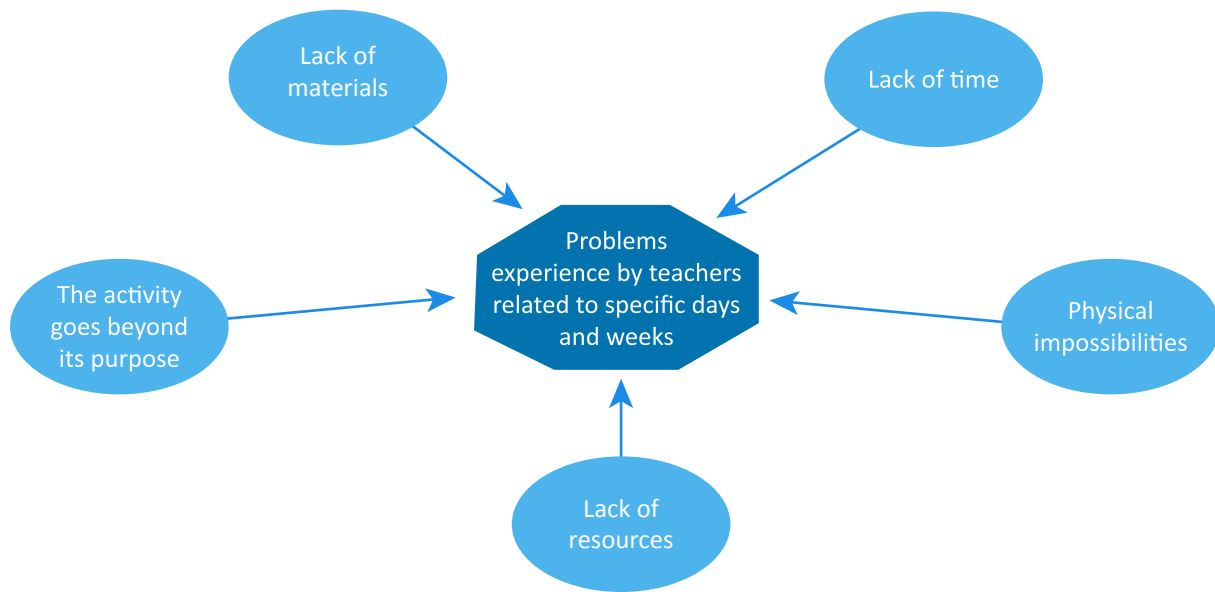
As can be seen in Figure 4, the participants drew attention to some problems while carrying out activities related to specific days and weeks in life science lessons.

One of the main problems faced by teachers is lack of time. The thoughts of T17, who had difficulty in allocating time for activities related to specific days and weeks, are as follows:

The biggest problem I have is the lack of time. Ceremonies or celebrated programs usually have to be held between classes. This forces children to celebrate that day compulsorily. When it is forced, students do not have enough enthusiasm and enthusiasm. (Teacher 17)

**Figure 4**

*Teachers' opinions on the problems they face regarding specific days and weeks*



Another participant T5, who stated that he had time anxiety, expressed his opinion as follows: “The programs are kept short due to the concern that the lesson will end or the subjects will not be completed. When you do it for the sake of doing it, it does not make much sense.” Another problem mentioned by the teachers is physical impossibilities. T8’s opinion on the subject is as follows: “Since there is no smart board in my classroom, I cannot implement many of my activities in the classroom. For this reason, the teaching of specific days and weeks remains abstract for the students. This makes my job difficult. For example, I would like to show a movie on the subject.” The opinions of T6, who emphasized the physical inadequacies in the school, are as follows:

Generally, there is not much of a problem with in-class activities. This is because the class teacher can talk about the day according to its importance and do activities. There are more problems in school-wide activities. In school-wide activities, seasonal conditions can negatively affect the activities to be held as a result of the lack of a hall where the activities will be organized and the activity is held in the school garden. (Teacher 6)

Some participants stated that negative situations were experienced because the activities related to specific days and weeks went beyond their purpose. The views of T9 on the subject are as follows:

I can say that some specific days and weeks are unnecessary. For example, celebrating Mother’s Day is an unnecessary celebration because a mother cannot have a day. While celebrating this day, orphaned children without mothers are forgotten in the classroom. A second example is the domestic goods week. Domestic goods week has also turned into an event that is celebrated outside of its purpose, it is wrong to celebrate the cake bought from the bakery and kiwi, banana, etc. bought from the greengrocer as domestic goods week. Of course, there are days and weeks that will be useful if the concepts that serve their real purpose are emphasized. (Teacher 9)

Another situation stated by the participants as a problem is the insufficiency of resources and materials. T5 stated that he had a shortage of resources and materials as follows: “When we look at the book, it is completely empty. The lack of source materials such as a text, picture, activity that will contribute to the lesson causes problems.” Similarly, T2’s views are as follows: “Okay, maybe not for all of them, but at least there should be content in the textbooks for certain days and weeks that we consider indispensable. National Education can provide various materials and resources for teachers in this regard.”

### Classroom Teachers’ Suggestions for More Effective Processing of Specific Days and Weeks

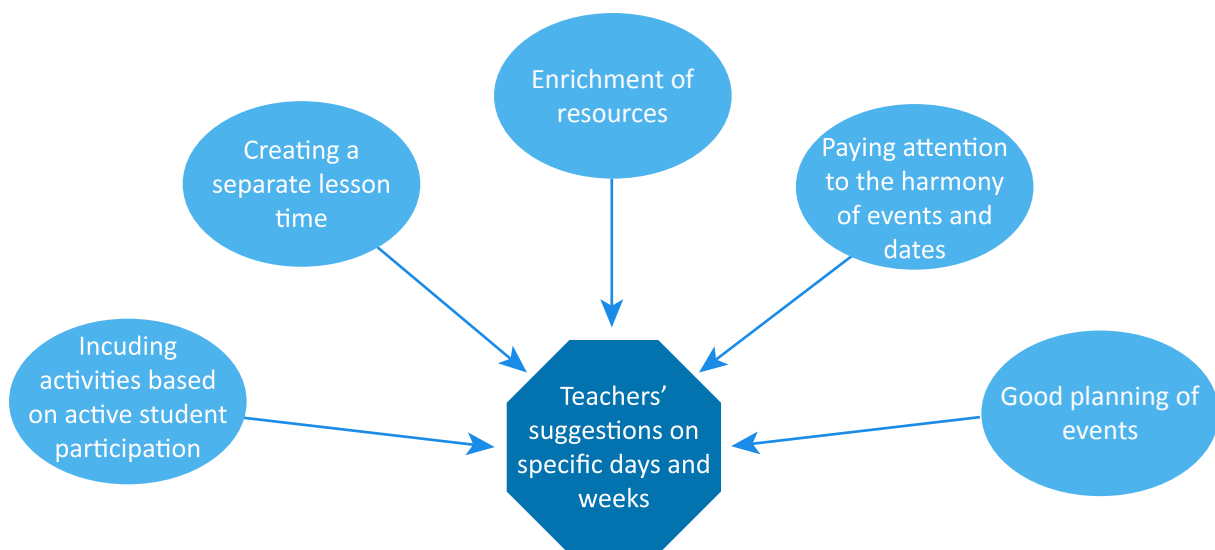
The suggestions offered by classroom teachers for more effective teaching of specific days and weeks in life studies lessons are presented in Figure 5.

As can be seen in Figure 5, teachers suggested enriching the resources, creating a separate lesson time for specific days and weeks, planning the activities organized within the scope of specific days and weeks well, ensuring that the dates of the activities and specific days and weeks are compatible, and conducting activities based on active participation. One of the suggestions emphasized by the teachers is to increase the resources that can be used on specific days and weeks. The opinion of T5 on the subject is as follows:

As I said before, resources are insufficient. Our ministry can prepare activities, visual studies, videos and animations, interviews about specific days and weeks. I think it would be better in terms of accessibility, saving time and unity across the country. In this way, very high quality content will be produced. (Teacher 5)

**Figure 5**

*Teachers’ suggestions for specific days and weeks in life science lessons*





Another suggestion expressed by the teachers was to create a separate class hour for activities related to specific days and weeks. T4 stated “A separate lesson time can be allocated in the curriculum for the celebration of specific days and weeks. This can increase the importance of these days.” Similarly, T5’s opinion is as follows: “In addition, in order to facilitate the celebrations and to avoid congestion in terms of time, one lesson hour per week should be changed as a specific days and weeks hour.”

Participants drew attention to the importance of a good planning beforehand in order for the activities for specific days and weeks to be more efficient. T3 expressed an opinion on the subject:

First of all, the school administration and teachers should plan very well in the first week when the schools open or during the seminars. Which event on which date is already known in advance. When you leave it to the last minute and try to do something in a hurry, it is both challenging for the teacher and not productive for the students. The activities should be planned in advance, on time and with an emphasis on spreading them throughout the school. (Teacher 3)

The harmonization of the dates of activities and specific days and weeks is another issue suggested by the participants. T6, who stated that this harmony should be ensured, said, “Specific days and weeks should be celebrated on their own date and time. It should be included in the books in this way. But you see that they are always different subjects on different dates.” Similarly, T17 said, “It is necessary to arrange the dates well. Because these days are meaningful when they are celebrated on their own day and date. For this reason, these dates should also be taken into consideration when organizing the topics in the textbook.”

Another suggestion of the participants on the subject was to organize in-class activities based on active student participation related to specific days and weeks. The opinion of one of the participants T11 on the subject is as follows:

The activities that students do by coming from within, by making their own efforts are also very important. I have seen this all these years, when we talk about specific days and weeks, we should not immediately think of ceremonies and forced celebrations in the school yard. We teachers have a big job here. We can do activities in the classroom for students to better understand the importance of these days. There can be games, drama activities, discussions about the meaning and importance of that day in the classroom. Otherwise, it becomes a compulsion when the child does not do anything on his/her own. (Teacher 11)

## Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

As a result of the research, it was determined that teachers found specific days and weeks important in terms of strengthening national unity and solidarity, ensuring the transfer of cultural accumulation, students’ adaptation to social rules, and gaining sensitivity to social events. In the study, it was concluded that teachers found life science textbooks inadequate in terms of reflecting specific days and weeks. Teachers stated that the QR codes placed in the textbooks for specific days and weeks did not work. The fact that these QR codes do not work in textbooks, which are seen as the most basic source, is a matter of discussion. In addition, not giving enough space to specific days and weeks in textbooks may prevent

students from learning about their culture, history, and important days. Students may not fully grasp their social responsibilities and values in this case. It also creates a situation that may cause students to be less aware of national and universal events. Students may have difficulty remembering important days or may not fully grasp the meaning of these days. Batmaz (2022) also states in his study that life science textbooks are deficient in terms of reflecting specific days and weeks and that specific days and weeks should be given more space in textbooks. The fact that specific days and weeks are not sufficiently included in the life studies textbook may complicate teachers' lesson planning process. Teachers may need additional materials to emphasize specific days and weeks. Keskin and Kuru (2018) emphasized a similar situation in their study and drew attention to the fact that textbooks are deficient in specific days and weeks. Çevik (2013) draws attention to the importance of specific days and weeks in understanding the importance of local and universal social events. Karaman (2010) stated in his research that specific days and weeks increase loyalty to national values, respect for our past, love, and respect for our homeland, and give the new generation a sense of responsibility through emotional bonding. Göçer (2004), on the other hand, concluded that activities related to specific days and weeks help students gain habits such as taking responsibility, working, and setting goals. Similarly, Şişman and Küçük (2011) stated that activities related to specific days and weeks, especially ceremonies held for national holidays, have an important share in strengthening the concepts of national consciousness and national unity in students.

As a result of the research, it was seen that classroom teachers attach importance to specific days and weeks. Similar to the research result, Kurtdede Fidan (2017) states in his research that celebrating certain days and weeks enables students to acquire values such as national spirit and identity, patriotism, and brotherhood. For this reason, he states that the value of celebrations for specific days and weeks should be recognized. In Öztürk's (2014) study, teachers stated that activities related to specific days and weeks are organized in schools and that the activities help students socialize and develop a sense of responsibility and taking responsibility in students. In Şiringel's (2006) study, teachers stated that students adopt the concepts of homeland and nation through specific days and weeks and that these concepts develop through activities. Elgenius (2011) emphasizes that individuals' participation in ceremonies such as the liberation and independence days of countries enables them to gain a sense of social unity and partnership. Lubbers and Meuleman (2016) state that national celebrations and commemorations have an impact on strengthening national bonds.

As a result of the research, it was determined that classroom teachers carried out activities such as organizing theater, performing drama activities, organizing poetry recitals, and watching movies in life studies lessons within the scope of specific days and weeks. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Göçer (2004). In his study, Göçer (2004) stated that teachers used activities such as writing, poetry, eloquence, plays, monologues, and drama related to specific days and weeks. Kurtdede and Fidan (2017) concluded in their study that classroom teachers mostly used poetry-reading activities related to specific days and weeks. In addition to this, Kurtdede and Fidan (2017) concluded that they benefit from activities such as using drama techniques in celebrations, writing compositions/stories, painting studies/exhibitions, making presentations, organizing competitions, making use of

trips, preparing posters, songs, preparing panels, making visits and planting trees (Kurtdele Fidan, 2017).

As a result of the research, it was seen that there were problems such as the lack of sufficient materials in the classrooms, physical impossibilities in schools, and the celebrations going beyond their purpose. Gültekin (2007) reached similar results in his research. It was stated that students could not comprehend the importance of these days sufficiently due to trivial reasons such as time, place, and course content by not paying enough attention to certain days and weeks that increase sensitivity through national feelings and some social events. Teachers offered suggestions such as conducting activities based on active student participation, allocating a separate class hour, increasing the variety of resources, and realizing the activities in accordance with the date of the specific day and week in order to effectively realize the activities for specific days and weeks in life studies lessons.

Based on the research findings, the following suggestions can be made:

- Life science textbooks should be prepared to include activities and content related to specific days and weeks.
- Teachers should be provided with various materials and resources for more effective teaching of specific days and weeks in classrooms.
- Schools' physical facilities should be improved for activities related to specific days and weeks.
- Course outcomes should be associated with specific days and weeks and date mismatches should be eliminated.
- School administrations and teachers should carry out large-scale activities for specific days and weeks in a well-planned manner.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) declared that this study has received no financial support.

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## Reinterpreting the Member Checking Validation Strategy in Qualitative Research Through the Hermeneutics Lens

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### To cite this article

Soysal, Y., & Türkmen, S. (2024). Reinterpreting the member checking validation strategy in qualitative research through the hermeneutics lens. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 42-63. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.4>

### Article Info:

Received: 04.05.2024

Revised: 19.07.2024

Accepted: 31.07.2024

### Abstract

This review proposes that exploring hermeneutics could reveal significant potential for reassessing the essence and structure of qualitative research, particularly in refining validation methods like member-checking. This inquiry suggests that embracing a hermeneutic perspective might provide fresh insights into how we understand and validate qualitative data, potentially enhancing our comprehension and improving the robustness of research practices in this field. The review is divided into multiple sections and subsections to build the argument that the hermeneutic viewpoint offers greater explanatory and exploratory potential for guiding specific validation strategies, such as member-checking, in qualitative research. This review's main argument begins with an overview detailing which aspects and how-aspects of qualitative research and its validation strategies. Subsequently, this review delves into the member-checking strategy as a central validation approach in high-quality qualitative research. The review then introduces hermeneutics within the qualitative research paradigm. Moreover, the present review explores how hermeneutics can serve as a tool for thinking in research endeavors. Finally, the current review integrates the focus on member-checking with the perspective of hermeneutics to achieve a broader and more holistic understanding. Concluding remarks and research-based implications are offered for the use of future qualitative researchers.

### Keywords

qualitative research, hermeneutics, member-checking

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## Introduction

### *Justification for the review*

The present review posits an intriguing hypothesis: delving into the realm of hermeneutics could unveil significant potential in reevaluating the essence and framework of qualitative research (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Reiter, 2006; Thirsk & Clark, 2017), focusing on refining validation methodologies like *member-checking*. Member checking, also known as participant validation, is a strategy in qualitative research where researchers return to participants to verify the accuracy of the data, findings, and interpretations derived from their interviews or observations. This process ensures that the participants' perspectives are accurately represented and can help identify misinterpretations or biases. It enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by involving participants in validating the research outcomes. This exploration suggests that adopting a hermeneutic perspective may offer fresh insights into how we perceive and validate qualitative data, potentially enriching our understanding and enhancing the rigor of research practices in this domain (Gillo, 2021; Peck & Mummery, 2018; Rennie, 2012). The hypothesized linkage between the hermeneutics perspective and qualitative research and its core validation strategies can be justified in many ways (Crowther et al., 2017; Ramsook, 2018). First, the relevance of linkage may be rooted in the premise that every form of communication, whether written, spoken, or even visual, involves some level of interpretation. Hermeneutics is not just an academic or philosophical but a practical tool used in interpreting everyday communications—from reading news articles and interpreting legal documents to understanding personal emails and social media posts or participants' verbal externalizations given during a one-to-one interview within a naturalistic inquiry (Roberge, 2011).

Secondly, hermeneutics is essentially about delving deeper into texts (e.g., the utterances of a participant in qualitative research) to extract meanings that are not immediately apparent. It advocates for a thoughtful engagement with texts (e.g., written reflections of a participant within a case study), suggesting that understanding comes from a superficial reading and a careful interpretation that considers multiple dimensions, such as the author's intent, the cultural context, and the intended audience. This is also primarily valid for qualitative research (Kutsyuruba & McWatters, 2023; McCaffrey et al., 2012; Nigar, 2020). To justify, from a qualitative research perspective, the above-located statement underscores the importance of approaching texts with a nuanced and thorough examination. It implies a methodology that involves delving beyond the surface of the text to unearth more profound layers of meaning. This approach suggests that comprehension arises not solely from skimming the text but from an intricate analysis that considers various facets, including the author's purpose, the socio-cultural backdrop in which the text was produced, and the target audience. In qualitative research, this perspective aligns with methodologies like thematic analysis or grounded theory, which emphasize exploring multiple dimensions to derive rich insights from the data (Kakkori, 2009).

In addition, hermeneutics underscores equipping individuals with the skills to navigate the complex world of information by fostering a critical approach to reading and understanding

texts. This is crucial in an era characterized by information overload, where the ability to discern and interpret accurately is increasingly essential. From the perspective of validation strategies in qualitative studies, this highlights the relevance of hermeneutics in enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings (Anderson, 2014). Hermeneutic approaches emphasize developing skills necessary for robust interpretation and analysis of textual data. Researchers can ensure the accuracy and reliability of their interpretations by employing techniques such as member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement. In information overload within a qualitative research program, distinguishing between credible and unreliable sources is paramount; hermeneutic validation strategies enable researchers to cultivate a critical mindset among participants and readers alike (Shaw & DeForge, 2014). This fosters a rigorous approach to textual analysis, essential for generating meaningful insights and contributing to advancing knowledge in qualitative research characterized by abundant information (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

#### *Structure of the review*

The present review includes several sections and sub-sections to develop the argument that the hermeneutics perspective holds greater explanatory and exploratory potential for informing specific validation strategies such as member-checking conducted in qualitative research. The review, therefore, starts with an outline incorporating what aspects and how-aspects of qualitative research and its validation strategies. The review's focus, which is the member-checking strategy as a core validation strategy in high-quality qualitative research, is then presented. From the perspective of the current review, hermeneutics is outlined in the qualitative research paradigm. In the following episodes, the review addresses how hermeneutics can be considered and used as a thinking tool for research purposes. Finally, the focus (the member-checking strategy) and the study's perspective (the hermeneutics) are combined to reach a broader and holistic understanding.

### **Researchers' Understanding and Position Regarding Qualitative Research Perspectives**

Before presenting a comprehensive insight into qualitative research, at least three overarching and guiding perspectives are introduced to take a rational position in combining the propositions of hermeneutics perspective and member-checking strategy. We believe that "realist," "constructivist," and "social constructivist" qualitative research perspectives inform qualitative researchers who may have different research purposes for uncovering reality within a naturalistic inquiry (Madill et al., 2000). Realist qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that an objective reality exists independently of human perceptions and beliefs (Maxwell, 2012). This perspective holds that phenomena can be observed, measured, and understood as they indeed are. The realist approach accepts some epistemological underpinnings: knowledge reflects the objective reality, and researchers can uncover this reality through careful observation and systematic inquiry. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the accuracy and validity of findings, striving for objectivity (Danermark et al., 2002). From the realist perspective, once objectivity is centralized, the values and biases of the researcher are seen as potential threats to objectivity and should be controlled or minimized.



Ethical considerations focus on maintaining neutrality and avoiding influencing the data or participants. Realist research often employs logical positivist methods, including systematic data collection and analysis techniques. From this perspective, findings are expected to be replicable and generalizable in similar contexts or populations. Realist qualitative researchers often use structured interviews, standardized observation protocols, and other data-gathering strategies that aim to limit researcher influence. Therefore, data analysis identifies patterns and relationships that reflect the underlying reality. Examples of realist methodologies include content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

On the other hand, the constructivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed and multiple realities exist (Fox, 2008). In this perspective, it is well-accepted that individual experiences and perspectives shape how reality is perceived and understood (Costantino, 2008; Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, the epistemology of the constructivist perspective incorporates specific assumptions, such as knowledge being seen as subjective and co-constructed between the researcher and participants or understanding is achieved through exploring the meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to their experiences. The axiology of the constructivist perspective contends that the values and perspectives of both the researcher and participants are acknowledged as integral to the research process, and reflexivity is emphasized, with researchers continuously reflecting on how their background and biases influence the study (Merriam, 1998). Constructivist research employs flexible and iterative methods that allow for the exploration of participants' lived experiences. The focus is on depth of understanding rather than generalizability. Qualitative researchers adapting to a constructivist perspective often use open-ended interviews, participant observation, and other methods that facilitate deep engagement with participants (Moustakas, 1994). Data analysis involves thematic coding and narrative analysis to uncover the meanings and interpretations of participants. Constructivist methodologies include phenomenology and narrative inquiry.

Moreover, social-constructivist qualitative research holds that reality is constructed through social interactions and shared understandings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Socio-cultural theorists (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991) contend that this qualitative research perspective emphasizes the role of culture, language, and context in shaping how individuals perceive and construct reality. In epistemic terms, within the socio-constructivist perspective, knowledge is believed to be a product of social processes and interactions. Hence, understanding is achieved by exploring how social contexts and relationships influence individual and collective meaning-making (Burr, 2003). Axiologically, a socio-constructivist researcher accepted that values, beliefs, and power dynamics within the social context are integral to the research process (Andrews, 2012). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to be aware of and critically examine the socio-cultural influences on their research. In the logic of this perspective, qualitative researchers employ methods that highlight the co-construction of meaning within social interactions and focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of knowledge construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Researchers adopting this perspective generally employ strategies to gather, analyze, and interpret data, such as focus groups, discourse analysis, and ethnography, that capture knowledge construction's interactive and contextual nature. Therefore, analysis of qualitative data

involves examining how social interactions and language shape understanding and meaning. Consequently, social-constructivist methodologies include discourse analysis and ethnographic studies.

In the current study context, a hermeneutics perspective is taken and centralized. This choice is underpinned by the fundamental tenets of hermeneutics, which argue that the generation of knowledge claims inherently requires the interpretation of subjective individual minds. These interpretations are deeply influenced and shaped by the diverse and bounded contextual, social, cultural, and institutional settings in which individuals are embedded. Therefore, the hermeneutic approach aligns closely with the core principles of constructivist and social-constructivist perspectives, making them the most suitable frameworks for the present study. We acknowledge that interpreting subjective experiences is central to understanding the phenomena under investigation by positioning the current study within a hermeneutic framework. This interpretive process is inherently tied to the contexts within which individuals operate, aligning with constructivism and social constructivism principles. These perspectives emphasize the role of individual and collective meaning-making processes, making them appropriate for a study focused on understanding participants' nuanced, contextually bound interpretations.

### **The Nature of Qualitative Research and Its Validation Strategies**

Qualitative research is a vital methodology in the social sciences, designed to provide a deep understanding of human behavior and the factors that govern such behavior (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and the social contexts within which these occur (Creswell, 2007; 2013). The qualitative research perspective is inherently exploratory, often aimed at gaining insights into underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations (Miles et al., 2013). It helps to uncover trends in thought and opinions and dive deeper into the problem to develop hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Merriam, 2014). Below, we delve into the nature and methodology of qualitative research, detailing its core features, techniques, and procedural nuances.

Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive and descriptive and focuses on individuals' experiences and interpretations of the world (Tracey, 2013). It acknowledges the researcher's influence on the research rather than striving for objectivity and seeks to understand phenomena in depth rather than quantifying how many people share a particular view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative researcher recognizes the importance of context in understanding social phenomena. It examines how cultural, societal, and personal interactions shape individual experiences (Maxwell, 2013). Research designs can evolve while conducting a qualitative inquiry as new insights emerge during data collection and analysis. Qualitative research primarily focuses on understanding complex human behaviors, societal trends, and the nuances of subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to quantify data and generalize results

across populations using statistical tools, qualitative research delves into rich, detailed descriptions of people's lives and actions to extract meanings (Silverman, 2011). Because of its interpretative nature, maintaining the integrity and credibility of qualitative research relies on robust validation strategies (Creswell, 2005; Guba, 1981). Here, we will elaborate on the importance of these strategies, emphasizing their role in enhancing the trustworthiness and quality of the research findings.

One of the primary concerns in qualitative research is the credibility of the findings (Hadi & José-Closs, 2016; Stenfors et al., 2020). To do this, triangulation (e.g., utilizing multiple theories, sources, methods, or investigators to cross-verify data), member checking (e.g., involving participants in the process of verifying the data and interpretative results) and reflexivity (e.g., encouraging researchers to constantly reflect on their assumptions, cultural biases, and expectations that they bring into the research process) techniques can be used (Pyett, 2003). Triangulation reduces bias and allows researchers to approach the data from various angles, ensuring that the interpretations do not result from a single method or source (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009). Member checking allows participants to confirm the accuracy of the accounts and interpretations, providing a check against researcher bias. Reflexivity helps to mitigate potential biases and enhance the depth of the analysis (Sousa, 2014).

Secondly, transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings with similar characteristics. Qualitative researchers should provide thick descriptions (e.g., a detailed account of the research context and the assumptions underlying the research.). This detailed description enables other researchers to determine if the findings apply to other contexts or if there are significant differences that would limit transferability (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). In addition, qualitative researchers conduct detailed case studies using particular cases to illustrate the findings, providing a comprehensive view of how conclusions were drawn and offering a blueprint that other researchers might consider in similar contexts (Weis & Willems, 2017).

Third, qualitative researchers have to ensure that the dependability and confirmability of the data are enhanced over time and across various conditions, as well as the extent to which the respondents shape the findings and not researcher bias (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). For this layer of the validation of a qualitative study, an audit trail, which keeps detailed records of all data, decisions, and activities in the research process, allows for an external check to be required. To put it differently, an audit trail provides transparency and an outline of the research process, helping others to follow the decisions made and assess whether similar outcomes might be reached under similar conditions. External checks can be maintained through peer debriefing by engaging with peers who review and critique the research process, which helps identify any blind spots or biases and enhances the analytic rigor (Weis & Willems, 2017).

Overall, validation strategies in qualitative research are indispensable tools that strengthen the study's trustworthiness. They ensure that the findings represent the phenomenon under investigation rather than reflections of the researchers' preconceptions. Researchers can robustly defend their findings' credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability by employing triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and maintaining a thorough audit trail (Amin et al., 2020). This systematic approach enhances the integrity of qualitative

research and boosts its impact and relevance in understanding complex, real-world issues. However, it is not a simple task for qualitative researchers to easily bracket their conceptual, ontological, epistemological, and axiological mental frameworks in collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Therefore, the current review aims to represent the ways of enhancing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by focusing on the value of the hermeneutics perspective for re-understanding and re-considering what aspects and how-aspects of the trustworthiness issues in qualitative research.

### **Focus: Member checking as a core validation strategy in the naturalistic inquiry**

Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a crucial validation strategy in qualitative research to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study's findings (Birt et al., 2016). This technique returns the data collected and the interpretations and conclusions drawn from that data to the participants for confirmation (Doyle, 2007). This iterative process allows researchers to ensure their interpretations accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives (Slettebø, 2021).

For an elaborated member checking, the researcher gathers data through interviews, focus groups, observations, or other qualitative methods and then analyzes the data to develop themes, categories, or theories (Morse, 2015). The most crucial mechanism of member checking is sharing the findings with participants. The researcher shares specific outcomes or findings with the original participants (Lindheim, 2022). This could be summarized data, a synthesis of interpretations, or a draft of the final report. These are needed to obtain feedback from participants. In this manner, participants are asked to confirm the accuracy of the findings, provide additional insights, or challenge the interpretations where they see discrepancies (Morse et al., 2002). Based on the feedback, the researcher refines the findings, clarifies misunderstandings, and incorporates participants' inputs to deepen and correct the analysis. The refined data and interpretations are then finalized for reporting with a more apparent assurance of their validity (Zairul, 2021).

Member checking serves multiple critical purposes in qualitative research. By involving participants in the verification process, researchers can enhance the accuracy and credibility of the data. Participants can confirm whether the findings are accurate to their experiences and expressions, which helps portray a more authentic picture of the phenomenon under study (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). Researchers bring their own biases and preconceptions to a study. Member checking helps mitigate these biases by allowing participants to point out where personal perspectives rather than the data may have influenced the researcher's interpretations. This strategy respects participants' perspectives as co-contributors to the research. It acknowledges their role as subjects and collaborators with a say in representing their information. Feedback from participants can provide deeper insights or highlight aspects that the researcher might have overlooked. This process often leads to more prosperous, more nuanced data.

A member-checking process incorporates some tangible challenges for qualitative researchers (Hallett, 2013; Thomas, 2017). It can be time-consuming and require additional resources to

re-engage with participants, especially if they are dispersed or hard to reach. Participants may not always understand the technical aspects of data interpretation, which can lead to challenges in validating theoretical constructs rather than factual accuracy (Koelsch, 2013). Just as researchers have biases, participants might also provide self-serving feedback or be skewed by their desires about the research outcome. Despite these challenges, member checking remains a highly respected validation technique in qualitative research, known for adding depth, authenticity, and robustness to qualitative findings (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). It underscores a commitment to a participatory research process, where findings are not only about the participants but also about them, reinforcing the research project's ethical integrity and scholarly validity. In this manner, the current study aims to reassess the value and functionality of member checking by re-considering it from the lens of the hermeneutics perspective, detailed in the sections below.

### **Perspective: Hermeneutical thinking and knowing -What aspects and how aspects of the hermeneutics perspective**

The current review hypothesizes that there may be a potential in understanding the hermeneutics perspective to re-comprehend the nature and structure of qualitative research, especially a specific version of validation strategy such as member-checking (Brogan, 2020; Borim-de-Souza et al., 2020; Iivari, 2018). Based on this hypothesis, some working definitions of hermeneutics and its etymology are presented in this section. The term “hermeneutics” has its roots in ancient Greek. It comes from the Greek word “hermeneutikos,” which means “interpretive” or “interpreter.” This, in turn, is derived from the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the god of language, communication, and interpretation in Greek mythology. The connection to Hermes underscores the idea of interpretation and communication being central to hermeneutics. Over time, the term evolved to refer to the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly in understanding written texts. Therefore, hermeneutics as a thinking and knowing system is mainly about the relation between the interpretation and being interpreted. In philosophy, the relationship between the knower and the known (or knowing and the knower) concerns the connection between the subject (the one who knows) and the object (that which is known). This relationship explores how knowledge is acquired, how the mind perceives and processes reality, and the extent to which our subjective experiences shape our understanding of the world. Key philosophical debates revolve around whether knowledge is primarily constructed by the knower (constructivism) or if it reflects an objective reality independent of the knower's perceptions (realism). This relation also has a more significant place and exploratory role in the qualitative research paradigm.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation, especially the interpretation of written texts and various discourses in verbal externalizations between individuals (George, 2021). It originated in ancient Greek philosophy but has since become an interdisciplinary field encompassing various methods and approaches to understanding texts, symbols, and cultural phenomena (Gadamer, 2004; 2007). Hermeneutics is applied to religious and literary texts, legal documents, artworks, historical events, and everyday communication in contemporary contexts. It involves analyzing a text or artifact's context, language, culture,

and historical background to uncover its meaning and significance (Gadamer, 1996). This point is related chiefly to the very nature of qualitative research in which institutional, contextual, historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic entities are closely considered when data is gathered, analyzed, interpreted, and communicated.

The key concept related to hermeneutics is “interpretation,” which has been widely and intentionally used by qualitative researchers who are the secondary narrators or interpreters of the externalized latent meanings provided by the participants (Heidegger, 2002). Therefore, from the perspective of hermeneutics, the interpretation should be interpreted and explained in the philosophical context. In hermeneutics, the meaning of “interpretation” goes beyond its everyday usage. It refers to understanding and making sense of texts, symbols, or cultural phenomena. This process involves more than just translating words or deciphering meanings; it entails uncovering more profound layers of significance, context, and intention behind the text or artifact being interpreted. In hermeneutics, interpretation is viewed as a dynamic and dialogical engagement between the interpreter (the researcher in qualitative research) and the object of interpretation (e.g., What are the lived experiences of first-generation college students in navigating the transition from high school to university, and how do these experiences influence their sense of belonging and academic success?), wherein the interpreter inherently brings their perspectives, biases, and experiences to bear on the text, while also seeking to grasp the author’s (participants in qualitative research) intentions and the cultural context in which the text (discourse in qualitative research) was produced (Brogan, 2020; Warnke, 2013).

Thus, interpretation in hermeneutics involves a multifaceted and often recursive process of understanding, where meaning is continuously negotiated and reconstructed through interaction with the text and its context. However, the interpretation in qualitative research and hermeneutics should be considered cautiously. A scientific study ultimately seeks to reach a truth. However, how and by whom this reality is constructed can raise interpretive issues. The interpreter begins to deviate from the truth as soon as they start interpreting. As should be accepted, truth or reality exists in an uninterpreted format. As truth or reality begins to be interpreted, it moves away from its primary meaning, giving rise to a secondary meaning that includes interpretation. This should not lead to a ‘skeptical’ situation such as “then we cannot know the truth.” To explain, what is known needs the commentator’s comment to be known to a degree. In other words, an essential way of knowing is to interpret, but interpretation distorts the truth; things cannot be known without interpretation, or they can only be known partially through interpretation (Brogan, 2020; Walsh, 1996; Zimmerman, 2015).

Moreover, modern hermeneutics also puts a severe distance between what is known grammatically and what is known as intention. We interpret a poet’s words, a writer’s descriptions, or a participant’s discursive expressions of learning and teaching on two layers: the layer based on the grammatical scope and the intention. Grammatical interpretation lacks intent and may fall short of or differ significantly from the intended meaning. For this reason, the hermeneutic perspective tries to benefit from the intention layer, rather than the grammatical scope, in depicting the meaning, truth, or reality that is tried to be created through meaning. This means that in qualitative research, how will the meaning of

the “experiential” content of the person transcribed verbatim into the “text” after the audio recording be interpreted, taking into full consideration the intention of the owner of the text? (Brogan, 2020; Ihde, 1999)

Qualitative researchers recommend the participant verification technique in this sense, which appears to be an effective validation strategy in many qualitative studies. But here, another hermeneutical problem arises: Is the owner of the text or the owner of the statement aware of the intention with which s/he utters those words, that is, his own original or authentic intention? The answer to this question of modern hermeneutic interpretation is “no.” Therefore, if the meanings have moved away from the real meaning due to the existence of the interpretation of the person who put it forward, or at least does not give the real meaning completely, how will the qualitative researcher, as a person who tries to look at the meaning from a secondary perspective, know that he has interpreted a valid meaning? This could mean that the problem of the hermeneutic perspective and the qualitative researcher is the same. The primary purpose of hermeneutics is to justify the proposition that “the main thing is not “understanding,” but the main thing is “non-understanding,” therefore “meaning” needs “interpretation.” On the other hand, the qualitative researcher aims to “understand” and “interpret” a discourse, feeling, thought or experience that is secondary to him/her. However, since interpreting as the hermeneutic perspective “warns” the qualitative researcher can distort or confuse understanding, the qualitative researcher must employ interpretive strategies most meticulously to “get closer to the real meaning.” It can be therefore inferred that the meaning is primary, but the interpretation is secondary.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that modern hermeneutics sees every understanding as an interpretation and goes beyond that idea, proposing that there is no understanding. Still, every understanding is a version of interpretation. From this perspective, the interpretation as it constitutes the meaning of natural or social phenomena is primary (Brogan, 2020; Roberge, 2011; Thiselton, 2009).

### **The Analytical Purpose of Hermeneutics as Knowing by Interpreting**

Hermeneutics aims to uncover and understand the meaning of texts, symbols, or cultural phenomena. It seeks to interpret and interpret the significance of these elements within their context, whether that context is historical, cultural, linguistic, or social. The ultimate goal of hermeneutics is to bridge the gap between the text and its reader or interpreter, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the message conveyed. Hermeneutics’ generic and diverse aims can be associated with the very nature of qualitative research. First, hermeneutics is to understand. Hermeneutics aims to facilitate understanding by deciphering the meaning of texts or symbols. This understanding often involves delving into the text’s historical, cultural, and linguistic context. Second, the hermeneutics perspective involves interpreting texts or symbols to uncover their significance and relevance. Interpretation may involve analyzing the author’s intentions, the cultural milieu in which the text was produced, and the audience for which it was intended. Third, hermeneutics incorporates a communicative nature. Hermeneutics helps to facilitate communication between different times, cultures, and perspectives. Understanding the meaning of texts within their context

enables hermeneutics to communicate across boundaries and fosters dialogue between individuals or groups with different backgrounds or viewpoints. Moreover, hermeneutics requires critical exploration. Hermeneutics encourages critical analysis of texts and symbols, allowing for a deeper exploration of their implications and interpretations. This critical approach helps to uncover layers of meaning and challenge assumptions, leading to a richer understanding of the text. It should be noted that hermeneutics is not only about understanding and interpretation but also about applying the insights gained to real-world situations. It allows for applying textual understanding to contemporary issues, ethical dilemmas, and practical challenges (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Whitehead, 2004).

#### *Scholarly-oriented research-based purposes of the hermeneutics*

The research-based purpose of hermeneutics involves utilizing its methodologies and principles to conduct rigorous and systematic investigations into the interpretation and understanding of texts, symbols, and cultural phenomena. In a research context, hermeneutics serves several vital purposes. It should be noted herein that there may be concrete and close associations between the research-based goals of the hermeneutics and the generic aims of the qualitative researchers. To justify, for instance, hermeneutics copes with textual analysis. In other words, hermeneutics provides a framework for analyzing texts in depth, examining their linguistic, historical, and cultural context to uncover layers of meaning. Research in hermeneutics often involves close reading and interpretation of texts, identifying themes, symbols, and rhetorical devices to elucidate their significance. As known, the qualitative research paradigm has been informed by many scholarly-oriented fields and disciplines that inform these fields of inquiry (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Whitehead, 2004).

Similarly, hermeneutics encourages interdisciplinary approaches to research, drawing on insights from philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and theology. Researchers may apply hermeneutical methods to diverse texts and cultural artifacts, exploring connections and patterns across disciplines. Like naturalistic inquiries, the hermeneutics perspective tries to establish a historical understanding of a phenomenon under investigation. Hermeneutics facilitates historical understanding by situating texts within their historical context and tracing the evolution of ideas over time. Researchers use hermeneutical methods to uncover the historical background of texts, discerning how social, political, and cultural factors shape their meaning. Critical reflection, as a fundamental explorative goal of hermeneutics, involves a deep and thorough examination of one's thought processes, assumptions, and biases during the interpretive act. Hermeneutics, which is the study of interpretation, particularly of texts, encourages researchers to continuously question and analyze the lenses through which they view and interpret their subjects. This reflective practice entails researchers engaging in self-reflexive analysis, actively considering and articulating how their personal backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints might shape their interpretations. By doing so, they aim to uncover and understand the preconceptions and biases that may influence their understanding of the texts they study. This process helps to ensure that the interpretations are not merely projections of the researchers' views but are grounded in a more objective and balanced understanding of the text.



Moreover, critical reflection in hermeneutics seeks to mitigate the impact of subjective biases. Researchers strive to recognize and address these biases, adjusting their interpretive approaches to minimize their influence. This practice enhances the validity and reliability of the research findings and fosters a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the texts. Critical reflection in hermeneutics is an ongoing, iterative process that demands constant vigilance and self-awareness from researchers. It involves a commitment to transparency and honesty about one's interpretive stance, fostering a deeper engagement with the text and promoting more rigorous and insightful scholarship. By continuously reflecting on and refining their interpretive methods, researchers contribute to a more robust and credible body of knowledge (Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Reiter, 2006; Thirsk & Clark, 2017).

Furthermore, the hermeneutics perspective can be applied to research purposes. Hermeneutics is applied in various research contexts, including literature, theology, jurisprudence, psychology, and education. Researchers may use hermeneutical methods to analyze legal texts, interpret religious scriptures, explore psychological narratives, or examine literary works, among other applications. Like the ground theory approach in qualitative research, the perspective of hermeneutics can be used for theory development. Hermeneutics contributes to the development of theoretical frameworks for understanding interpretation and meaning-making. Researchers engage in theoretical inquiry, refining concepts such as authorial intention, reader response, textual ambiguity, and the hermeneutical circle, advancing our understanding of how meaning is constructed and communicated (Gillo, 2021; Peck & Mummery, 2018; Rennie, 2012).

#### *Combining qualitative research perspective with hermeneutic perspective*

Combining qualitative research with a hermeneutic perspective can lead to a rich and nuanced approach to understanding human experiences, texts, and cultural phenomena. First and foremost, qualitative research often emphasizes the importance of context in understanding phenomena. When combined with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers delve deeply into the context surrounding texts or experiences, considering historical, cultural, and social factors that shape meaning (Gillo, 2021). This contextual approach enriches interpretation by comprehensively understanding the background against which texts or experiences are situated.

Both qualitative research and hermeneutics prioritize interpretation and sense-making. Researchers utilizing these perspectives engage in interpretive analysis to uncover underlying meanings, symbols, and themes within texts or qualitative data. They recognize that meaning is not fixed but is constructed through dialogue between the text and the interpreter and within the broader socio-cultural context. Qualitative research often involves direct engagement with participants or texts. Researchers adopt a hermeneutic perspective approach to this engagement as a dialogical process, where understanding emerges through interaction and interpretation. They value participants' perspectives and seek to understand their lived experiences within their cultural and social contexts (Nigar, 2020).

Both qualitative research and hermeneutics acknowledge the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the interpretive process. Researchers employing these perspectives engage

in reflexivity, critically reflecting on their assumptions, biases, and preconceptions that may influence interpretation. They recognize that interpretation is not value-neutral and strive to be transparent about their positionality. Qualitative research often adopts a narrative approach, focusing on the stories and narratives of participants. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that studies stories or narratives to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their identities. It involves collecting and analyzing personal accounts, often through interviews or written documents, to explore the meanings and interpretations that people attach to their life events. Narrative inquiry emphasizes these stories' context and temporal aspects, acknowledging that they are shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative studies, researchers pay close attention to the structure, content, and function of narratives and how they are told. This method allows for a rich, detailed understanding of individual experiences and can reveal insights into broader social and cultural phenomena (Riessman, 2008). It is beneficial for exploring complex, nuanced aspects of human life that more traditional research methods might overlook. When combined with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers explore the narrative structures and themes within texts or qualitative data, recognizing the narrative as a means through which meaning is conveyed and constructed. Qualitative research and hermeneutics encourage the integration of theory and data in the interpretive process. Researchers draw on theoretical frameworks to guide their analysis while allowing the data to inform and enrich theoretical understandings. This iterative process of theory-data interaction enhances the depth and complexity of interpretation. Integrating qualitative research with a hermeneutic perspective offers a holistic approach to understanding human experiences, texts, and cultural phenomena. It combines the rigor of qualitative research methods with the interpretive depth of hermeneutics, leading to nuanced insights and a deeper appreciation of meaning and context (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Pérez-Vargas et al., 2020).

#### *Combining member-checking validation strategy with the hermeneutic perspective*

Combining a checking validation strategy with a hermeneutic perspective can enhance the rigor and credibility of interpretive research. Member checking, a qualitative research method, involves verifying the accuracy and validity of findings by returning them to participants for feedback or validation. For instance, Birt et al. (2016) discussed the application of member checking in health research and explored its effectiveness in enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative data. Hermeneutics emphasizes the dialogical nature of interpretation, viewing understanding as emerging through dialogue between the text and the interpreter. Similarly, member-checking involves engaging participants in a dialogue about the researcher's interpretations. By incorporating member checking into the hermeneutic process, researchers invite participants to contribute to interpreting their experiences, ensuring that their perspectives are accurately represented (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011). For example, Doyle (2007) illustrated member checking in research with older women, detailing how the process helps negotiate and validate the meaning of the data collected.

Hermeneutics recognizes that meaning is co-constructed through interaction between the text and the interpreter. Member checking aligns with this perspective by acknowledging

the importance of participants' contributions to the interpretive process. Through member checking, researchers validate their interpretations against participants' lived experiences, enriching the depth and authenticity of the findings (Carlson, 2010). For example, Koelsch (2013) provided an example of a study involving educators where member checking was used as an iterative process. Participants were involved in several rounds of feedback, which allowed for a deeper co-construction of meaning and helped mitigate researcher bias. Hermeneutics encourages researchers to be reflexive about their biases and assumptions that may influence interpretation. Similarly, member checking requires researchers to be transparent about their interpretations and open to participant feedback. By integrating member checking with a hermeneutic perspective, researchers engage in reflexive dialogue with participants, critically examining their interpretations and considering alternative perspectives (Turner & Coen, 2008).

Member checking enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of interpretive research by allowing participants to validate or challenge the researcher's interpretations. This iterative validation process contributes to the research's rigor, strengthening the findings' validity and reliability. By incorporating member checking into the hermeneutic process, researchers demonstrate a commitment to transparency and accountability, enhancing their interpretations' credibility (Bradshaw, 2001). Hermeneutics recognizes interpretation as an iterative process that evolves. Member checking facilitates this iterative approach by allowing researchers to refine their interpretations based on participants' feedback (Buchbinder, 2011). By revisiting interpretations in collaboration with participants, researchers deepen their understanding of the phenomena under study and produce more nuanced and contextually grounded interpretations. In summary, combining a member-checking validation strategy with a hermeneutic perspective enriches the interpretive process by fostering dialogue, co-construction of meaning, reflexivity, and trustworthiness. This integrated approach enhances the rigor and credibility of interpretive research, yielding insights that are more authentic, nuanced, and contextually situated (Madill & Sullivan, 2018).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This review yields several conclusions in attaching the member-checking strategy to the hermeneutics. First and foremost, the review implies the importance of interpretation. The qualitative researcher with a hermeneutics lens should capture the point that interpretation is not just an additional layer of understanding but the primary means through which we engage with participants' verbal or written externalizations. This is a crucial departure from previous beliefs where participants' verbal or written externalizations were considered clear and straightforward and were thought not to require further interpretation. Therefore, a qualitative researcher adapting hermeneutics should challenge traditional or positivistic research views. Traditionally, it is assumed that participants' verbal or written externalizations with clear language and straightforward instructions do not need interpretation; their meanings are taken at face value. However, the modern hermeneutic approach challenges this by suggesting that no text (e.g., participants' verbal or written externalizations) is genuinely straightforward. Every text reading involves an interpretive act, where the reader's (coder's)

context, background, and perspective influence their understanding. In other words, from the lens of hermeneutics, the qualitative researcher should act in a way that all human-based discourses inherently involve an interpretive process. This process is not just about deciphering words or sentences but engaging with the verbal/written discourses in a manner that considers the intent behind it, the context in which it was written, and its relevance to the present. Interpretation is thus seen as an essential activity that is dynamically intertwined with comprehension, which is the primary purpose of the qualitative researcher.

Moreover, the qualitative researcher adapting the hermeneutics perspective has to interrogate the role of the reader's perspective. In hermeneutics, each reader (the qualitative researcher and the participant) brings unique experiences and cognitive frameworks to a text, which can alter the interpretation. This subjective element of text interpretation underscores the complexity of understanding texts and the need for a hermeneutic approach. Therefore, the qualitative researcher inherently needs the interpretation of their preliminary analysis by the participants. To support this, the qualitative researcher should not see hermeneutics as merely a tool for academic or philosophical analysis but as a necessary component of understanding any written or spoken material in our daily lives to invite the participants as co-interpreters or co-commentators. In this manner, as a whole, it should be accepted by the qualitative researcher that hermeneutics proposes a more reflective and interpretive approach to understanding, and this reflection and interpretation is not only the primary assignment of the researcher but also the participant as a co-researcher.

The qualitative researcher has to re-consider hermeneutics more broadly to apply this perspective in a wide-ranging sense. The modern hermeneutics emphasizes that it applies universally to all forms of text. This universality means that each invites a hermeneutic approach, whether the text is a complex legal document, a piece of classic literature, or simple everyday instructions or conversations. This approach involves examining beyond the literal meanings to uncover deeper insights and implications. In hermeneutic theory, a text is any written, printed, or digital communication that conveys a particular message or information. The centrality of the text implies that hermeneutics is not just about interpreting traditional texts but also encompasses all forms of written communication, reflecting its broad applicability. Viewing every text (the content the qualitative research analyzes and interprets) as central to hermeneutics highlights the importance of context, authorial intent, and the cultural and historical background in which the text was produced. This broadens the scope of interpretation and insists on a more nuanced understanding of all communicative acts.

In addition, the qualitative researcher has to see hermeneutics as a fundamental dialoguing tool to interact with the participant and foster the qualitative study's credibility. It can be accepted that hermeneutics facilitates an ongoing dialogue between the text (the content), the reader (the qualitative researcher), and the participant. This dialogue is not a literal conversation but an interpretive exchange where the text speaks to the reader or the participant, and the reader and the participant respond based on their understanding and interpretation as the core strategy in the member-checking strategy. In this dynamic interaction, the text (the content) is not a passive object but an active participant that

influences and is influenced by the reader and the participant. The reader's or the participant's preconceptions, experiences, and the context in which they engage with the text all contribute to this dialogue (Harvey, 2015). Therefore, the text (the content) can mean different things to different readers/participants or even to the same reader/participant at different times. This ongoing dialogue underscores that understanding a text as material analyzed in a qualitative study is never final but continuously evolves. As new interpretations emerge and contexts change, the dialogue between the text, the reader, and the participant is renewed, leading to fresh insights and perspectives. This process reflects the inherently dynamic nature of hermeneutics as a discipline and naturalistic inquiry as an interpretive way of knowing. These concepts frame hermeneutics as a profoundly interactive and continually evolving discipline that emphasizes the active role of the text, the reader, and the participant in the interpretive process. By engaging with texts through this hermeneutic dialogue, readers and participants in the qualitative research are encouraged to explore beyond the surface and to consider broader, more complex interpretations based on the dialogue they develop with texts (e.g., generated by the utterances of a participant in qualitative research) across different contexts and times.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) declared that this study has received no financial support.

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## Content and Thematic Analysis Techniques in Qualitative Research: Purpose, Process and Features

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### To cite this article

Özden, M. (2024). Content and thematic analysis techniques in qualitative research: Purpose, process and features. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 64-81. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.5>

### Article Info:

Received: 13.06.2024

Revised: 26.06.2024

Accepted: 16.07.2024

### Abstract

It has been observed that qualitative research methodologies are increasingly used in educational research. However, many errors can occur in qualitative research at various stages, from planning the study to collecting data, from selecting participants to writing the findings. One of the processes where novice qualitative researchers experience the most problems is data analysis. At this stage, researchers often do not know how to structure and code the data, and they lack confidence in their knowledge and skills regarding the processes of developing categories and themes. Another significant issue for researchers is their inability to understand the purposes and usage of the techniques applied in qualitative data analysis. It is even observed that in some studies, the processes of one analysis technique are replaced with those of another technique with similar characteristics. The continued increase of these problems negatively affects the robustness of qualitative research. The present study has been prepared to contribute to solving these issues observed in the literature. The study explains the characteristics, purposes, differences, and necessary steps of content analysis and thematic analysis approaches, which are frequently used in the analysis of qualitative data. Additionally, the study highlights the principles that should be considered in conducting content and thematic analyses, with the hope of assisting researchers in carrying out a rigorous and robust process.

### Keywords

qualitative research, qualitative data analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis

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## Introduction

Qualitative research can be defined as “*the process of developing a field-specific explanation or theory by examining the meanings created by individuals*” (Özden & Saban, 2017, p.5). However, it can be said that the majority of published qualitative studies are aimed at explanation and understanding. It has been observed that theory development studies are less frequent for various reasons. Researchers investigate the characteristic values, meanings, beliefs, thoughts, experiences, and emotions in phenomena and situations to develop the mentioned explanations or theories (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In this process, they utilize various data collection tools such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. The analysis of the obtained data is one of the areas where qualitative researchers struggle the most (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

Qualitative data analysis is the process of classifying and interpreting data to explain the explicit and implicit dimensions, meaning-making structures, and representations found within the data. It is also used to explore and describe issues in the field and processes in practice. The ultimate aim is generally to reach generalizable statements by comparing various materials, texts, or a few situations. Qualitative data analysis is conducted for the purposes of description, explanation, and theory development. Qualitative data can be analyzed to *describe* a phenomenon. This phenomenon may have emerged as a result of the subjective experiences of an individual or a group. In such cases, the analysis focuses on the phenomenon, its specific characteristics, and the connections between them. The analysis can also focus on comparing various individuals or groups experiencing the phenomenon, their common characteristics, or the differences between them. The second aim may be to determine the reasons underlying the existing differences, that is, *explanation*. The third aim is to *develop a theory* about the phenomenon being studied based on the analysis of the data (Flick, 2014).

Within the framework of the mentioned aims, techniques such as content analysis or thematic analysis can be used in the analysis of qualitative data. There are other qualitative analysis techniques, such as conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and constant comparative analysis. Here, the most commonly used techniques, content and thematic analysis, are preferred. Both techniques are frequently employed in qualitative research. Content analysis is an approach where both numerical and thematic analysis processes are utilized, and culture and context are considered important interpretive features (Grbich, 2013). On the other hand, thematic analysis is often seen as a weaker analytical technique compared to content analysis. Thematic analysis can be introduced as a descriptive analytical technique that provides qualitative researchers with the basic skills necessary to employ many other qualitative data analysis techniques (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). However, it can be said that what is more important than the strength or weakness of the analytical technique is its appropriateness to the subject being investigated and the adherence to rules in the analysis processes. In other words, when the reader reviews the analysis processes, they should not be prompted to ask what distinguishes this analysis from thematic analysis or content analysis.

In this study, the aim is to introduce the purposes, processes, and characteristics of content analysis and thematic analysis techniques and to explain how the data analysis process develops in both techniques. Information is provided under the following headings within the scope of the mentioned aim.

### **Definitions and Purposes of Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis**

Content analysis is also referred to as *qualitative content analysis* (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) and *ethnographic content analysis* (Altheide, 1987). It is a systematic process of coding and categorization used to discover communication discourses and structures, patterns and trends of the words used, their frequencies, and their relationships in large amounts of information sources that are not immediately apparent. Content analysis is a systematic coding and classification approach that can be used to explore a large portion of existing textual information to identify the trends and patterns of the words used, their frequencies, relationships, communication structures, contexts, and discourses (Grbich, 2013). Thematic analysis, on the other hand, is a technique for describing and analyzing patterns within the data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). It involves conducting the analysis process based on the similarities, differences, and relationships in a data set. The term thematic relates to the aim of searching for themes clustered within the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Willig, 2013).

Both content and thematic analysis techniques aim to analytically examine and descriptively process narratives based on life stories by breaking them down into small analytical units (Sparker, 2005). Content analysis is a suitable technique for analyzing complex, significant, and sensitive phenomena (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). It can be an appropriate analysis strategy to identify common points in the data, especially when what is known in a specific area is limited (Green & Thorogood, 2004). On the other hand, thematic analysis allows for rich and detailed descriptions of the data as a flexible and useful research tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is because thematic analysis requires the investigation and identification of common characteristics within the data set (DeSantis & Noel Ugarriza, 2000).

Content and thematic analysis techniques are focused on the qualitative analysis of data. However, content analysis not only enables the qualitative analysis of data but also provides a quantitative representation. It is a descriptive approach used both in coding the data and interpreting the quantitative numbers of the codes (Grbich, 2013). In contrast, thematic analysis allows for a detailed and nuanced analysis of the data with a fully qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Data Analysis Process in Content Analysis**

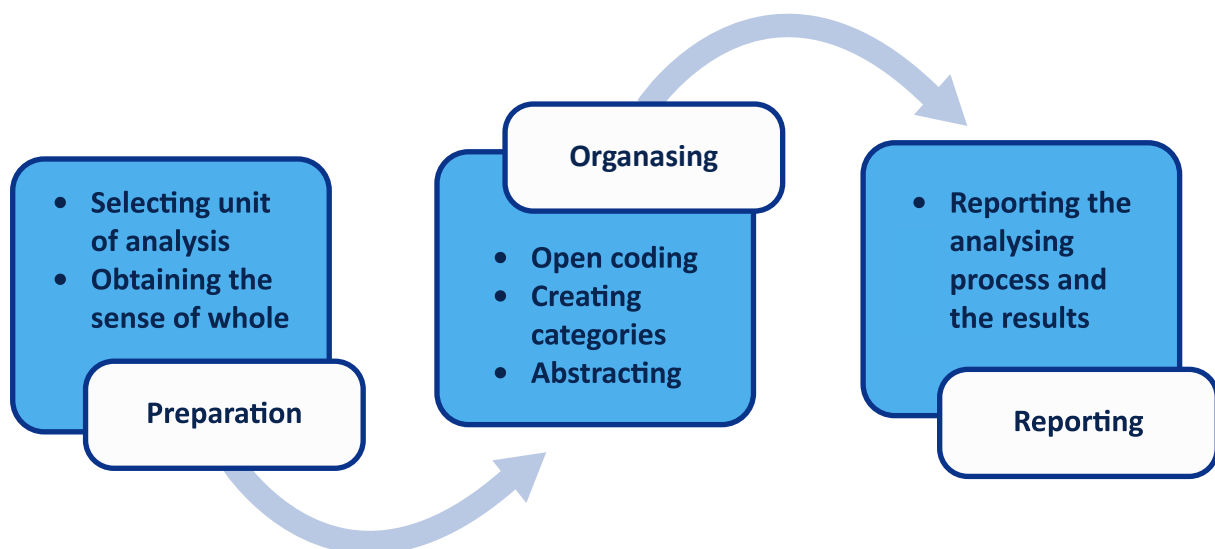
Inductive and deductive approaches can be used in the application of content and thematic analysis techniques. When what is known in a specific area is limited and there is insufficient information about the phenomenon being studied, an inductive approach can be used. In this approach, specific events are observed and relationships between these observations are established to reach generalizations. The inductive approach is used when there has been no prior research on the phenomenon, and thus, categories are derived directly from

the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). On the other hand, if the aim of the research is to test a previous theory in a different situation or to compare categories obtained from different studies, a deductive approach may be appropriate. In this approach, the analysis is based on previous information, theories, or models, and the process progresses from general to specific (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In this study, the content analysis and thematic analysis processes are explained according to the inductive approach.

The data analysis process in content analysis consists of three stages: (i) *preparation*, (ii) *organizing*, and (iii) *reporting*. The tasks and procedures that researchers need to perform at each of these stages are explained below in Visual 1.

**Figure 1.**

*Data Analysis Process in Content Analysis*



### Stage One: Preparation

In the preparation stage, two fundamental processes are carried out: selecting the unit of analysis and obtaining the sense of whole. The unit of analysis is the focal point on which the researcher codes to answer the research questions. Depending on the research question, the unit of analysis can be a letter, word, sentence, phrase, interview, or entire observation protocols (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Furthermore, the unit of analysis can encompass an entire newspaper, a diary, a book or book chapter, a storybook, or a set of storybooks, among other possibilities. For instance, let's consider a phenomenological study on intercultural experiences of higher education students conducted by a researcher (see Ersoy, 2013). In this study, the unit of analysis would be the interviews conducted with each participant who has experienced intercultural encounters.

Selecting the appropriate unit of analysis not only guides the coding process but also influences the development of codes. Choosing the wrong unit of analysis can lead to two negative outcomes. First, if the chosen unit is too granular (i.e., at a much more micro level than what is actually needed), the researcher may overlook important contextual information and may need to conduct an analysis that requires more time and cost. An example of a unit of analysis that is too granular could be individual words. Second, if the chosen unit is too vague (i.e., at a high macro level), important relationships and contextual meanings within smaller (individual) units of content may be overlooked, leading to incorrect classification and interpretation of data. An example of a unit of analysis that is too vague could be all the journals written by 25 participants in a study or all the comments made by participants in an online support forum (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Qualitative researchers should opt for a broader, more contextually based unit of analysis rather than a narrowly focused level of analysis (such as words or sentences). Researchers should avoid units that obscure meanings and nuances at an individual level. However, units of analysis that can be defined as entire interviews, observations, or focus group discussions offer researchers the possibility of obtaining reasonable and valid meanings in contexts that can be analyzed.

When starting the analysis, researchers need to decide whether they will analyze only the manifest content or also the latent content (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Manifest content refers to what is easily observable in the material, while latent content refers to the meanings inferred from the material (Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). Latent content is embedded within the material and is interpreted, interpreted, and explained by the researcher considering contextual conditions.

Decisions regarding the selection of manifest or latent content can influence the choice of the unit of analysis. A researcher analyzing manifest content may use quantitative content analysis. In content analysis, numerical data is preferred because the repetition of words in the analyzed document indicates the importance of those words. This numerical process relies on searching for keywords and word frequencies within the context. The units of content analysis that researchers can use during the process of analyzing manifest content may include the following (Grbich, 2013):

- *Word frequency*: This helps determine how often your key words occur in your documents. When counting word frequency, it is logical to exclude conjunctions such as “because, and, or, or, like, thing, which, etc.” as well as other common conjunctions used in your document set. After determining the frequency of key words, it would be useful to choose several other tools to describe the contextual use of the selected key words.
- *Keyword in context or concordance*: This approach displays every word in the document in alphabetical order and in context.
- *Category analysis or cluster analysis*: This is a stage where other related (synonymous) words are also included. For example, after the word “economy” is defined in the



document, other relevant words such as employment, unemployment, and inflation are also searched for. Then the computer shows how frequently each category occurs in the document.

- *Co-occurrence*: For this process, the researcher should search for specific words that are related. For example, words like security and terrorism. For this purpose, the researcher scans the document to check how closely some words are related to each other.

On the other hand, analyzing latent content requires a more nuanced understanding. A researcher focusing on implicit meanings in the data, consistent with research objectives, would approach the data with an ethnographic perspective. Such a researcher is expected to engage in processes such as description, exploring context, explaining meaning, and identifying patterns. A classic example of analyzing latent content is Little Orphan Annie. The research is significant for making visible the ideological representations of the emerging bipolar world rivalry after World War II. In the relevant study, questions such as (i) Who are Annie's friends and rivals? (ii) What are the goals endorsed by Annie and her friends? (iii) What recommendations do the characters make to achieve these goals? (iv) Which symbols do Annie, and her friends evaluate positively? and (v) Which symbols do they condemn? were addressed. Research data were obtained by examining 104 issues of the comic strip over two years (from April 1948 to July 1950). The analysis revealed that both the very poor (e.g., orphans) and the very wealthy (those Annie seeks help for orphans from) were Annie's most important friends, while Russian agents were depicted as a gang of young hoodlums extorting protection money from children. Annie's life goals were found to include making a lot of money, being charitable, being a law-abiding citizen, making a good marriage, and raising a large family. To achieve these goals, earning large amounts of money (i.e., money being both the end and the means), the use of power, and hard work were recommended. Symbols evaluated positively by Annie and her friends included orphans, workers, honest merchants, and smart businessmen, while symbols such as laziness, unwillingness to work, radicals, work camps, the Soviet Union, and Hitler were negatively evaluated (Shannon, 1954; Schreier, 2013). This study is important for explaining the visibility of latent content about conservatism, middle-class Americanism, capitalist values, and anti-Soviet ideology through content analysis.

Once the unit of analysis has been decided, the researcher should obtain a sense of the whole by reading the transcripts several times, striving to understand what is happening in the data (Morse & Field, 1995), and develop a holistic understanding. To achieve this, questions such as "who is telling the story, where is this happening? when did it happen? what is happening, why?" can be used during the process of reading the data with a comprehensive perspective that fosters a deeper understanding. Furthermore, during the preparation phase, written materials should be read several times to thoroughly understand the data. In this sense, during the preparation phase, no theory or previous research is more effective than the researcher's familiarity with the data. Once an understanding of the data relationship is developed, the analysis process can begin (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). It can be said that determining the unit of analysis and becoming familiar with the data are critically important in the preparation phase. This way, the analysis can be conducted more meticulously, and the designated unit of analysis is also validated.

## **Stage Two: Organization**

This stage involves the processes of open coding, category formation, and abstraction. Open coding is a stage where notes are taken on the data and labels are assigned to the data using concrete or abstract descriptions. In vivo coding involves labeling the data using words or descriptions found in the documents we are working on during the analysis process. Abstract coding, on the other hand, involves assigning concepts related to the researcher's own theoretical sensitivity to the data in the documents we are working on. In the open coding process, any of these strategies or both can be used together. However, researchers using the abstract coding strategy can create a coding guide that includes conceptual explanations of the codes generated. This way, they can prevent possible inconsistencies in the data analysis process that spans over a long period. Whether using in vivo or abstract coding strategy, it is important to create a sufficient number of labels that explain all dimensions of the content. After the labeling stage is completed, a coding key is created to view the labels as a whole. Once this process is completed, relevant labels are grouped into categories based on their common characteristics.

The stage of open coding is followed by the process of category formation. In content analysis, the aim is to reach a condensed and broad definition of the phenomenon under investigation, making it crucial to create concepts and categories that describe the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). A category is a group of content that shares a common characteristic. For example, codes such as “reflection on self”, “overcoming depression”, “overcoming insomnia”, “living with hope for a new day”, and “utilizing faith” come together to form the category of “increased personal strength” (Holley, 2020). As seen, category formation serves functions such as facilitating descriptive characterization of the content and expressing the visible content of the text.

Categories should be comprehensive yet distinct from each other. Any data relevant to the research purpose should not be excluded just because there isn't a suitable category for it. However, category formation is not simply about grouping similar or related categories together. Grouping categories involves classifying data based on belonging to a specific group. This is important for facilitating comparisons between data that belong to the same category and those that do not. The purpose of category formation is to create a tool that explains the phenomenon under investigation, develops understanding, and produces knowledge (Cavanagh, 1997). When creating categories, researchers make decisions by interpreting which data will be included in a particular category (Dey, 1993). At this stage, creating 10-15 categories can be considered ideal (Morse & Field, 1995). However, there is no rule or consensus on the number of categories you should create in qualitative research. For example, Creswell (2013) claims that there could be 25-30 categories. At this point, the criterion should be that the emerging categories encompass all relevant data related to the research purpose in sufficient quantity and adequacy.

The final component of the organization stage is abstraction. Abstraction means to express the general definition of the research topic clearly and precisely through categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This process shares similarities with theme development in thematic analysis. In short, at this stage, researchers attempt to create an integrative structure that adds

meaning to the phenomenon under investigation and its visible aspects, passing through various categories (Graneheim, Lindgren & Lundman, 2017). Abstraction can be seen as an expression of the hidden content of the text and a way to connect meanings within categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Additionally, in the organization stage, definitions should be developed for each theme, category, and code. Examples from the data should be identified for each code and category to prepare for reporting the findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Stage Third: Reporting the Analysis Process and Results**

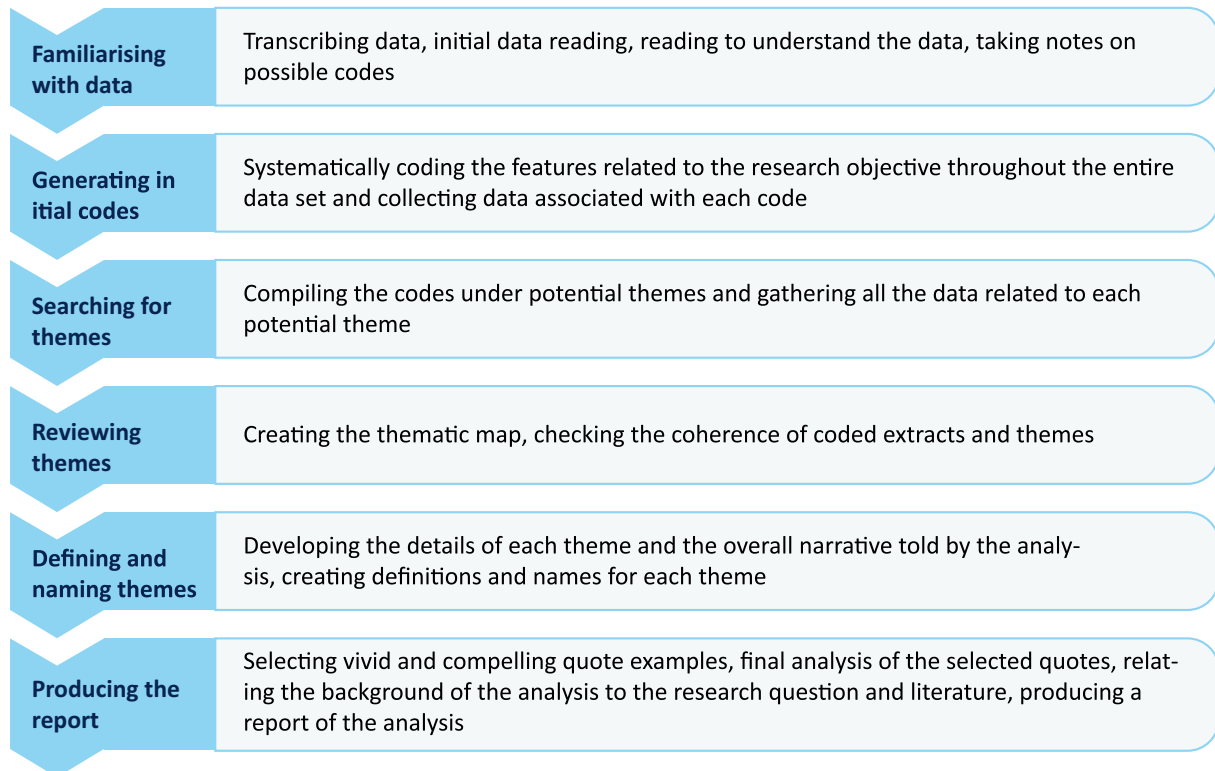
During the reporting process, researchers should provide information on how they conducted data entry, transcribed the data, ensured data security, developed coding processes, and anonymized participants. In a way, readers should be enabled to follow each stage of the analysis process, and a verifiable chain of evidence should be established (Twining, Heller, Nussbaum, & Tsai, 2017). At this stage, researchers should report in detail how they conducted the content analysis process for readers. In other words, they should explain with authentic examples how they performed the tasks and processes at each stage of the content analysis process in their own research. This way, they can ensure the credibility of their research. Additionally, researchers can utilize data analysis software to manage data during the analysis process. Models, concept maps, and categories can be used to report the results (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

### **The Data Analysis Process in Thematic Analysis**

The data analysis process in thematic analysis consists of six stages. However, these stages should not be seen as a linear model where each stage is completed before moving on to the next. Instead, thematic analysis should be considered as an iterative process. The detailed explanation of how the thematic analysis process unfolds is provided in the following Figure 2 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Figure 2.**

*Data Analysis Process in Thematic Analysis*



adapted from Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013.

**Stage One: Familiarization with the Data**

When embarking on the analysis process, the researcher may have collected the data themselves, or the data might have been provided to them. It is preferable for the researcher or research team to collect and analyze their own data. If the data were collected by the researcher, they would begin the analysis process with some background knowledge and analytical thoughts about the data. In fact, the data collection process is, in a way, part of the analysis and should not be considered separate from it. Therefore, in qualitative analysis, who collects the data is an important consideration. Nonetheless, it is crucial for the researcher to immerse themselves in the data to understand its breadth and depth. Immersion often involves repeatedly but effectively reading the data, exploring meanings, and patterns. Ideally, the entire dataset should be read at least once before the researcher begins coding.

Taking notes for coding or marking the data to be coded will assist the researcher in the later stages. Once these processes are completed, it can be said that the researcher is ready for the more formal coding process. However, coding continues to evolve throughout the analysis process. Coding is a living, dynamic process influenced by ongoing developments.

## **Stage Two: Generating Initial Codes**

The second stage begins with the researcher immersing themselves in the data and becoming familiar with it. Consequently, the researcher creates an initial list of thoughts about what is in the data. This stage thus involves generating initial codes from the data. Codes can be described as identifying interesting features of the data and as “*basic units of raw data or information that can be associated with the phenomenon under investigation*” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). However, coding is distinct from themes. Themes emerge in subsequent stages of interpretive analysis where coding occurs. If a theme is a heading, then codes are subheadings under that heading. If a theme is a framework, then codes fall within that framework.

Coding may exhibit different characteristics depending on whether themes are data-driven or theory-driven. Initially, themes will be data-driven; however, the researcher will later approach the data with specific questions in mind. Coding also depends on whether the researcher will code the entire content of the dataset or only specific features of the dataset. This determination is primarily influenced by the research purpose/questions and the density of the dataset. Systematically working through the entire dataset, giving equal importance to data from each participant, and identifying interesting features in each participant can form the basis of recurring patterns, briefly themes.

During the stage of generating initial codes, it is particularly important for researchers to: a) code to generate as many potential themes/patterns as possible, b) code extensively where quotations will be taken from the data, c) code participants’ individual quotations under different relevant themes. As a result of these processes, a quotation may remain uncoded, may be coded once, or may be coded multiple times if necessary.

## **Stage Three: Searching for Themes**

The third stage begins after the completion and consolidation of initial coding for all the data. At this stage, the researcher has a long list of different codes derived from the entire dataset. Therefore, the focus shifts to the more comprehensive analysis of themes. For this purpose, different codes are classified under potential themes, and the themes are integrated with all relevant coded quotations. Essentially, the researcher has started analyzing the codes and is contemplating how to bring different codes together to form inclusive themes. It may be helpful at this stage to visually present different codes grouped under themes. The researcher can use tables and mind maps or engage in organizing codes within clusters of themes by writing the name of each code and a brief description on a separate sheet of paper. These activities emerge as the researcher begins to think about the relationships between codes, themes, and different levels of themes. Through these processes, some initial codes may be used to form main themes, while others may form sub-themes, and perhaps some may be discarded. Additionally, at this stage, the researcher may also identify sets of codes that do not belong anywhere. This group of codes, likely labeled as “other,” is probably a temporary theme.

The researcher concludes this stage by associating candidate themes, sub-themes, and related coded data quotations. At this point, the researcher should strive to develop a rationale for the importance of individual themes. However, deciding whether themes will be kept as they are, merged, reviewed, separated, or discarded without thoroughly examining all quotations would be a mistake.

#### **Stage Four: Reviewing Themes**

The fourth stage begins with the researcher identifying a series of candidate themes and involves the development and review of these themes. At this stage, it may become apparent that some candidate themes lack sufficient supporting evidence or are not genuine themes due to the data having different characteristics. Moreover, at this stage, two themes may be structured to create a new theme, or one theme may give rise to two new themes. Throughout this process, there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes, while the data under each theme should cohesively fit together.

This stage encompasses two levels: reviewing and refining themes. The first level requires reviewing coded data quotations, which involves reading through amalgamated quotations for each theme and considering whether these quotations form a consistent pattern. If the researcher finds that candidate themes are creating a coherent and consistent pattern, they can proceed to the second level of this stage. However, if the candidate themes are not coherent, the researcher should check whether the theme itself is problematic or if some quotations within the theme do not align with it. In either case, the researcher needs to work on the theme, create a new theme, find a place for quotations that do not serve the existing theme, or remove them from the analysis. If the researcher believes that candidate themes adequately capture the lines of coded data, they are ready to proceed to the second level of this stage.

The second level involves similar processes, but the operations are conducted across the entire dataset. At this level, the researcher must pay attention to the relevance of individual themes to the dataset. However, the researcher should also consider whether the candidate thematic map accurately reflects the evidence from the entire dataset as a whole. At this stage, the researcher should re-read the entire dataset for two purposes. First, as discussed earlier, to determine if the themes regarding the dataset are working. Secondly, to read the dataset to code the data that may have been overlooked during the early stages of coding into the themes. The need for re-coding from the dataset can be explained by the fact that coding is an ongoing organic process.

After completing all these processes, if the thematic map created by the researcher is working, they can proceed to the next stage. However, if the thematic map does not fit the dataset, the researcher should return to the review and correction process until a satisfactory thematic map is established. This allows the researcher to identify potential new themes, and if the data is relevant and significant, they will start re-coding. It is almost impossible to determine when the coding process will end. However, if the refining process does not yield anything new, it may be time to stop. If the re-coding process evolves into fine-tuning and addressing minor details within a functioning coding framework, coding should be halted.

At the end of this stage, the researcher is expected to have an understanding of the different themes they have created, their compatibility with each other, and their characteristics reflecting the story of the data.

### **Stage Five: Defining and Naming Themes**

The fifth stage begins with the researcher establishing a satisfactory thematic map of their data. At this point, the researcher proceeds to identify and clarify the themes, which they will present for analysis, and analyze the data within these themes. Identifying and clarifying involves determining the essence of each theme and deciding which dimensions of the data each theme covers. The researcher should return to the amalgamated data excerpts for each theme and organize them into a coherent and cohesive narrative. It is expected that the researcher not only interprets the content of the presented data excerpts but also determines what each theme is about and why.

The researcher should write detailed analyses for each theme. They should consider where each theme fits within the overarching narrative of the study. This allows for a focus on both the function of the themes and their relationship with other themes. As part of the refining process, the researcher should determine whether a theme contains sub-themes. Sub-themes can be particularly useful for structuring broad and complex themes and can also be used to demonstrate the hierarchical meaning within the data.

At the end of this stage, the researcher should clearly define what the themes are or are not. Researchers can evaluate the adequacy and functionality of each theme by writing a few sentences explaining the scope and content of each theme. If a theme is not working, further refinement and review work should be carried out on the theme. Theme names should be concise, precise, effective, and should give the reader an immediate idea about the theme.

### **Stage Six: Producing the Report**

The sixth stage begins with the researcher having a set of functional themes and involves writing the research report based on the final analysis. The research report is written to persuade the reader of the complex story derived from the analysis in a valuable and valid manner while staying grounded in the data. The report requires concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive writing that presents the story told by the data within and framed by the themes. When writing the report, themes should be supported with sufficient evidence. For example, quotations should be included in the report to demonstrate the strength of the themes. The researcher should select particularly strong examples or quotations that reflect the essence of the topic they want to convey, without introducing unnecessary complexity. Quotations should be easily identifiable as examples of the issue at hand.

However, writing the report involves more than just presenting the data. Quotations should be embedded within the analytical narrative based on the researcher's data, going beyond mere description and relating to the research questions. In research using thematic analysis technique (see Özden, Uçansoy Baştürk, & Demir, 2015), examples of the process of coding, sub-theming, and theme development are presented in Table 1:



**Table 1.**

*Relationship Between Code, Category, and Theme*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Not studying for the lesson, challenging, desire for excitement	Personal characteristics	Individual Factors
Passing the course, desire for success, desire to achieve high grades	Seeking academic advantage	
Low academic self-esteem	Inadequate academic self-concept	
Failure to review assignments, proctors, personality traits of instructors, lack of seriousness in proctors, indifference of instructors, lack of objectivity in proctors, insensitivity of proctors, inadequacy of instructors, quality of instructors	Attitudes and actions of instructors	Environmental Factors
Competitive education, difficulty of exams, exam system, emphasis on cognitive assessment, lack of consistency between course content and exam content	Competition-based education and exams	
Minimal or intense course content, rote-learning structure of courses, teaching methods, rote-learning system	Content structure and role of the course	
To know what everyone else is doing, socializing, not wanting to embarrass friends, cooperation	Influence of peers	
Students not being punished	Institutional characteristics	
Not wanting to embarrass the family, risk of losing the student's scholarship	Familial and economic reasons	

In the mentioned study, researchers have generated 228 codes. Examples of these codes include “*avoiding studying, desire for high grades, insensitivity of invigilators, difficulty of exams, excessive course content.*” After completing the coding of the data, the researchers grouped them to create meaningful patterns that could form sub-themes. At this stage, names for sub-themes were determined for groups of codes that could form patterns together. In this context, sub-themes such as “*Personal Characteristics, Inadequate Academic Self-Concept, Instructors’ Attitudes and Actions, Institutional Characteristics*” were created. In other words, the researchers clustered the 228 codes to create nine sub-themes. As a result of these processes, the researchers questioned whether the created sub-themes reflected the overall appearance of the data. Through discussions, it was decided that the sub-themes exhibited characteristics to create new patterns. They believed that sub-themes such as “*Personal Characteristics, Academic Achievement, and Inadequate Academic Self-Concept*” could constitute personal reasons for cheating, and by bringing these sub-themes together, they formed the theme “*Individual Factors.*” They defined the theme of individual factors as a feature that does not explain reasons for cheating related to academic procrastination behavior, academic gains, and overcoming low self-efficacy perception. On the other hand,



it was thought that the sub-themes “*Instructors’ Attitudes and Actions, Competition-Based Education and Exams, Content Structure and Role of the Course, Influence of Peers, Institutional Characteristics, Familial and Economic Reasons*” were related to the institutional, economic, and social environment in which the individual is located. They conceptualized this theme as “*Environmental Factors*,” which helps to contextualize cheating behavior within a framework that facilitates, neutralizes, and rationalizes ethical violations.

## **Conclusion**

The preparation phase of content analysis and the data familiarization phase in thematic analysis exhibit similar characteristics. In both stages, researchers are expected to immerse themselves in the data, read through them several times, and grasp the overall meaning. While thematic analysis primarily advises researchers to consider both latent and manifest content in data analysis, researchers using content analysis can choose between manifest (emerging categories) and latent content (emerging themes) before moving on to the next stage of data analysis. Open coding, grouping codes under possible sub-categories/sub-themes or categories/themes, and comparing and associating developing coding clusters with the entire dataset constitute features of the organizing stage, which is the second stage of data analysis in content analysis. This set of analytical processes used in content analysis is performed under the headings of generating initial codes, naming and defining themes, reviewing themes, and exploring themes in thematic analysis.

As previously mentioned, there are many similarities between the data analysis processes in different stages. The terminology used throughout the data analysis process in both approaches contains closely related explanations. In thematic analysis, terms such as data corpus, dataset, data extract, code, and theme are equivalent to the concepts of analysis unit, unit of meaning, condensed meaning unit, code, and category in content analysis, respectively (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The way findings are presented has been widely discussed in both content and thematic analysis. Simply put, the emergence of theme(s) can be considered the result or final product of data analysis. The term “theme” has been associated with many definitions and used interchangeably with other concepts such as category, domain, unit of analysis, stage, process, outcome, and strategy (DeSantis & Noel Ugarriza, 2000). A theme is a structure that integrates different data points into a coherent whole (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). It captures some key points in the data related to the research question and may indicate some meanings or patterns that could answer the research question in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A category primarily refers to a descriptive level of content and can be seen as an expression of the explicitly evident content of the text. On the other hand, a theme can be defined as the interpretation of latent content within the text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Particularly in thematic analysis, themes are often challenging to define as they tend to be abstract (DeSantis & Noel Ugarriza, 2000; Spencer et al., 2003). Additionally, in thematic analysis, a theme does not necessarily have to be tied to quantifiable criteria; instead, it depends on whether something significant related to the overarching research question is found (Spencer et al., 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In content analysis, however, it is possible

to access a theme based on frequency within the text. Content analysis is objective and systematic, focusing on apparent meanings rather than hidden meanings in the document (Bloor & Wood, 2006).

When conducting content analysis, one of the first decisions to be made is whether the analysis will focus on explicit or implicit content. Content analysis deals with interpreting both explicit and implicit content, but the depth of interpretation and level of inference may vary (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Powers & Knapp, 2006). In contrast, thematic analysis integrates both the explicit and implicit aspects of the data. This means that analyzing the hidden aspects of the data is an integral part of the open-ended approach to analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Another characteristic of data analysis in thematic analysis is the creation of a thematic map. This map includes a visual presentation of themes, codes, their relationships, detailed descriptions and explanations of each theme, their criteria, examples, counterexamples, and other relevant details. Additionally, as part of the data analysis process, it helps to review and identify consistent yet distinct themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In both approaches, data analysis processes are not linear but iterative. Nonetheless, regular reviews are essential. The conclusion should take the form of a narrative describing the data in relation to the research question or questions.

The final stage of data analysis in both approaches is reporting research findings. This stage is particularly emphasized as the culmination of the data analysis process in thematic analysis. Additionally, in both approaches, researchers are encouraged to use their creativity to present findings in the form of a narrative, play, film, or other narrative forms, as well as through maps or models. It is emphasized that high-quality data analysis depends on collecting high-quality data. It is the researcher's responsibility to collect quality data and present complex data in an engaging manner that yields interesting findings. After collecting and transcribing data, analysts are advised to immerse themselves in the data through reading and re-reading, paying special attention to participants' behaviors and emotions, in order to capture the overall meaning (Polit & Beck, 2003).

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author declared that this study has received no financial support.


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## Development and Use of the Alphabetical Analysis Technique in Qualitative Research

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### To cite this article

Akbaba Altun, S. (2024). Development and use of the alphabetical analysis technique in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: Theory & Practice*, 2(1), 82-94. <https://doi.org/10.14689/qietp.2024.6>

### Article Info:

Received: 02.06.2024

Revised: 14.06.2024

Accepted: 24.06.2024

### Abstract

Researchers utilize data analysis methods according to the questions they explore and analyze the data accordingly. However, current qualitative techniques may be insufficient, and many different research designs and techniques have been proposed in recent years. As Patton (1990) stated, if there is no existing method or technique suitable for the research, the researcher should develop and conceptualize one. This study first discusses the importance of choosing the appropriate qualitative research method for the research topic. It then explains which analysis technique should be used in qualitative research and depicts the development process of alphabetical analysis. Finally, the alphabetical analysis technique is introduced. Alphabetical analysis provides a framework for presenting content using the letters of the alphabet. The stages of alphabetical analysis consist of five steps: 1) reading the data multiple times and deciding how to analyze it; 2) preparing a table with the letters of the alphabet; 3) placing each feature under the relevant letter; 4) determining the frequency of each concept or word; 5) writing the features under each letter in a meaningful way. This technique aims to make data more understandable and offers a novel approach for qualitative researchers, increasing interest and readability by presenting characteristics of professions in a different format.

### Keywords

qualitative data analysis, alphabetical analysis, data presentation, meaning making.

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## **Introduction**

Researchers utilize data analysis methods according to the questions they explore and analyze the data accordingly. The choice of a method, often framed as an approach (Patton, 1990) or a paradigm (Kuhn, 1996), either contributes to our understanding of a phenomenon or attempts to solve a problem. Yet, it is not always possible to apply the same analysis technique to solve all problems. As Patton (1990) stated, if there is no existing method or technique suitable for the research, the researcher should develop and conceptualize one.

In recent years, many different research designs have been proposed, and techniques have been developed. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016) stated that data analysis in qualitative research involves diversity, creativity, and flexibility, with each qualitative research having different characteristics and requiring new approaches in data analysis. Patton (2002) emphasizes that the final decision in analysis belongs to the researcher, who must use all their intellectual capacity to ensure a fair reflection of the data in transforming collected data into findings according to the research's purpose. Because research depends on the skill, education, insight, and competencies of the researcher at every stage, qualitative analysis ultimately relies on the analytical acumen and style of the researcher.

This study explains the development process and use of an analysis technique called the alphabetical analysis technique by giving an example from a research study exploring the characteristics of school principals. Since the alphabetical analysis technique is a qualitative data analysis technique, the features of qualitative data analysis will be explained first. Then, the development process and usage areas of the alphabetical analysis technique will be described.

## **What is Qualitative Data Analysis?**

Researchers employing qualitative research have expressed various perspectives on qualitative data analysis. Sandelowski (1995) highlights that “one of the most paralyzing moments in conducting qualitative research is beginning analysis” (p.375). She suggests the following steps for starting analysis: “getting a sense of the whole, extracting the facts, identifying key topics or major storylines, and using frameworks to reduce data” (p.371). Kuş (2006) notes that qualitative data analysis styles vary in line with the ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches adopted by researchers. Patton (2002) defines analysis as the transformation of data into findings and emphasizes that there is no strict formula for this transformation, although guiding principles exist. Wolcott (1994) similarly describes qualitative analysis as transforming qualitative data, involving stages of description, analysis, and interpretation. Merriam (2013) views data analysis as the process of making sense of data.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) consider qualitative data analysis an ongoing process that starts in the field and continues after data collection. They stress that qualitative data analysis should be systematic and detailed, comprising stages such as data collection, coding, theme and pattern identification, data visualization, drawing meaningful conclusions,

and report writing. Kvale (1996) describes qualitative analysis as occupying the space between description and interpretation. Miles et al. (2019) see analysis as “three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p.8). Their approach offers a systematic and in-depth process involving data reduction, visualization, and validation. Tools like coding, theme determination, matrices, and graphs facilitate a better understanding of the data and meaningful results. Merriam (2013) also emphasizes the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis, the importance of coding and categorization, the use of the constant comparative method, memoing, contextualization, ensuring trustworthiness, and achieving data saturation. Her framework guides researchers in systematically analyzing qualitative data, ensuring that findings are grounded in the data and reflective of participants’ experiences.

While qualitative data analysis is often given as a separate title in qualitative research books, the data analysis of specific designs is also addressed individually. For example, Türk and Eksi (2017) discuss data analysis in ethnography while explaining ethnographic methods. Saban and Ersoy (2016) explain the analysis of each design separately after outlining qualitative designs. Kvale (1996) suggests five approaches to interview analysis: condensation, categorization, narrative interpretation, and ad hoc methods. Braun and Clarke (2006) report that thematic analysis is a flexible and comprehensive method used to analyze qualitative data, providing a systematic framework with six steps: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This clear framework provides flexibility and applicability for researchers.

Kabakçı Yurdakul (2016) defines qualitative data analysis as the process of creating a holistic, meaningful, and symbolic structure from qualitative data. Patton (2002) emphasizes that qualitative data analysis should be a flexible, creative, and in-depth process. Key elements include closeness to data, coding, theme identification, validation, and drawing meaningful conclusions. Patton’s approach provides a framework suitable for the dynamic and exploratory nature of qualitative data analysis, guiding researchers in deriving meaningful conclusions from their data.

### **Which Analysis Technique Should Be Used in Qualitative Research?**

Qualitative data analysis involves organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data to capture themes and patterns using valid and reliable mechanisms to answer research questions. Patton (2002) states that the suggestions made through analysis can be adapted to suit the researcher’s particular situation and the study’s purpose. However, researchers are obliged to reflect and report their analysis processes, detailing and accurately showing all aspects.

Valid and reliable qualitative data collected through qualitative data collection methods are generally analyzed manually or using computer software. Merriam (2013) considers data analysis a complex process used to answer research questions. Researchers in the field of qualitative research classify and explain qualitative data analysis techniques in various ways. For example, while Miles et al. (2019) focus on visualization in data analysis, linguists



might consider “the text itself as an object of analysis” (Glesne, 2013) and focus on meaning. Sandelowski (1995) argues that a systematic and disciplined approach will avoid empty coding, reduce resistance to starting analysis, and advance the analysis process. It is well-known that many researchers, especially those new to qualitative research, often proceed with previously created codes or themes.

In recent years, with the widespread use of technology and developments in artificial intelligence, AI-based models, especially GPT-based models, have been recommended for qualitative research analysis (Christou, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). As a qualitative researcher, I asked ChatGPT 4.0 how it could be used for qualitative research analysis. After providing detailed information, the conclusion given by ChatGPT 4.0 is summarized below:

*“ChatGPT can be a powerful tool for qualitative research analysis, offering support in summarizing data, generating codes, identifying themes, interpreting findings, and drafting reports. By leveraging ChatGPT’s capabilities, researchers can enhance their analytical process, gain new insights, and streamline their workflow. However, it is crucial to use ChatGPT thoughtfully and ethically, complementing it with the researcher’s expertise and judgment.”*

ChatGPT 4.0, which has recently been a topic of discussion, can be used to organize qualitative data and analyze and visualize it. Additionally, by uploading the raw version of the data you have coded and categorized, you can compare the categories created by ChatGPT with your own. The researcher’s task is to control these processes and check their accuracy.

The most well-known qualitative data analysis methods include content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, grounded theory analysis, and discourse analysis. As a qualitative researcher, I encountered difficulty categorizing my data under limited concepts while conducting research on school principals’ characteristics. When current qualitative techniques were insufficient, I decided to find different ways of presenting and explaining my data in a more understandable format. During this quest, I discovered using letters of the alphabet to explain the characteristics of school principals.

### **How Did the Alphabetical Analysis Technique Emerge?**

Considering that the characteristics of school principals would change significantly in the 2000s, associations related to Educational Administration and Leadership wrote books, conducted research, and organized congresses in the 1990s about the characteristics, competencies, and skills that principals should have in the 21st century. As a researcher in the field, I felt the need to investigate what kind of characteristics school principals, who are at the center of these discussions, think they should possess in the 21st century and to what extent these characteristics reflect the literature. Within this framework, my research explored the question: “What kinds of characteristics should school principals have?”

This research was designed as a qualitative survey study. An online qualitative survey was prepared to reach more diverse participants in a limited time (Jansen, 2010) and to give participants the freedom to answer closed and open-ended questions at their convenience.

The research data were collected online with an open-ended questionnaire via Google Forms, with responses from 83 school administrators from different education levels and 36 different cities.

The following question was posed to school principals: “What kinds of characteristics do you think a school principal should have? Why?” Before analyzing the data, the identified features were read several times. School principals’ opinions were coded according to the concepts expressed. The characteristics of school principals are described in the literature as personality traits, 21st-century skills, competencies, or the top five or top ten characteristics most seen in school principals. In this research, the following procedures were carried out:

1. The characteristics stated by the school principals were listed as 131 characteristics. These characteristics were recoded as personality characteristics and professional characteristics. However, it was observed that some characteristics were not differentiated into either personality or professional characteristics and were coded as common. Of these, 62 characteristics were stated as professional characteristics, 35 characteristics were coded as both personality and professional characteristics, and 34 were coded as personality traits.
2. These codes were reviewed by experts, who suggested that the two headings (personality and professional) were too general and would benefit from being more detailed. However, as seen in the personality traits listed below, it was challenging to categorize the mentioned traits under specific categories:

*Characteristics of school principals coded as personal characteristics include: patient, empathetic, honest, charismatic, tolerant, determined, hard-working, disciplined, flexible, self-sacrificing, cultured, calm and emotionally controlled, intelligent, dynamic, humorous, energetic, trustworthy, enterprising, relaxed, well-intentioned, protective, modest, cheerful, clear, able to share, prudent, respectful, tolerant, consistent, and conciliatory.*

3. The identified characteristics of school principals were also coded as technical, human, and conceptual characteristics, but many characteristics did not fit these concepts.
4. The top ten most frequently mentioned features identified in the introduction of the research were determined, but more than a hundred features remained unclassified beyond the top ten.
5. A matrix was created to examine how much the characteristics determined by school principals reflect 21st-century skills, and these skills were checked.

After all these trials, it was found that some features did not fit into the established categories, and forcing them into such categories would cause a loss of meaning. Therefore, recognizing that flexibility and creativity are essential for qualitative data analysis, I decided it would be more appropriate to specify a broader range of features rather than limiting them to

specific categories. To prevent the loss of meaning, I chose to write each feature under the corresponding letter of the Turkish alphabet. This approach serves as an alternative for researchers who do not wish to categorize their data under specific themes and categories, allowing practitioners to present the characteristics of their profession in more detail. Additionally, presenting the characteristics in this novel format was expected to increase interest and readability of the study. For example, the ABCs of being a School Principal. Ultimately, the aim is to convey the features directly to the reader as expressed by the participants, without being overly conceptual.

### **Alphabetic Analyzing Steps**

The steps of alphabetical analysis consist of five stages, each explained below:

**Step 1: Reading the Data Multiple Times and Deciding How to Analyze It.** First, you need to read your data multiple times to understand whether it can be organized according to certain categories or themes. Assess if you can create a classification, category, or theme based on what you read. If there is difficulty in making categories and too many features are reflected, you can code and use alphabetical analysis.

**Step 2: Preparing a Table with the Letters of the Alphabet.** After all the data is coded, it should be checked whether the features could be categorized according to specific categories again. If there are too many features that cannot be included under a certain category or theme, and these features would lose their meaning under such categories, then the features will be listed under the corresponding letter in the prepared alphabet table.

**Step 3: Putting Each Feature Under the Relevant Alphabet.** While writing each feature under the relevant alphabet letter, also note how often each specified feature is mentioned. See the display below.

**Table 1**

*Principal's Qualities*

A -Frequency	B -Frequency	C -Frequency	Ç -Frequency
Adaletli (15) Anlayışlı (9) Adil (4) Azimli (2) <b>Alanında uzman</b> Alicıları her zaman açık Anında müdahale edebilmeli- Aidiyetli olmalı Araştıran olmalı	Bilgili (6) Becerili Bilimsel gelişmeleri takip eden Babacan Bütünleyici Bulunduğu ortamda etki yaratmalı		<b>Çözüm odaklı (4)</b> Çalışkan (2) Çevresi olan Çevre ilişkisini yönetebilmeli Çalışanları tam kapasite çalıştırabilmeli
D -Frequency	E -Frequency	F -Frequency	G -Frequency
<b>Dinlemeyi bilmeli (3)</b> Donanımlı(3) Dürüst (3) Disiplinli (2) Dinamik Değişime açık Destekleyen Dirayetli Değer gören <b>Duygularını kontrol edebilen</b> <b>Duygudaşlık kurabilen</b>	Empati kurabilen/yapabilen (4) Esnek-esnek olmalı (2) Eşit mesafeyi sağlamalı <b>Etkili iletişim sağlamalı</b> Esprili olmalı Entelektüel olmalı Enerjik Ekip ruhu ile hareket eden Eleştiriye açık	<b>Fedakâr (2)</b> Farklılıklara saygı gösteren	Güvenilir olma(6) Gelişmeleri takip eden(2) <b>Gelişime açık olmak (2)</b> Görevin bilincinde olmak- Güçlü yönlerini bilmek Görev ahlakı Geleceği görmek Güven vermeli Girişimci Güç kaynaklarını iyi kullanabilmeli Geniş olmalı(Rahat olmalı)
H -Frequency	I -Frequency	İ -Frequency	J -Frequency
Hoşgörülü (3) Herkesle eşit mesafede olmak (2) Hakkaniyetli olma Huzurlu çalışma ortamı oluşturmalı		İletişim güçlü olmalı/ iyi olmalı/iletişim becerilerine sahip/iletişim cambazı/iletişime açık (16) İnsan ilişkileri iyi olmalı/ insancıl becerileri olan (6) İyi bir eğitimci/eğitim bilimci olma(2) İşbirliğine açık olan(2) İşini sevmeli <b>İyi bir dinleyici olmalı</b> İnisiyatif alabilmeli İyi niyetli olmalı İnsanlara inanıp bunu insanlara yansıtabilmek İnsanlara değer vermeli İsteklendirme unsurlarını keşfetmek İletişimi iyi olanlara pozitif bakabilmeli İstisare etmeli İdareci olmalıİradeli olmalı İşlere öncülük etmeli	

K -Frequency	L -Frequency	M -Frequency	N -Frequency
<p>Karizmatik (3) Kültürlü (2) Kararlı(2) Kendini sürekli geliştiren(2) Kriz yönetimi güçlü Koruyucu Karar verme süreçlerini iyi bilmeli Kişisel gelişime açık Kavramsal becerileri olan Kıfayetli Karar alabilen Kapsayıcı Kendini güncel tutan Kurumdaki üyeleri harekete geçirmeli Kaynakları amacına uygun doğru kullanmalı</p>	<p>Lider olmalı-lider ruhuna sahip olmalı ve liderlik etmeli (16) Liyakat sahibi olmalı</p>	<p>Mevzuata hakim olmalı (2) Motivasyon gücü Mesleki gelişime açık olmak Mesleki tecrübesi olmalı Manipülasyon yapabilmeli Mütevazı olmalı</p>	<p>Ne istediğini ne yaptığını bilen olmalı Neşeli Net olmalı Nazik Net bir kişilik</p>
O -Frequency	Ö -Frequency	P -Frequency	R -Frequency
<p>Organizasyon becerisi olmalı(3) Otokontrolü yüksek olmalı Ortak hedef oluşturma Otoriter Okul-aile işbirliğini önemsemeli Ortak akılla yönetimi benimsemeli Objektif</p>	<p>Öngörülü(2) Önyargısız Örnek olunmalı Öğretimsel lider Öğrenmeye açık olmalı Öğretmenleri mesleki geliştirmeye teşvik etmeli Ötekileştirmeyen Özverili olma</p>	<p>Planlama/program yapma becerisi (3) Pratik olmalı (2) Profesyonel Problem çözen Potansiyeli ortaya çıkarma becerisine sahip Paylaşımçı (lider) Paylaşmayı bilen Personele değer veren</p>	<p>Risk alabilen Risk yönetebilmeli Rol model</p>
S -Frequency	Ş -Frequency	T -Frequency	U -Frequency
<p>Sabırlı(13) Sorumlulukların bilincinde olan(4) Sakin (2) Sorumluluk almaya ve sorumluluk vermeye hazır olmak Sorun çözme becerisi yüksek Sorunları yakından takip eden Sağduyulu Saygı sevgi göstermeli/görmeli Sevgi ve saygıya dayalı disiplini benimsemeli Sorunlara pratik çözümler üretebilmeli Saygılı Sosyal becerisi yüksek</p>	<p>Şeffaf (2)</p>	<p>Tecrübeli (2) Tarafsız(2) Teknik becerisi olan (2) Tolere etme özelliği olmalı Temsil yeteneği olan Tutarlı Tüm branşlarda fikir sahibi olmalı Tahammüllü Teknolojik gelişmelere açık</p>	<p>Uzman olmalı Uzlaştırıcı</p>

Ü -Frequency	V -Frequency	Y -Frequency	Z -Frequency
	Vizyoner/Vizyon sahibi (6)	Yenilikçi/yeniliklere açık (10) Yönetişim ile okulu yönetmek/yönetişim uzmanı olmak (4) Yetkin Yol gösterici Yönetim süreçlerini uygulama becerisine sahip Yönetmeyi bilmeli Yetenekli Yetkisini dağıtabilmeli Yönlendirici Yapıcı	Zeki (2) Zayıf yönlerini bilen

In the table above, under each letter are the characteristics that school principals expected to have. These features can be written under each letter (See step 5). Again, there are different colors in the table above. These colors reflect words that evoke the same concept but are expressed in different words. These words are especially important when you determine the frequency related to that concept. In my study, I wanted to look at the top ten characteristics that reflect school principals. I had to look at the first ten features according to the words that reflect that feature and the frequencies. For example, there were many words expressing the concept of leadership. I put them under the concept of leadership and looked at its frequency. Thus, I identified the most frequently recurring feature. Researchers who will analyze in this way can put a feature expressed in different words under a concept or category and analyze it in that way as well.

**Step 4: Determine the Frequency of the Concept or the Word.** A list is created to see under which feature the data features are gathered in terms of frequency. In this research, if a feature was expressed with different words, they were included under one word to determine the frequency. For example, being a visionary, being foresighted, and seeing the future were expressed under different letters. They were listed under “vision” as a feature when viewed by frequency under one word.

**Step 5: Writing the Features Under Each Letter in a Meaningful Way.** Write the features under each letter in a meaningful way. The characteristics stated by the school principals participating in the research were written under the letter of the alphabet that started with that letter, and then those characteristics were written meaningfully with a title. For example, school principals’ characteristics starting with the letters A and B are written as follows.

**A harfinde müdürde olması beklenen özellikler:** Okul müdürü adaletli (15), anlayışlı (9), adil (4), azimli (2), alanında uzman, alıcıları her zaman açık, aidiyetli ve araştıran olmalıdır.

**B harfinde müdürde olması beklenen özellikler:** Okul müdürü bilgili (6), becerili, bilimsel gelişmeleri takip eden, babacan, bütünleyici ve bulunduğu ortamda etki yaratmalıdır.

When writing article in any other foreign languages, the features appear differently. The features below the Turkish letters A and B have been added so that you can see how they change when written in English. Therefore, each researcher can analyze by using the letters of his/her country's alphabet and place the feature starting with that letter among the features specified in the table.

**Characteristics expected in the principal with the letter A:** The school principal should be fair (15), understanding (9), fair (4), determined (2), an expert in his field, always open to the recipients, committed and inquisitive.

**Characteristics expected in the principal with the letter B:** The school principal should be knowledgeable (6), skillful, follow scientific developments, fatherly, integrative and create an impact in the environment he is in.

### **How and Where Could Alphabetic Analysis Be Used?**

The technique you choose for qualitative research should align with your research questions, objectives, and the nature of your data. Each technique offers unique advantages and is best suited for different types of inquiries. For instance, thematic analysis is versatile and widely applicable, grounded theory is ideal for theory generation, phenomenological analysis is suited for exploring lived experiences, and ethnographic analysis is best for studying cultural contexts. Ultimately, the choice of technique should be guided by what will best help you achieve your research goals and provide meaningful insights into your research topic. If existing analysis methods cannot answer your research question or reflect your data meaningfully, you can develop a new analysis method.

Alphabetic analysis provides a framework for the rich and detailed presentation of content using the letters of the alphabet. With this framework, researchers can make data more understandable and present it in a clearer manner to the reader. This approach offers a novel analysis technique for researchers conducting qualitative research. It serves as an alternative for researchers who have difficulty categorizing their data under specific themes and categories. Moreover, it allows practitioners to present the characteristics of their professions as expressed by those in the field in greater detail. Additionally, presenting the characteristics in this novel format is expected to increase interest and readability of the study. Alphabetical analysis aims to convey and translate features directly to the reader as expressed by the participants, without being overly conceptual. In the mentioned research, features were determined under each letter and their frequencies were noted. However, other researchers may explain or thematize their data under specific categories if the features under the letters are similar or related.

The Alphabetical Analysis Technique is particularly well-suited for qualitative data or studies where the data is rich, detailed, and diverse, and where traditional categorization methods might lead to a loss of nuance or meaning. This technique is flexible and creative, making it suitable for a variety of research contexts. Descriptive studies, survey studies and document analysis are some types of data or studies that could benefit from alphabetical

analysis. Descriptive studies that related with profiles of individuals or professions like characteristics of leaders, teachers, students, or any other group with diverse traits can be suitable for alphabetical analysis. Responses from surveys with open-ended questions where participants provide a wide range of answers and qualitative feedback from stakeholders, such as customers, employees, or community members could be analysed by alphabetical analysis technique. Alphabetical analysis can be applicable for document analysis mainly related with analysis of policy documents, legal texts, historical texts, letters, archival materials or educational curriculums where specific features or elements need to be highlighted.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author declared that this study has received no financial support.



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