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Editorial

Ali Ersoy¹ 

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Dear readers,

I am delighted to share with you the final issue of the journal *Qualitative Research in Education: Theory and Practice (QIETP)* for 2025. There are a total of five articles in this issue, including four research articles and one review article. I am grateful to our esteemed authors and referees for their contributions to QIETP. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors and reviewers who contributed to this issue with their valuable work.

The first research article in this issue is titled "Considerations for the Use of Online Open-Ended Survey Questions in Educational Research on Youth Experience of the School System" by Michelle Dusko Biferie, Johanna Sam, Bowen Xiao, and Jennifer Shapka. The authors sought to answer the question of how qualitative methods could respond to criticism that education psychology research examines personal and relational issues using impersonal methods. In this context, online open-ended survey is presented as a "middle way" for interpretive researchers who value the rigor of qualitative methods and positivist researchers who want to use qualitative methods for large amounts of data. Therefore, it can be said that the study offers an insightful perspective on a current topic.

The second study is a research article titled "How Do Asylum Seeker Students Make Sense of Social Studies?" conducted by Arife Figen Ersoy, and Nurullah Seyidoğlu. Researchers examined the experiences of refugee students in social studies at schools in Türkiye. Based on this examination, they drew conclusions about the development and adaptation processes of refugee students in the context of social studies. The study appears to offer important findings regarding refugee education in terms of examining the experiences of refugee students within the scope of a course using qualitative methods.

The third study is a research article titled "An In-depth Examination of the Online Fluency Development Approach for Addressing Reading Difficulties." by Gülizar Nacar. In his study, the author has thoroughly examined the online fluency development approach in overcoming reading difficulties from a qualitative perspective. The study has shown that the online fluency development approach increases the student's reading speed. The study provides important insights for overcoming reading difficulties.

The fourth article in this issue is a research article by Nai-Chneg Kuo. The title of his article is "Examining the Role of AI in Qualitative Research: Insights from Document Analysis of Daisaku Ikeda's Peace Proposal." The author has examined the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in qualitative data analysis, a current and controversial topic, by analyzing Daisaku Ikeda's 2020 peace proposal,

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thereby practically investigating how concerns and challenges in this area arise. It can be said that this is an important study in understanding the use of AI in qualitative data analysis and the answers to some critical questions that arise.

The final article in this issue is Erin Nerlino's review article titled "Critical Validities: A Framework for Qualitative Research." In Nerlino's study, the issue of validity in qualitative research is addressed comprehensively. There are numerous studies in the literature that evaluate the issue of validity in qualitative research from different dimensions. Some of these even propose criteria. In this study, the author discusses five types of validity for qualitative research: contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, and transformative validity.

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. I would like to take this opportunity to wish our editors, reviewers, and readers a happy and healthy year.

Professor Ali Ersoy

Editor-in-Chief

Keywords

QIETP, editorial, qualitative approach, Asylum Seeker Students, AI in qualitative research, reading difficulties, online open-ended survey, validity in qualitative research

Considerations for the Use of Online Open-Ended Survey Questions in Educational Research on Youth Experience of the School System

Michelle Dusko Biferie¹  Johanna Sam²  Bowen Xiao³  Jennifer Shapka⁴ 

To cite this article

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Abstract

Purpose: Educational psychology research practices have been criticised for using impersonal methods to study personal and relational topics. In response to these tensions, there is a push towards more qualitative research in educational psychology and growing use of youth-friendly research approaches to increase youth participation. We are proposing the use of stand-alone online open-ended surveys as a ‘middle way’ for researchers who are sensitive to the criticisms around rigour around qualitative research in educational psychology and for positivist researchers who wish to use a qualitative method to tackle large amounts of data.

Method: Using open-ended data from a longitudinal school-administered survey on adolescent student perceptions of teacher rapport, our five steps (entry into the field, responder and non-responder analysis, data preparation, data analysis and interpretation) describe how to triangulate and crystallize data within the survey to enhance rigour and argue that holistic data management, coding within the data set and across multiple questions yields a rethinking of triangulation and crystallization. Our approach yielded four themes that honored the diversity of student perspectives: “Pull and Push”, “Holding the students hand”, “The teacher is the school” and “Solo flyers”. We provide examples of the richness of data achievable through this method.

Findings: Our findings show that teachers’ relational skills are valued by students and are important in fostering positive student learning dispositions for deeper understanding of content and lessons.

Implications: We encourage researchers to consider analyzing online open-ended survey data using an interpretivist lens to honor student diversity and inclusion in school-based research.

Keywords

youth, school-based research, survey, interpretivism, online methods

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Background

Educational psychology research practices have been criticized for using impersonal methods to study personal and relational topics (Newman & Clare, 2016), most notably how students learn and the underlying cognitive, emotional and social processes that drive learning (Immordino-Yang et al., 2025). Despite the complexity of the dynamics in the school environment, most research in educational psychology is siloed; “qualitative and quantitative research traditions continue to exist and develop in disconnected spaces [and] present a risk to coherence in the psychological sciences” (Wallace & Kuo, 2020, p. 579).

In response to these tensions, there is a push towards more qualitative research in educational psychology; indeed, this research enterprise seeks to understand context and to describe and make meaning of human experiences, often resulting in great, realistic detail (Lim, 2025). Because the focus of interpretative research is people (the researcher as a researcher instrument) and learning about people, it is inherently relational (Newman & Clare, 2016). Despite the growth of qualitative research publications in educational psychology, issues around methodological integrity and rigour abound, mostly from misunderstandings from positivist researchers as to what constitutes ‘rigour’ in qualitative research (Meyer & Schutz, 2020; LaDonna et al., 2018).

In addition to the growing impetus for qualitative research in psychology in general, there is a growing involvement of youth (aged 12 to 18 years) in educational research. This interest stems partly from children’s rights to participation and the recognition of youths as experts in their own lives and identities and sense of personal agency (Kirk, 2007). Discussion around dismantling the ‘patriarchal’ treatment of youth as inherently fragile and unsuitable ‘subjects’ for research on sensitive topics that affect their lives is yielding a growing awareness of the identities of youth. Various frameworks have been proposed to engage youth in research with the understanding that youth participation lies on a continuum from consultation to empowerment (Eckhoff, 2019).

Acknowledging that children and youth should not be passive objects of research inquiry but active participants in the creation and generation of knowledge has resulted in significant interest in community and participatory qualitative research with youth (Tilley & Taylor, 2018). However, community-based approaches (digital or not) and other qualitative methodologies that require deep engagement with participants, as most do, are often not entirely feasible in the study of school environments and the relationships that support student success. The demand on school communities to support such intensive research, the time required to build rapport, trust, and school community buy-in, gaining consent from parents, and the rather intrusive nature of researchers being present at school activities for observation are challenging for researchers to navigate. Additionally, the personal disclosure from teachers and students is problematic despite the best efforts by researchers to mitigate these concerns and in light of the numerous challenges schools are experiencing to simply teach the curriculum and support students (Kristjansson et al., 2013).

Community participatory research is often seen as a remedy for the involvement of marginalized youth in educational research (Rodriguez Espinosa & Verney, 2021). Attention to marginalized identities, and how best to engage marginalized youth in a way that honours their voice and diversity (i.e. culture, race) and that promotes equity and their agency to the extent that is

developmentally appropriate, are also growing trends. Marginalized youth, such as those from racialized or immigrant backgrounds, neurodiverse or LGBTQ communities, are heavily under-represented in educational research (Matthews & López, 2020). Most research on marginalized youth frames their experiences from deficit perspectives with poor representation of marginalized youth voice and perspectives (Kumar & DeCuir-Gunby, 2023). Indeed, marginalized youth are ‘researched on’ as opposed to ‘involved’ or consulted in the research processes that impact their representation to the scholarly community (Tilley & Taylor, 2018). Some of the root causes of their lack of visibility are rooted in logistical issues surrounding researchers gaining access to places where youth feel comfortable sharing their stories. Also relevant are the power imbalances and trust issues typical of the research process, involving youth exposure and disclosure to powerful and unfamiliar adults from communities that are typically not their own (Teixeira et al., 2021).

The recognition of these factors has resulted in a push towards more ‘youth-friendly’ research engagement approaches (Flanagan et al., 2015). To increase access to youth and youth engagement, researchers are exploring digital research approaches such as digital storytelling, voice recording and blogs that engage youth, the same technologies that have become central to their lives and that are used to build and grow their relationships with others (Flanagan et al., 2015). Digital and online approaches have been shown to increase participation in marginalized and otherwise hard-to-reach populations (Murthy, 2008) with youth reporting greater psychological safety in the form of increased anonymity and confidentiality with their use (Kelly et al., 2020; McDermott et al., 2013). We are proposing the use of stand-alone online open-ended surveys as a ‘middle way’ for researchers who are sensitive to the criticisms around rigour around qualitative research in educational psychology and for positivist researchers who wish to use a qualitative method to tackle large amounts of data. In summary, we propose an innovative approach to circumvent some of the challenges of studying the ‘personal with impersonal methods’ with youth in educational research.

Surveys as Qualitative Research Tools

Surveys are especially useful in collecting or generating large amounts of data about many participants, making them well-suited to exploring school-based phenomena. Online data collection in particular has the ability to reach a diversity of people, transcend geographic boundaries and comes with relative ease of development and administration (Topp & Pawloski, 2002). Of particular interest is the use of open-ended survey questions (or free text responses), which have often been used to supplement number-based or quantitative studies. This question type provides the necessary context to yield more insights and enables participants to provide additional information (Kelly et al., 2020). Open-ended questions have been perceived as additional data, a research ‘nice to have’ rather than a research method in its own right (Kelly et al., 2020). At best, open-ended survey questions (OESQ) add ‘richness’ to quantitative data, findings and analysis.

As our digital lives encompass more of our day-to-day lives, collecting and using online data makes research more accessible to populations such as youth who otherwise would be difficult to reach and engage in a comfortable fashion than the more personal and geographically limiting in-

person interview with unfamiliar adults (Flanagan et al., 2015). Studies on response rates have shown that when questionnaires are administered digitally in a school setting, response rates are high, up to 80% (Raspberry et al., 2018), in contrast to an average of 44% among randomly surveyed adults online (Wu et al., 2022). Indeed, online survey use reduces perceived power imbalances between youth and adults, as perceived by youth (Kirk, 2007). The impetus to redress power imbalances between youth and researchers is crucial in light of the growing need to recognize youth as agentic and powerful participants in the research process and to enable more youth to participate in research about their schooling experiences.

Similarly, online surveys are able to elicit more honest responses, especially about sensitive topics, compared to face-to-face interviewing or interactions (McCabe et al., 2004). Likewise, the lure of reaching hard-to-reach populations, which often have very unique, traumatic and rare experiences that are of great interest to qualitative researchers, is now more easily reached by an internet connection, a click of a button, and the near anonymity provided by online-mediated interactions (McInroy, 2016).

Beyond the use of online open-ended survey questions (OESQ) for quantitative and mixed methods studies is the growing debate on the use of these types of questions as standalone qualitative research projects. The impetus for this re-imagining of the use of OESQ stems partly from perhaps unfounded criticism from positivist researchers about the low ecological validity of qualitative studies. The growing awareness of making qualitative research more accessible to wider audiences and more applicable to wider contexts is encouraging qualitative researchers to ‘think outside the box’ of more traditional data collection procedures such as the ‘gold standard’ semi-structured interview. Using a dataset from Cyberteens, a school-based longitudinal study employing online open-ended survey question (OESQ) investigating the impact of teachers on student learning dispositions and learning behaviours, we will illustrate approaches to and discuss considerations with working with the data that honours 1) student diversity, agency and voice, aspirations in line with bridging the siloes of educational psychological research and; 2) creating rigorous, ‘youth-friendly’ qualitative methods of research engagement. In doing so, we will provide examples of the richness of online open-ended survey responses and discuss alternatives to using additional data sources in triangulation and crystallization approaches to achieve rigour using a qualitative research approach.

We will introduce the epistemological differences between using online OESQ from a post-positivist and interpretative perspective followed by a discussion on how to understand online OESQ response patterns to learn about respondents. We elaborate on the need for youth-friendly online open-ended survey questions and the possible richness of responses that goes beyond the number of responses. To illustrate a new method for analyzing large data sets we will discuss 1) entry into the field and collaborating with school communities to best capture student diversity; 2) A comparison between responders’ and non-responders’ sociodemographic characteristics enabling a discussion about the importance of youth-friendly design and school-friendly data collection procedures; 3) potential ways to prepare the data for analysis; 4) Data analysis and interpretation and lastly, 5) Additional considerations, directions for future research and limitations of our proposed method. Borrowing from Tracy’s conceptualization of rigour for qualitative

research approaches, we illustrate how online open-ended survey responses can be triangulated and crystallized within the original dataset while respecting multivocality to lend the data to credible interpretations. Direct quotes from high school students are provided to illustrate richness and possible interpretations of the data using a pre-existing framework.

Post-positivist and Interpretative Use of Survey Data

In order to provide sufficient background on OESQ to be more relevant to qualitative data collection methods in educational psychology, a discussion on the differences between positivist and interpretative use of survey data is necessary. Positivists perspectives on survey design posit that reality is shared, exists outside of our minds and is objectively known. Additionally, respondents are able to accurately perceive and report on reality and that language is medium or conduit through which participants convey reality to others (Junjie, M., & Yingxin, 2022). In light of these understandings, positivists create survey questions to minimize various respondent biases (biases rooted in the person answering the questions) and design biases (biases in survey construction that influence how respondents answer) or noise in their data to get at the truth. Indeed, survey designers acknowledge examples of biases such as extreme-end responding, down the middle responding, priming effects, ‘survey fatigue’ and the like (Stantcheva, 2023; Burruss & Johnson, 2021). These biases are often based on cultural habituation and modes of communicating; for example, cultural psychology studies exploring the differences between East Asian and Hispanic populations showed evidence that East Asians tend to answer surveys in the mid-range of possible responses. In contrast, Hispanics tend to answer in the extremes (Heine & Ruby, 2010).

In contrast, Kelly et al., 2020 argue that survey and question construction should be understood from an interpretativist perspective. Borrowing perspectives from the social constructionist approach, which informs many qualitative methodologies, language is not a medium of conveying information, but a highly dynamic social action between two or more interlocutors (Raclaw et al., 2020). Completion of surveys, then, is a form of this social action and so-called response biases are a product of the limitation of human computer interaction. Raclaw et al. 2020 continue explaining that humans actually activate a frame of interaction and scripts that we use for human-human interaction for human-computer interaction. We imagine we are talking to real people, but we are not. Survey completion, therefore, is a contrived interaction for humans, requiring the need to make this interaction more ‘more human’ or ‘more natural’. The most common approach is to imagine that we are discussing the questions with a real person (Raclaw et al., 2020). The result is the reflection of the mood, approach and perspectives a human is making meaning of the experience of completing a survey and answering questions.

The structure of the survey, its design and how participants interact with it are not noise, but nuggets of data for the qualitative researcher. These so-called ‘biases’ are data in themselves; they are the participants and can imply their demographic backgrounds. Response biases tell us something about the survey-human interaction through the generation of language and the co-creation of knowledge (Kelly et al., 2020). As for the criticism that surveys offer de-contextualized data, one needs simply to analyze how respondents are answering the questions and who these respondents are to be provided with ample context to make sense of what is being meant or implied

by the responses. We can shift our gaze to who the respondent is in addition to their responses. As with most survey data, individuals who choose not to answer the question tend to vary considerably from those that do. The most salient example is that women are more likely to answer OESQ than men (Miller & Lambert, 2014). The choice to answer the question reflects participants' agency, which is akin to their choice to participate in an interview or not. We can also learn about the identities of those showing up and those who feel they have been excluded, as evidenced by non-participation.

The implications for educational psychology or any psychology that seeks to engage youth, for that matter, is that much can be learned about which youth *choose* to participate in research and how. Attempts to be as inclusive as possible to encourage more youth to participate encourages careful wording of questions. From a positivist perspective questions may be written in rigid ways with careful attention to jargon or including definitions of any key terms. Whereas from an interpretivist perspective questions may be worded in a more casual or conversational manner to promote a 'rapport' or a 'relationship' of sorts. Regardless of approach, we can expect to see variation in responses based on how questions are asked and how they are presented online.

Additionally, to know who is 'showing up' in the data, we can analyze the text with differing levels of depth (Kelly et al. 2020). As positivist- interpretivist epistemological differences lie on a continuum, we can also approach textual analysis of OESQ responses from a socially constructivist perspective. Positivists analyze textual data on the surface level. That is not to say that these approaches are not sophisticated or lacking in rigour; using computer assisted technologies, researchers can generate word frequencies, mine the data for most commonly used words, statistically analyze chosen units of analysis called n-grams (one, two, or three word grouping that represent some kind of unit of meaning) (ten Kleij & Musters, 2003; Jaeger & Rasmussen, 2021). Researchers even code the data using auto-code approaches based on prescribed parameters created by humans and code responses in positive, negative and neutral responses, called expressive coding (Hai-Jew, 2022). Positivist researchers attempt to clean their data, removing noise items or those that are not easily understood or that seem irrelevant, again, to remove biases or 'nonsense' responses (Jackson & Trochim, 2002; Elliott, 2022).

Our approach to analyzing OESQ responses is also an alternative to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in qualitative research. AI services such as ChatGPT and deep learning models are gaining traction among researchers who primarily use these technologies to gain familiarity with their data, to conduct superficial coding and to check their analyses. However, the use of AI is fraught with many challenges, including yielding unreliable analyses, issues around originality of the analyses, and positionality of the researcher and authoring of the findings and related ethical concerns such as biased content (Christou, 2023). These grave concerns reflect the epistemological debates about how knowledge is constructed, for whom and for what purpose noting the inherent biases that are introduced by the technology itself. Many studies highlight the need for strong human oversight when using these technologies ultimately reducing their value as 'robot research assistants'. When we ascribe meaning-making to machines, the end product reflects machine thinking, which undermines our goal of understanding human relationality and perspectives.

While the use of computer-assisted technologies has significantly reduced the work of positivists researchers, qualitative researchers that seek to understand meaning have to resort to more laborious methods because computers don't generate meaning, humans do (Popping et al., 2015). While becoming familiar with one's data is a crucial step in all qualitative methodologies, a step that can certainly benefit from tools from the positivist researchers' toolbox, the qualitative researcher must dig deeper in the data and move beyond simple description (Hai-Jew, 2022). There is unfortunately no way to get around analyzing hundreds if not thousands of lines of text; interpretative paradigms requires interpretation of the data, rather than mere exploration (ten Kleij & Musters, 2003).

At first glance, the amount of data possible from OESQ responses appears overwhelming. However, a closer examination of the volume of data reveals some interesting parallels to the weight of data from semi-structured interviews. Using NUD*IST package, the precursor software to NVivo, Higgins et al. (2000) took one minute to code each half-line of text from open-ended survey responses. The study also showed that a survey with 500 respondents answering 4 open-ended questions resulted in 1000 lines of text, which equated to 2,000 minutes of coding, which adds up to 39 hours of work. Likewise, a meta-analysis indicated that data saturation, or the point at which there are no changes to the codebook explains how much data is needed to identify a theme:

In the literature, 85% of researchers used a convenience sample, with a median size of 167 participants (interquartile range [IQR] = 69 – 406). In our simulation study, the probability of identifying at least one new theme for the next included subject was 32%, 24%, and 12% after the inclusion of 30, 50, and 100 subjects, respectively. The inclusion of 150 participants at random resulted in the identification of 92% themes (IQR = 91 – 93%) identified in the original study (Tran, Porcher, Falissard, & Ravaud, 2016, p. 88).

In summary, there needs to be a minimum of at least 150 people for one theme to be identified. Braun and Clarke applied a more qualitative analysis to find a theme in open-ended responses' one needs at least 500 lines of responses but only 300 lines to be able to apply codes; comparable to analyzing half an interview in narrative form (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The point here is that with a sufficient number of respondents, one can achieve comparable volume and richness of data. Because responses are brief, they alone are not 'rich' however, in aggregate and within the sample, there is diversity and heterogeneity that would not be achievable with interviews. There is sufficient heterogeneity of responses to devise codes and themes to facilitate deeper analysis, especially after 500 participants (Jaeger & Rasmussen, 2021). While there may deceptively be more data from OESQ, the reality is that it is the form of the data in the lines of seemingly unrelated text that is unfamiliar for qualitative researchers, rather than it's volume.

In line with other researchers who are advocating for more adaptive and perhaps modern approaches to data collection, we clarify that we are not de-emphasizing the role and utility of traditional qualitative methods. In contrast, we argue that OESQ and surveys are a very adaptable and flexible method that could be useful for a variety of qualitative methodologies in educational psychology. We acknowledge the major criticisms of this approach, namely the perceived lack of context, depth of responses or richness, inflexibility, and the inability to probe respondents to ask clarifying questions to co-create the 'richness' or valid and authentic responding so integral to the

interpretivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Instead, we provide an example of how to use OESQ in a systematic way for qualitative research in education, while addressing the advantages and limitations using Tracy's 8 criteria for excellent qualitative research (Tracy, 2010; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). To date, in our opinion, Tracy's articulation of rigour is the most comprehensive reflecting commonalities across most if not all qualitative methodologies.

Qualitative Research Rigour Criteria

As with most evolving data collection methods, issues around rigour and quality are of central concern. In 2010, Tracy published "Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research" in which she argued for a more systematised and universal criterion for evaluating qualitative studies across various interpretivist approaches. She identified eight criteria (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence that could be applied to determine methodological quality while at the same time "leaving space for dialogue, imagination, growth, and improvisation" (Tracy, 2010 p. 837). We would like to incorporate some of her thinking in addressing some of the concerns raised over the use of OESQ responses as standalone research projects, namely, credibility. We believe these criteria are uniquely relevant to the discussion on the use of open-ended survey responses, judging from the criticisms of their use. Tracy's modified framework will be used to critically examine the feasibility of maintaining rigour in the use of online open-ended survey questions in qualitative ways.

In terms of credibility, Tracy encourages researchers to think about how to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. She argues that through practices such a thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality, credibility can be achieved, yielding a research project that is both rigorous and accessible to a wider audience. Thick description includes noting what is being said and what is not being said and who is doing the talking, showing meaning rather than telling readers what to think, and tacit knowledge that "transcends the immediate surface of speech, texts, or discursive materials" revealing hidden assumptions, meanings and all things taken for granted in speech (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

Through triangulation and crystallization, researchers are encouraged to provide different facets of exploration, scope, understanding and consistent interpretation of thick description. Triangulation, an offshoot of more quantitative studies seeks to find one single truth, is often referred to in qualitative paradigms as the use of multiple data methods and theoretical lenses. In other words, data and findings are shaped by their means of production (Bloor, 2001 in Tracy, 20210). Crystallization, however, "assumes that the goal of doing so is not to provide researchers with a more valid singular truth, but to open up a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

Lastly, multivocality, refers to the plurality of voices and multiple opinions and Tracy argues that this can be achieved with "intense collaboration with participants" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). While she argues for in-person interactions, we show that multiple opinions can also be achieved in textual form with sufficient numbers of respondents. We would like to demonstrate that analysis of OESR can be done with attention to rigour as defined by qualitative methodologists.

Current Study

This paper adopts an interpretivist lens to examine survey data, focusing on the subjective meanings and lived experiences of youth in digital contexts. The data are drawn from *Cyberteens*, a broader longitudinal research project spanning four waves of data collection. The project investigates adolescents' use of online technologies and their implications for mental health and academic outcomes. Data collection took place separately at each school between October 2023 and March 2024. All self-report questionnaires were completed online using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) on students' personal devices during school hours, with survey administration occurring simultaneously across all grade levels. What makes our study unique is the input from school authorities and emphasis on giving youth a voice; researchers and school authorities co-created open-ended questions based on perceived knowledge gaps about students with students. Our study sought to provide youth with the ability to provide insight into the system, 'from the inside'. To show appreciation for participation, all students from each school were entered into a draw for a chance to win a smartphone at each time point.

Step 1. Entry into the Field

As with all community-based research how a researcher gains access to participants is equally important to the quality of the data. Rapport with the school community was facilitated because of the low-demand placed on schools to conduct this research with teaching staff spearheading research direction based on the needs of the school. This intense collaboration generated open-ended questions that reflected systems-level concerns about school climate. With some pre-planning and collaborative engagement, schools are responsive to one-time data collection strategies as was demonstrated by the enthusiasm of schools involved in our study. Our research team capitalized on long-standing partnerships with schools, built over several years through the consistent sharing of annual reports on student well-being and digital media use, commonly referred to as updates on "how the kids are doing." In this study, school staff were able to use this data to improve school climate and create initiatives for teachers to get to know their students better to build a stronger sense of belonging, a known promoter of social and emotional wellbeing among youth (Arslan et al., 2020). Our approach demonstrated that data collection can be efficiently and quickly done with little drain on school resources, an approach that is surely to be appreciated in schools that are under-resourced or that have high numbers of students with unique challenges. Likewise, the plurality of voices represented in our data honours the diversity of the school body and protects students anonymity and privacy.

The total number of students across our four schools was 3,519, and we obtained 2144 responses. We recommend that researchers devise a plan to deal with the enormous amount of data they will receive in a short amount of time. The use of computer-assisted technologies like NVivo may be useful in organizing data in ways that make sense in light of the research question being asked. Before data analysis, it is essential to determine 'who showed up' in our study and analyze the response patterns to elucidate if our entry into the field and study design attracted an inclusive representation of the student body.

Step 2. Responder and Non-responder Analysis

Data were collected from four public secondary (high) schools serving grades 8–12 in Southwest British Columbia: three urban schools within a large metropolitan district and one rural school in a smaller community. All four are comprehensive, non-vocational high schools offering broad academic and extracurricular programs. This urban–rural mix (3 urban, 1 rural) and comprehensive school profile provides essential context for interpreting participation patterns and any school-level differences in outcomes. (What kind of school? Middle? High school? Normal or vocational?). As researchers who regularly conduct research in this region, we have tacit knowledge about local schools and communities. We recommend that researchers who are unfamiliar with schools and communities they are approach to familiarize themselves with them ahead of time.

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Total Population and Responders

Before any analysis of the statements or comments began, we compared the students in the school who completed the questionnaires (Table 1) to the sample of students who answered the open-ended survey question (see Table 2). We conducted a series of chi-square tests to examine differences in response likelihood based on various demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Composition of Student Body across All Schools

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n/ % / M (SD)</i>
Total students (n)	3,519 (1,604 girls, 45.6%)
Age (years)	$M = 14.49$ years, $SD = 1.49$
International students (study permit required)	15.2 %
Domestic students (born in Canada or permanent residents)	61.9 %
Ethnicity	
- East Asian	37.2 %
- White/Caucasian	24.8 %
- South Asian	6.2 %
- Southeast Asian	19.3 %
- South Asian	6.2 %
- West Asian	2.6 %
- Latin American	6.3 %
- Indigenous	3.5 %
- Black	3.9 %
- Other	4.4 %

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

As is typical across many schools in this region, there is a significant number of students with Asian heritage and who speak multiple languages at home. Unlike other regions, there are significantly more boys across the four schools sampled than girls. These response patterns are

most likely due to recent high volume of immigration from Asian countries and the physical closeness of one school to the university and international family student housing.

Table 2

Responder Analysis

Respondent Characteristic	Chi-Square Test (χ^2)	P-value	Key Finding
International Students	χ^2 (8, n=3466) = 32.21	$p < 0.001$	International students are less likely to provide responses.
Age	χ^2 (9, n=3311) = 24.37	$p = 0.004$	Younger students (11-13) are less likely to provide responses compared to older students (14-18).
Born in Canada	χ^2 (1, n=3311) = 16.17	$p < 0.001$	Students born in Canada are more likely to provide responses compared to international students.
Language Spoken at Home	χ^2 (1, n=3301) = 4.38	$p = 0.036$	English-speaking students at home are more likely to provide responses.
Gender	χ^2 (1, n=3519) = 7.89	$p = 0.005$	Girls are more likely to provide responses compared to other genders.

Results revealed that international students were significantly less likely to provide responses compared to domestic students, $\chi^2(8, n = 3466) = 32.21, p < .001$. Similarly, students born in Canada were more likely to respond, $\chi^2(1, n = 3311) = 16.17, p < .001$. A potential explanation is that these students are perhaps feeling more empowered to comment on teacher performance than international students. The majority of international students in our sample come from cultures that have a more hierarchical relationship with teachers, mostly East Asian and Southeast societies (Jiang, 2025). Language spoken at home was also significant: students who spoke English at home were more likely to participate, $\chi^2(1, n = 3301) = 4.38, p = .036$. Another barrier could involve language usage. Our sample included comments written in languages other than English, despite the English language prompt. Translation of the comments prompted concerns about our questionnaire design and the encouragement of ease of disclosure. Age also emerged as a significant factor: younger students (ages 11–13) were less likely to respond than older peers (ages 14–18), $\chi^2(9, n = 3311) = 24.37, p = .004$. Older students were also more likely to answer the question, perhaps due to having more experience in the school system and familiarity with their teachers who often taught multiple grades. In terms of gender, girls were more likely to respond than students of other genders, $\chi^2(1, n = 3519) = 7.89, p = .005$. This finding was consistent with previous research showing that females are more likely to answer open-ended survey questions than males (Miller & Lambert, 2014) and is problematic as our sample was predominantly male. Our questionnaire design and questions can foster more exploration on how to make questionnaires more inclusive to varied populations, especially those that are not usually well represented in

survey research (males, ESL, students from lower socioeconomic status) (Porter & Whitcomb, 2005).

It was apparent that our sampling strategy had certain limitations, namely our original research question did not speak to a significant number of students. With growing artificial intelligence capacities, language prompts, word generators and automatic translation could address some language barriers. In the case of research with youth, researchers should be mindful to tailor the research question to the developmental level of the potential participants. With older children more likely to answer the question, younger students volunteered that they liked or did not like their teacher. Directions for future research can include finding methods to make OESQ completion more appealing for younger people to answer, using more youth-friendly language or tone and experimenting with administering surveys on youth-friendly platforms. These forward thinking approaches capitalize on youths' capacities to use and read on their smartphones quite extensively, in contrast to more researcher-friendly approaches, such as laptops and in-person methods that may be more alienating to young people (Denny et al., 2008).

Despite our best efforts to build a healthy relationship with the school, a more targeted approach could have provided additional benefit. Building relationships with school communities and creating an inclusive climate with a particular focus on learning about younger students' and boys' opinions may be a worthwhile endeavour for researchers who are able to enter school communities in person. As for creating more hospitable and welcoming online environments, further research should explore digital design of surveys and platforms that could appeal to younger ages and boys. The analysis of qualitative findings must be congruent with the aforementioned respondent characteristics, not the sample as a whole.

In addition to developing approaches to inspire youth to participate in research, especially research conducted online, researchers need to be able to tailor the content to suit the needs of youth. This approach is particularly important in creating OESQs. As there is no opportunity for elaboration as with the semi-structured interview, researchers need to be prepared and ask the right question. This of course is no easy task and pilot testing the question for possible range of responses would be ideal. As with all rigorous approaches, tailoring the question to the audience or sample will increase validity and reduce non-response bias (assuming this is of importance for your study) or inclusivity.

Going forward, we needed to keep in mind that our sample was predominantly older, domestic and female students and a significantly different sample, mainly younger boys and international students' voices were mostly absent from analysis. As with other research designs, researchers should seek to capture intended voices; we were aiming for inclusivity and thus these response patterns should be further discussed with the schools to learn how to encourage younger boys from the international student community to participate.

Step 3. Data Preparation

While knowing 'who showed up' is the first step to becoming familiar with the data, the sheer volume of responses requires care in organizing in meaningful units of analysis. Our Qualtrics

(www.qualtrics.com) output was an Excel file with 2144 responses. This translated into nearly 3000 words. Closer reading of the file revealed that a significant number of responses were not written in English and some students responded with texting language and emojis, pictograms embedded in texts used to convey emotion. Non-English statements were translated using Google Translate and texted responses like IDK (I don't know) were included. Responses with emojis were excluded from analysis (n=35) because our focus was on text-based responses.

To facilitate the meaning-making process, we chose to alphabetize the responses by first letter as similar statements often started with the same letter or word. Alphabetizing responses also provided the opportunity to quickly glance through the data noting any semiotic patterns. After reading all 2144 comments to the question, "In your own words, tell us how your relationships with your teachers at school influence your learning experiences" statements were grouped based on negative or positive behaviour exhibited by the teacher. This yielded 129 comments that depicted behaviours that had a negative impact on student learning and 629 comments that had positive effects. See Table 3 for examples of positive and negative comments.

Table 3

Examples of Positive and Negative Teacher Behaviours

<i>Statement Valence</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Teacher Behaviours</i>	Good, they respect me and I respect me. Their timeless efforts helps me stay active and ready.	It's a hit or miss. Some teachers act like they're out to get you— especially in our most important years for grades. Many will treat us as 9-5 workers with far too much overtime. It's hard to feel connected with our teachers when our lives are just filled with work.
	I can pay attention more to teachers that try to have more of a connection with their students past standard teacher-student dynamics.	Last year, I got a (locally) infamously bad teacher. He continuously called me out in class, asking why I couldn't finish my homework; despite the fact that my mom had emailed him with all the information he needed to know about it. When I asked him if he had read the email, he said something like “yeah, well... Aren't you 14 or something?”. Which is definitely something. I mean, if everyone with issues just grew out of it spontaneously at the age of 14, that would be awesome. The next time he asked me about homework, I told him that he was giving me too much work. He then dragged me outside the classroom to tell me that I'm “only what, 14 years old?” and that I was too young to criticize his teaching methods. After that, I never entered that classroom for the rest of the year. Obviously, I failed. Got an applying in the summer school socials class, by the way! All this is to say, if the teacher sucks, my chances of academic success are drastically lowered.

As the quotes above demonstrate, there was enormous richness in the data set. With such plurality of voices possible with online OESQs and the thousands of respondents, it is perhaps not surprising that some individuals chose to share stories or experiences in greater depth than one-line answers. As Tran et al. (2016) described, the richness of the responses to online open-ended questions tends to be a function of the number of respondents and consequently, the development of codes and themes also requires a sufficient number of lines of text. These trends were also observed as we worked through our data set.

While we did not encounter any responses that proved to be troubling or conveyed psychological distress in this dataset, researchers must also be prepared for a range of responses. Special attention should be paid to those responses that reveal psychological trauma, typical self-disclosure from the anonymous nature of online surveys (McInroy, 2016), and in light of the fact that analysis of data occurs after the incident causing harm. Our previous research with large data sets resulting from online open-ended survey questions inquiring about how students are feeling during the COVID-19 lockdown and how teachers can promote school connectedness contained a few statements of a distressing nature. Examples included students disclosing suicidality and physical abuse (Dusko Biferie et al. 2024). Trauma informed data collection practices should be explored to minimize harm to participants. Approaches to potentially re-identify respondents to provide care whenever reasonably possible should also be considered.

Step 4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Further analysis of these comments included identifying what else students are talking about and what other questions can be posed to the data to help crystallize the findings as nearly 1300 students did not directly answer the primary research question. The aim was to go beyond just summarizing the data but finding the meaning behind the comments. Exploratory techniques were employed such as the creation of word maps using NVivo 12; selection was based on the inclusion of all words with at least three letters from the remaining 1300 comments. After removing grammatical and lexical words, the words left behind were amalgamated into a phrase with the semantic meaning 'Good teachers help students understand'. Using this exploratory approach and the semantic grouping as a guide to the general trend, the data were approached again with the perspective that the teacher drives development forward.

Upon closer reading of these 1300 comments, inductive codes were developed. Each statement was coded as one unit of analysis and applied to all statements (n= 1265). As per the reflexive thematic analysis approach including the six steps that moved analysis from inductive to deductive approaches, codes were then linked in a concept map to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are described below. For examples of quotes see Table 4.

In the search for meaningful patterns in the data and in thinking of additional questions to ask the data in the absence of additional sources, we attempted to triangulate and crystallize within our data set. This approach we believe offers an alternative to more traditional interpretations of triangulation (the use of multiple data sources) and by extension, crystallization. With large data sets with thousands of participants, we felt confident in probing the data for alternative

interpretations of the OESR question. Based off the guiding statement and re-reading the 1265 comments, we posed the following questions: 1) how do students understand how a positive relationship with teacher impacts their learning?; 2) what is the value of positive relationships and its importance to students; 3) what do students do to achieve/maintain a positive relationship with their teacher? And lastly, how do students who feel their teacher relationship doesn't influence learning perceive learning? These lines of inquiry resulted in the following themes: Hold(ing) the students hand, The teacher is the school, and solo flyers. Please see Table 4 for theme description, example quotes and interpretation.

Table 4

Description of Themes, Selected Quotes and Thematic Interpretation

Theme	Description	Examples	Interpretation
“Pull” and “Push”	<p>-when the teacher is being open, warm, receptive and responsive to students needs; students read these behaviours as a willingness to help and invite learning</p> <p>-when teachers that were rude, passive-aggressive, or ‘not pleasant’, singling out students and those that employed punitive correction were perceived as abusing teacher’s power and pushing them away from learning</p>	<p>“Having a bad relationship with your teacher can make it hard to feel like learning or asking for help if needed. But if you have a good relationship with your teacher, any nervous feelings around asking questions are usually gone. Also, this is kind of like a feeling you’d get if you had a presentation you were scared for, (its the same feeling) but for a different reason, for example if you needed to get a paper because you were going to be gone, you’d feel a sinking feeling because you need to talk to a certain teacher, and feelings like this about stuff causes unnecessary stress so removing all types of stress like this makes you feel better overall which is why good relationships are important. This also influences your learning because being anxious or stressed and trying to focus is hard for me.”</p> <p>“I don’t have much of a relationship with my teachers at school, especially for classes that are more academically challenging. This affects me because I don’t approach them as much as I should when I am struggling. Some teachers though, I feel like support my growth through freedom of our choices. It helps us learn about concepts that we don’t just need in school, but also everyday life.”</p> <p>“I feel as though my teachers care about their students and want them to have a positive learning environment. Personally, I find that when I form a closer relationship with teachers I tend to be more successful in that course and in my learning.”</p>	<p>-teacher gently pulls students towards learning by adjusting and modifying their own approach and consequently, the learning disposition of the student</p> <p>-when teachers encourage students and show passion for their subject matter and genuine interest in students’ success, students feel pulled into wanting to learn and overcome obstacles to learning</p> <p>-teachers prosocial disposition resulted in positive learning experiences which for students were perceived as feeling motivated, confident and comfortable about asking questions and seeking further help from the teacher, also strengthening the student-teacher relationship</p>

HOLD(ing) the students' hand as a friend	<p>-a good student-teacher relationships is like analogous to parent holding a child's hand through a difficult task</p> <p>-more comfort, less stress and enjoyment for the student</p>	<p>“Based on my relationships with teachers in my previous school year, I gained motivation from classes that felt more laid back despite the challenging concepts. A teacher’s perception of student capability and the concepts they are able to tackle can shift depending on how they encourage students to view the subject matter. A laid back attitude while going through loaded material promoted a calm attitude amongst myself and my peers.”</p> <p>“Having a positive relationship with my teachers and having them understand me helps immensely in my learning - when they understand that I DO want to learn and do my work but ADHD makes it a struggle, that I DO want to show up on time but I have insomnia and while I may miss the start of class I'll still do my best to finish the work and engage in class. When they understand they give me more leeway than would normally be granted to students and because of that I'm more able to actually learn and engage in my own way.”</p> <p>“I try to be kind to all my teachers, because I know that everyone is really just trying their best to do their job at the end of the day. Becoming friendlier with my teachers helps with feeling free to ask question and not being afraid to reach out should I need help. Learning is less intimidating if I feel comfortable with my teacher.”</p>	<p>-students characterize a positive learning relationship as one in which the fear to ask questions was absent and when students feel the courage to persist in learning despite confusion and difficulties</p> <p>-students feel they better understand concepts, feel happier in school and enjoy learning</p> <p>-students spoke clearly to communicate their needs to the teacher and viewing the teacher as a mentor</p> <p>-students applied strategies to maximize their learning ambitions by fostering positive dyadic relationship with their teacher</p> <p>-if teacher-student relationship was good, student felt teacher more willing to help</p>
The teacher is the school	<p>- relationship with their teacher is symbolic of their relationship with the school environment</p>	<p>“I believe that when a teacher grows close with a student by showing how they care and believe they can do it then a student will feel more inclined to work hard and finish their work making a positive impact on how they perceive school.”</p>	<p>-students change their peer group to suit their needs but cannot choose teacher or school structures - students spend nearly all of their school time with teachers, teachers are in essence, the spirt and soul of their school and</p>

		<p>“If you have a good relationship with your teachers, the safer you could feel at school.”</p> <p>“In my school, so far this semester I've been lucky to have really good teachers. Usually in my other years of school, there's been the odd couple of teachers that create a negative impact in some way, but so far this year the teachers I have are really good. The space they've created have shown me they actually care for what they are teaching and are passionate about it. They are very organized and helpful. This has helped me a lot and has influenced my learning experiences positively. I feel like I am understanding the material I am learning a lot better than I used to. It's actually sinking in, rather than washing away after a while. I feel a bit more content with being at school because of this, but it's still difficult for personal reasons.”</p>	<p>face of the institution especially among younger students</p> <p>-a good teacher relationship leads to positive perception of learning and especially of the school environment and connection with classmates</p> <p>-positive associations encourage students to want to learn and increase the motivation to connect to school life among especially among students that are struggling</p>
Solo flyers	<p>- students who see themselves as independent learners</p> <p>-don't need nurturing relationship with their teachers; they keep psychological distance</p>	<p>“I don't have much of a relationship with my teachers. they're nice and friendly but I don't know much about their personal lives (except for Mr. [Name] but he tells everyone about himself. Good guy). I haven't had any negative experiences with my teachers. they're all positive so they don't really noticeably effect my learning. (Obviously they're the ones teaching me so I guess they're doing a good job).”</p> <p>“I really like it when teachers are nice AND good at teaching. However, I'd rather [have] a teacher be better at teaching than nice. Good teachers allow me to be good a subject. I usually don't like forming relationships with my teachers.”</p>	<p>-students prefaced their comments that they had very distant relationships with their students lending us to interpret that that for some students, learning is not really affected by a lukewarm relationship with teacher but more so by negative or abusive ones</p>

In terms of data analysis procedures and as our findings in their totality indicate, OESQ yielded incredible richness; there was enough richness in our data to answer four related research questions with just over 2000 responses from just a little over 3000 respondents. Our findings show that teacher relational skills are valued by students of all ages and are important in fostering positive student learning dispositions for a deeper understanding of content and lessons.

Step 4. Interpretation of the Data

After the data were prepared and thematically analyzed by borrowing conceptualizations from learning sciences, we analyzed data at the collective level and emphasized situated learning and a systemic approach (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Specifically, we were interested in the effect of top-down structures on student learning (role of teacher). As part of the system, our study emphasized youth's voices to highlight how youth perceive a system (learning at school) that is often described by researchers from the perspectives of research theory and researcher positionalities.

In line with the concept of inviting students to learn, students expect teachers to attune to student psychosocial and learning needs by helping them make the necessary attitudinal shifts and overcoming personal obstacles to learning. When teachers 'hold the students' the teacher is able to sustain the energy of the student, maintains engagement with the student resulting in a student who is energized and ready to learn. When teachers understand students' particular situation, students perceive the teacher working with student, rather than against them. A good teacher-student relationship for students, therefore, is characterized by an increased sense of safety to engage in the risk taking required in learning, like trying new things, asking questions and stepping outside of one's comfort zone. An overwhelming number of students' comments referred to the students liking or not liking their teacher; in other words, being likable matters.

Our findings also confirm volumes of research showing the importance of teacher-student interactions on student engagement and connectedness to school (Göktaş, & Kaya, 2023). When engagement and connectedness is high, students develop strategies to further maximize the connectedness and to achieve and maintain positive relationships with their teachers. In our theme, Teacher as Friend, students were actively attempting to equalize the natural power imbalance that exists between teacher and student and to meet their teacher 'half-way'. Some students took these attitudes even further, capitalizing on a positive teacher relationship for personal ambition such as higher grades or more attention from the teacher. More importantly, our research confirms well established findings through youth's voices and perspectives. System-level factors such as teacher skills and attitude that permeate in the culture of the classroom are directly and viscerally experienced by students, often leading to diverging learning outcomes and enthusiasm to learn.

As our interpretation of the data demonstrates, we were able to create a coherent narrative with detailed quotes based off the responses provided. Our data set added more nuanced understanding of the topic of student-teacher relationships that went beyond our immediate question about what behaviours were perceived as creating a positive or negative relationship among student and teachers. Had we not dug deeper in the data with additional questions attempting to crystalize our

findings, we would have lost the plurality of voices that chose to discuss something other than what we had originally deemed important or interesting. Moving forward, all data has value and needs to be accounted for in survey research; participants volunteered their responses because they were meaningful for them. Honouring both the emic and etic perspectives in the data analysis is so integral to the multivocality required for qualitative research to be considered credible (Tracy, 2010). Indeed, we had over 2000 independent voices in our data set. Providing the questionnaires to youth on their phones or on their tablets appeared to well received as our non-response rate for the students present during data collection was fairly low.

Beyond online use of OESQs, researchers should consider data sources that can be incorporated into online data collection strategies to further triangulate and crystallize findings. Confidential, online portals can easily accommodate multimedia, voice memos and digital recordings which unquestionably provide richness in that they enable more creative responding than traditional methods (Murthy, 2008), especially for youth who are already quite familiar with them (Kristjansson et al., 2013). Using youth-friendly methods may address some of the issues with non-response among youth who already feel alienated from both in-person and online cultures.

OESQs as a method can yield incredibly diverse and rich data for qualitative researchers willing to take the time to explore their data set. With an appropriate number of responses, researchers can look at their data from multiple angles, ask it multiple questions and read multiple voices sharing unique perspectives that go even beyond the phenomenon of interest. Through crystallization of the data and re-thinking triangulation, qualitative researchers can confidently generate their findings while staying true to the data and their methodology of choice. We have argued that our proposed methods can foster greater credibility in research design and study findings and we hope to inspire others to use OESQs especially researchers who work with youth. We encourage qualitative researchers to use OESQs from a qualitative research perspective and devise strategies that are in line with the epistemological principles of this research endeavour and to design surveys and their questions accordingly.

5. Additional Considerations and Limitations

Future research on how best to encourage rich responding should consider establishing parameters of data collection or at least standardized goals around required number of responses, a qualitative power metric of sorts, to use an analogy from positivist research. This endeavour will be especially challenging in light of the fact that not all responses are rich. Most are only three word answers and not all respondents actually answer the question. Altogether however, a tenacious researcher can find nuggets of richness and in their totality resulting in a coherent and crystallized account of the phenomena in question.

However, we are also cognizant of the limitations of this approach, namely that the source and representation of the data can yield considerable influence on how the question is answered and who answers it. For example, the length of a text box has considerable influence on the length of responses provided; shorter text box lengths produce more targeted responses than longer text boxes, which sometimes discourage responding (Zuell et al., 2015). On the other hand, a longer text box encourages longer answers (Yamazaki et al., 2023). Beyond survey data collection,

alternative data sources such as interviews and focus groups carry their own particular ways of responding. While hailed as the gold standard in authentic responding, semi-structured interviews actually yield less honest responding compared to the more anonymous and written feedback required of OESQs (Krumpal, 2023). When thinking about how best to crystallize and triangulate our data and findings, OESQs may provide many advantages, such as prompting the desired length of answers and more honest and private responding, particularly useful with sensitive research topics.

We must also note that despite the volume of data possible with OESQs, this research method may not be suitable for all qualitative methodologies. For example, narrative analysis would benefit from more traditional methods in which individuals are more able to share stories through interviews. We do urge researchers to devise approaches that are more amenable to storying in online platforms, such as the use of online diaries or online voice memos that may be response options to an open-ended question posed online. In this study, we used reflexive thematic analysis, staying consistent with previous research on OESQs with the work of Braun and Clarke (2021) and researcher comfort with the methodology. However, our approach can be used in junction with other methodologies, such as social network analysis (SNA) using online open-ended surveys. Analyzing respondents and non-respondent characteristics, re-thinking crystallization and triangulation with additional questions and tailoring questions accordingly can be a useful and rigorous way to strengthen SNA, especially with a sufficient number of responses. However, further research would be needed to determine how to incorporate the findings from these additional analyses into the matrix.

Despite these limitations, we argue that interpretive approaches to OESR are a viable alternative to more intensive and participatory youth-friendly approaches. As discussed, OESR can reach literally thousands of respondents in a short amount of time, especially in school settings. Using survey data, especially open-ended questions in an interpretative approach is, in our opinion, a healthy compromise between more traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches. We have shown that richness, multivocality, and crystallization of findings are possible with large seemingly ‘quantitative-looking’ data sets. The ability to maintain rigour as deemed required by qualitative approaches may appease concerns around credibility among positivist and interpretive researchers while capturing the context or landscape of the school community and providing a systems-view understanding of the complexity of school environments and learning in a youth-friendly way. We have also shown how we can explore ‘the personal’ and ‘relational’ in ways that build communities of schools and researchers working collaboratively using a method that draws in thousands of students to share their stories and meaning-making in less demanding ways than more traditional qualitative research methods.

Declarations

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How Do Asylum Seeker Students Make Sense of Social Studies?*

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Abstract

Purpose: In the development and adaptation of asylum- seeker students in Türkiye, the social studies course stands out. This research aims to reveal the views of asylum- seeker students in Türkiye about the social studies course.

Method: Qualitative research approach was adopted in the study. The data were obtained through the interview technique. Ten asylum- seeker students who have spent the last three years in Türkiye participated in this research.

Findings: As a result of the research, asylum- seeker students stated that the social studies course is an easy, fun and useful course that deals with real life, provides the ability to produce solutions to the problems encountered during life, develops the perception of time and space in history and geography, and allows them to socialize by talking and sharing things. They enjoy the topics related to migration and human rights in the social studies course, but have difficulty in understanding history topics. In the social studies course, the students learn vital and current issues, rights and citizenship issues, and recognizes Türkiye and Atatürk. Regarding the content of the social studies course, the students wanted the course give more space to the subject of migration, and to include subjects that touch on the culture, history and geography of their own countries. They also wanted more practice in the social studies course.

Implications: As a result of the research the social studies course can be made concrete and taught with visual materials, and this course can be enriched with more active, collaborative and inclusive classroom activities can be recommended.

Keywords

migration, asylum- seeker, students, social studies, elementary education.

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Introduction

Migration, which is defined as any kind of relocation that makes a meaningful difference in people's lives (Erder, 1986; Fawcett, 1985), is increasing on an international scale today. International migrations, which are realized for a wide variety of reasons, are generally made from developing countries to developed countries for business purposes (Schmid, 1992). In this context, it is seen that a significant majority of migrations in the world are actually aimed at meeting the labor force needs of the West (Hayter, 2000). According to the 2024 International Migration Report prepared by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), there are 281 million international migrants worldwide and this rate is increasing every year. Türkiye is the second country most affected by international migration (BBC News, 2024).

Unlike migration to developed countries around the world, migration to Türkiye is mostly driven by the need to escape from war and seek asylum in a safe country. In particular, there have been various waves of migration to Türkiye from countries with civil unrest such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. After the Arab Spring, the civil unrest in Syria led to the largest wave of migration. As of the end of 2024, 3.112.683 Syrians refugees and 12.549 Afghans refugees and 91,373, Afghans asylum-seekers and 89.397 Iranians asylum-seekers were living in Türkiye under temporary protection (The UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2024).

As a humanitarian act, the phenomenon of migration, which causes differentiation in the social structure (Sirkeci & Cohen, 2015), can create new needs for both those who migrate and those who live in the countries of migration. As a result of migration, all sociological institutions in a society such as family, economy and politics are affected. One of the sociological institutions that undergo restructuring after migration is the educational institution. Asylum-seeker students and refugee who come to a different educational institution as a result of migration need an educational environment that provides sociocultural adaptation (Öztürk et al., 2017).

In the education process of refugee and migrant children, teaching approaches such as multicultural education and inclusive education are adopted. In Türkiye, the Ministry of National Education has adopted an inclusive education approach for the education process of these students. Inclusive education is an educational approach that aims to educate students with different qualitative and quantitative characteristics in the same educational environment (Amaç et al., 2025). According to inclusive education, every individual can learn and succeed. To achieve this, learning environments must be tailored to the individual (Rose & Howley, 2007). Multicultural education models aimed at promoting socialization are also based on the cultural representation of individuals from different cultures in the teaching and learning processes. Accordingly, different cultures participate in the education process together, and their access to education and the support they receive are geared towards ensuring their cultural adaptation (Düzen et al., 2025).

Various sociocultural opportunities were provided to refugee and asylum-seeker students nationals who migrated to Türkiye. As a result, various arrangements have been made in many areas, especially in education (Erdem, 2017). These regulations include establishing temporary education centers, ensuring their inclusion in all formal education, allowing schools opened by Syrians, conducting vocational training courses and projects, providing language trainings specially designed for all age groups, and providing opportunities in higher education (Duruel,

2016, Erdoğan, 2018). In addition, arrangements have been made in the curricula of courses in schools to meet the needs of asylum-seeker students

Within the scope of the right to education of international migrant children under temporary protection in Türkiye, the social studies course in primary education stands out in the socialization and integration of these children. The social studies course is one of the first courses that comes to mind in the context of sociocultural adaptation and producing basic solutions to the problems encountered after migration. In this context, the social studies course has an important role and responsibility. Social studies is an important course that adopts sociocultural adaptation as a basic principle (Kaya & Öner, 2017). In addition, social studies is an important course in solving various sociocultural and psychological problems (Ersoy & Seyidoğlu, 2020; Karaman & Bulut, 2018) that prevent the socialization of asylum-seeker and refugee students (Maksum et al., 2021). Social studies is concerned with individuals' understanding of social realities and the efficient execution of the socialization process. In this context, social processes such as migration, sociocultural adaptation, socialization, and the education of different cultures together fall within the teaching area of social studies (Sönmez, 1999). National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2023) has approved a new definition of social studies: "Social studies is the study of individuals, communities, systems, and their interactions across time and place that prepares students for local, national, and global civic life." At the same time, the NCSS has explained the purpose of social studies as follows (NCSS, 2023):

Using an inquiry-based approach, social studies helps students examine vast human experiences through the generation of questions, collection and analysis of evidence from credible sources, consideration of multiple perspectives, and the application of social studies knowledge and disciplinary skills. As a result of examining the past, participating in the present, and learning how to shape the future, social studies prepares learners for a lifelong practice of civil discourse and civic engagement in their communities. Social studies centers knowledge of human rights and local, national, and global responsibilities so that learners can work together to create a just world in which they want to live.

In social studies teaching, the information obtained from interdisciplinary studies in ensuring socialization constitutes the content of social studies (Odia, 2014). Social studies is an interdisciplinary field encompassing numerous subjects such as history, geography, economics, sociology, culture, management, law, citizenship, human rights, social justice, and current issues (NCSS, 2023). The topic of refugees and migrants is a current issue within the scope of social studies. Therefore, social studies plays an important role in understanding and analyzing the reality of migration in all its dimensions. In this context, this course is effective in the construction of the social structure after migration and migration. In other words, social studies contributes to solving the problems created by the new social reality brought about by migration. Thus, one of the most important functions of social studies in social structures receiving migration is to ensure sociocultural adaptation and to understand the changes in the reality of life and to design new desired life realities. In this respect, social studies teachers should be able to design teaching and learning environments that include the individual, developmental and sociocultural differences of all their students, including refugee students (Seyidoğlu, 2024).

The Social Studies Curriculum developed by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in Türkiye in 2024 also addresses the phenomenon of migration and migrant education. In grades 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the social studies course, a learning area called "Living Together" was developed. For example, in the 6th grade social studies curriculum, the learning outcome coded SB.6.1.3. of the learning outcomes and process components is determined as "To be able to negotiate solutions to problems encountered in social life". The teaching-learning process of this outcome is explained as follows (MoNE, 2024a, p.1):

The teacher makes a short presentation on the definition and types of social problems and asks students to give examples from daily life about social problems. Based on the examples given, students examine social problems such as disasters, environmental pollution, migration, epidemics, waste. As a result of the examinations, a fishbone is created for the causes of social problems in our country.

In the 2024 Social Studies Curriculum common text, "virtue-action-value" tables were developed. Under the title of hospitality action of the value of love in the program, the sub-action "Behaves hospitably to citizens of other countries such as tourists, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers" was included. Thus, the phenomenon of migration was included under various headings in the program (MoNE, 2024b, p. 86).

There are many studies on refugee students living in Türkiye. When the studies conducted within the scope of social studies course are examined, it is seen that various theoretical and applied studies have been conducted on social studies course and migration and immigration problems. The studies differ in terms of socialization problems, educational problems, and perceptions. For example, Topkaya and Akdağ (2016) examined the views of prospective social studies teachers on asylum seekers. Yıldırım (2020) examined inclusive education for asylum seekers in social studies course. As a result of the research, it was seen that various activities involving the cultures of asylum seekers were included in the social studies course. Özdemir (2020), in his study on the cultural adaptation of asylum seekers with social studies teachers, found that teachers defined the concept of cultural adaptation as acceptance, respect for differences, compliance with social rules, commitment to national values and culture transfer. Kızıl and Dönmez (2017) examined the problems in social studies education provided to refugees in Türkiye. As a result of the research, it was stated that they were exposed to negative ideological education about Türkiye and the Turkish nation in Syria and that this situation should be taken into consideration while providing education to asylum seekers by the state in Türkiye. In a study conducted by Kuş and Önger (2020) with social studies teachers, it was revealed that problems such as policies and programs implemented, language and cultural differences, and the students' lack of adequate education negatively affected the behavior of refugee and asylum-seeker students. When these studies in the literature are examined, the problems of asylum seekers and the problems experienced after migration are mostly revealed in the context of social studies course.

At the same time, the problems experienced from the perspectives of teachers and students were emphasized. In studies conducted abroad, the issue of social studies education that can be carried out to provide refugee and asylum-seeker students with global education has been studied. Global education studies were carried out together with social studies activity studies with students from different individual, developmental and sociocultural environments. In the research, practices that require careful attention to sensitive issues such as acquiring knowledge, creating community and home connections, interpersonal communication and intercultural dialogue, supporting and expanding language teaching were carried out. The study concluded

that refugee students are a unique student population that provides a rich educational diversity in the social studies classroom, and that although refugee and asylum-seeker students face multiple barriers to success in school, teachers can use a variety of practices to capitalize on student backgrounds and create inclusive classrooms where all students can meaningfully engage in learning (Quaynor & Hamilton, 2012).

In Türkiye, there are only two studies conducted directly with students about refugee and asylum-seeker students' perceptions of the social studies course. One of them, Seçgin and Erten Özalp (2020) did not identify the problems experienced by asylum-seeking students in the social studies course from the perspective of teachers and students. Accordingly, it was stated that teachers were very indifferent to the social studies course of asylum-seeking students. Teachers also stated that they thought that this was because they did not know Turkish well. Asylum-seeking students, on the other hand, stated that they did not like the subjects related to Turkish history and geography; that they had difficulty in understanding the social studies course and that they were not successful in this course. The other study, Yaman et al., (2023) examined the contribution of social studies course in the integration of asylum-seeking students into the society according to student views. As a result of the research, it is seen that the social studies course is effective in helping asylum-seeking students acquire the Turkish way of life and Turkish culture. Although these studies provide some results about student views, it is useful to expand the research with different participants in many different schools.

In this study, it is aimed to reveal what asylum-seeker students living in Türkiye think about the social studies course, what they learn in the social studies course, the acquisitions of the social studies course and how the acquisitions are used in daily life. At the same time, it was aimed to determine the subjects that these students liked the most in the social studies course and the subjects they found unnecessary, to reveal which subjects they had difficulty in learning and the reasons for this, and to reveal which subjects they thought should not be included in the social studies course. In addition to contributing to the literature with the data obtained in this study, it is aimed to contribute to the production of policies for social studies education. This study will also reveal the expectations of these students from social studies education and their familiarity with the course.

In this direction, it will also contribute to the design of the social studies course education process in line with the interests and needs of refugee and asylum-seeker students.

In this context, the aim of this researcher is to reveal the views of asylum-seeker students in Türkiye about the social studies course. In line with this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

Asylum-seeker students in Türkiye,

1. What are their definitions of the social studies course?
2. What are their acquisitions in the social studies course?
3. What are their views on the content of the social studies course?
4. What are the difficulties they experience in the social studies course?
5. What are their suggestions for the social studies course?

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was adopted in the study. In qualitative research, an approach that requires a perspective on the events from the perspective of the participants in the research is adopted (Glesne, 2016; Güler et al., 2015; Jensen, 2013; Potter, 2013). In qualitative research, data collection techniques such as observation, interview and document analysis are used (Dowling, 2012; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, qualitative research was used since it was aimed to reveal the views and perceptions of the refugee and asylum-seeker students participating in the study about the social studies course in detail in their own words.

Participants

Criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling types, was used to determine the participants in the study. Criterion sampling is a type of sampling in which participants are determined within the framework of certain criteria (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, first of all, secondary schools in the city center where immigrant children receive intensive education were determined. The study group consisted of 10 asylum-seeker students. These voluntary students were selected among 6th and 7th grade students who came from different countries, and spent the last three years in Türkiye. Information about the participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the students participating in the study

Code name	Classroom	Age	Length of stay in Türkiye	Countries
Farkhunda	6	12	4	Afghanistan
Behram	6	13	7	Iran
Kasım	6	12	3	Tataristan
Ahmad	6	12	6	Syria
Nadir	6	14	5	Afghanistan
Omar	6	12	4	Syria
Abduljabbar	7	14	4	Iraq
Fatıma	7	13	3	Iraq
Ferid	7	13	6	Syria
İyman	7	13	7	Egypt

The students who participated in the study have been living in Türkiye for at least 3 years, on average 5 years, and are familiar with Türkiye. They have been studying at their schools for at least two or three years. Their ages range between 12 and 14. There are students from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Iran and Tatarstan. Parents' occupations are usually military, police, tradesmen and farmers. The education level of the parents is mostly primary school and high school.

Data Collection

The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interview is a type of interview in which certain questions are prepared beforehand but new questions can be asked to the participants when necessary (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). A semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was used in the interview. The interview form was developed by the researcher. Two social studies education experts who work with refugees were consulted during the development of this form. A preliminary interview was conducted with a student. After necessary adjustments, the form was implemented.

Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis. Before the research, the participants were informed about the research and their participant rights were explained. Their signatures were obtained for the participant consent form. In addition, permission was obtained from their parents. The semi-structured interviews conducted in line with this permission were recorded with a voice recorder. Interviews with the participants were conducted face-to-face. Interviews were conducted in Turkish since the students speak Turkish.

Due to the limited language proficiency of the participants in the interviews, the students' level of self-expression limited the depth of the data. Explanations were provided during the interviews to verify meaning and support the students' level of understanding. During the data analysis process, attention was paid to language-related shifts in meaning, and such instances were discussed and interpreted among the researchers.

Data Analysis

The data obtained as a result of the research were analyzed through content analysis. In content analysis, it is adopted to proceed from the part to the whole. Content analysis involves more in-depth data analysis and conceptualization (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The audio recordings obtained were transcribed in computer environment and made ready for analysis. Categories were obtained from coding and themes were obtained from categories. In line with these themes, the findings obtained from the data were interpreted and conclusions were reached. Content analysis was conducted by two researchers.

Credibility should be ensured in qualitative research. In qualitative research approach, credibility is understood as the accuracy of the data obtained, reflecting and confirming what the participants actually said in the analysis (Güler et al., 2015). Various measures were taken by the researchers to ensure trustworthiness in the research. In this context, direct quotations were made from the participants. The findings obtained as a result of the research were shared with the participants and their opinions were taken. It was seen that the findings of the research formed meaningful results and were consistent within themselves. Furthermore, to ensure transferability in the research, the findings outlined by Miles et al., (2014) have been made applicable to other contexts, participant groups, or cases sharing fundamental similarities with the original research setting.

Findings

In the study, the opinions of asylum-seeker students about the social studies course are given under the titles of perceptions, acquisitions, content, difficulties and suggestions in Table 2.

Table 2

Asylum-seeker Students' Views on Social Studies Course

Perceptions	Social studies course is fun and useful. Social studies course is conversational Social studies course is easier than other lessons.
Acquisitions	Turkish culture and social norms. Turkish history and geography etc Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his characteristics Citizenship and human rights Daily life knowledge Current events Communication skills
Content	Topics of interest Human rights, Migration Topics of no interest Turkish history and geography
Difficulties	Basic Challenges Abstract concepts Coping with challenges Ask a friend Online learning
Suggestions	Add new topics related to migration and their own country and culture More practical and visual lessons

Perceptions about Social Studies

Under this theme, the students' perceptions of the social studies course were revealed. In this context, the students made perceptions about the content of the course and comparisons with other courses. In these interpretations, the students described the social studies course as a good, useful, easy and fun course. In addition, the students said that the social studies course is a course that is based on narration and that it is a course that allows the students to talk in class and to talk about a subject and to talk about it. Examples of the students' opinions are as follows:

I think it is a very useful and good lesson. I have a lot of fun in class. (Nadir, Grade 6).

I think it is useful because without social studies we would not have learned some things. It is better because it is a lecture-based course. I have difficulty in mathematics, but in social studies we talk and the lesson goes well. What I like the most is that we talk, we tell our problems. We share things. (Fatıma, Grade 7)

Social studies is easier than other subjects. The lesson is fun. (Behram, Grade 6).

Acquisitions from the Social Studies

Under this theme, the students explained what they learned in the social studies course, what they gained from the social studies course and how they used what they learned in the social studies course. The students said that they learned about history, rights and duties related to citizenship, their own rights and responsibilities, and geographical issues in the social studies course and that they learned information about these issues. Examples of the students' opinions are as follows:

I learn about my rights and responsibilities in the country I live in. What this country wants from me. I have to obey the laws. I learn about laws in this lesson. (Ahmad, 6th grade)

We learn about the history of Türkiye and developments in the world. We learned about migrations and we migrated because it is an important issue for us. (Kasım, 6th grade)

I learned where Tehran is located and that Iran and Türkiye are neighbors. (Behram, 6th grade)

It is very important to communicate better with people. We get to know ourselves in the social studies course. We realize information about our family and our environment. (Ferid, Grade 7)

In their responses about what they gained from the social studies course, students said that they recognized Türkiye and Atatürk. Students explained their views as follows:

Countries, cities, social distance, history, maps, I learn about Atatürk. I learn about ancient history, I learn about what they used to do and how they lived. I learn about life and customs in Türkiye. I learn about Atatürk's contributions to Türkiye. He made Türkiye is a strong country. I also learn about the beauties of Türkiye. (Fatıma, 7th grade)

He tells us about Türkiye. Therefore, we get to know the cities. For example, I learned the city we live in and its districts very closely. (Omar, Grade 6)

We learn the rules of rights. We learn the rules of life outside. Thanks to social studies, we see what we need to learn in everyday life. This is very useful for us. (Kasım, 6th grade)

In this section, which includes the opinions of asylum-seeker students about the social studies course, the students think that the social studies course is a course that tells about life and deals with the events encountered in daily life to prepare for life. However, the majority of the students also thought that social studies was a course that dealt with citizenship issues that addressed our rights and responsibilities and included history and geography. Examples of these students' views are as follows:

We learn about the things we have experienced in life and historical things. Sometimes in life we need to apply somewhere or do something. We have problems in this regard. Social studies tells us these things we need to do as a citizen. (İyman, Grade 7)

I learn about communication, I learn about equality, I learn about history, for example Ottoman history, I learn about our rights and rules, I learn where my country is on the map. (Farkhunda, Grade 6)

In their responses about what they gained from the social studies course, students said that they learned about current issues encountered in life. In addition, students stated that they learned to establish positive relationships with their friends and social environment, to communicate and not to be prejudiced. Students explained their views as follows:

I traveled with my friends. We got to know each other. We had a dialog with new friends. Now they are not prejudiced against me and I am not prejudiced against them. (Behram, Grade 6).

Not being prejudiced, speaking in I language, I recognized the countries, I learned about maps, I learned the rules, I learned very important things about communication. Now we communicate with each other with love and respect. We can get along. (Farkhunda, Grade 6)

For example, I learned how we can behave, the laws, for example, how I can do that. We learn about our history, the life of our ancestors. (İyman, Grade 7)

Students stated that they applied what they learned in the social studies course in daily life, helped their families in their daily lives, and developed ways of behaving in accordance with the rules required by social life with what they learned in the course. They explained how they used what they learned in the social studies course as follows:

When I go out, when I go to the bazaar or the market, I use what I learned in the social studies course when I talk to people. I help my family because they do not know much Turkish because they came here at an advanced age. This makes it easier for me to live in Türkiye. (Abduljabbar, Grade 7)

I use it at home, I use it in the environment. I help my mother communicate with others. (Kasım, Grade 7)

Social Studies Course Content

In order to reveal the students' evaluation of the social studies course, they were asked about the topics they liked, the topics they found unnecessary and the topics they found difficult. The topics that the students liked the most in the social studies course were the topics that addressed the conditions they were in due to their immigration status and the topics that interested them. Some examples of the students' opinions are as follows:

I liked the subjects where we have rights. I liked the subject of population. I liked the Ottoman state. (Kasım, 6th grade)

Old Mosques Maps, topics related to agriculture, what grows where. Weather, I like these. (Fatıma, 7th grade)

The new topic we learned is being respectful to other cultures. Because at first I didn't know Turkish and people were prejudiced against us, so I liked this topic. (Farkhunda, Grade 6)

All of the students stated that there were no topics they found unnecessary in the social studies course. Only Abduljabbar said, "There are no topics that I find unnecessary. However, sometimes there is too much detail in Ottoman history, population, and European history". However, they said that there were too many abstract concepts in social studies and that they had difficulty in learning them. For example, Fatıma from Grade 7 said, "The subjects I have difficulty with are communication and human relations in the first unit, travel in Turkish history in the second unit, population in our country in the third unit, and bridges between countries in the last unit." Farkhunda (Grade 6) said the following about why she had difficulties in Journey to History and Human Geography of our country: "The Ottoman history periods were a bit difficult because I don't know much about the history of Türkiye because I am from another country. I did not understand some words. For example, I did not fully understand the words human geography, plain, plateau, valley." (Farkhunda, 6th grade).

Difficulties Experienced in Social Studies

Regarding the difficulties the students experienced in the social studies course, the students stated that they had difficulties due to not speaking Turkish well, especially in historical subjects, and that they could not understand some abstract concepts in the social studies course. The opinions of the students about the difficulties they encountered in the social studies course are as follows:

I don't understand some words in class, such as entrepreneurship, consumer, continuity. Again, I have an understanding for the Arabic ones. But some words are heavy for me. Maybe I can understand them by comparing them. I can speak and write Turkish, but there are still many words I do not understand, especially in the social studies course. (Nadir, Grade 6)

Some words are difficult when I don't know them, but I understand better when they are Arabic words. Some words are also in our language, especially when there are similar words in history subjects. (Fatima, Grade 7)

Regarding the difficulties they experienced in the social studies course and the solutions they brought to these difficulties, some students said that they "could not think of anything" and that they could not produce any solutions. Some students stated that they asked their friends and some students stated that they learned what they could not learn at school, especially with the support of the internet.

When the teacher explains some subjects, I don't know the meaning of some words. This is difficult for me. I learn by asking the teacher and my friends. (Abduljabbar, Grade 7).

For example, in the unit on Anatolia, the new homeland, I did research on Google to find out what raiding, conquest and expedition meant. There were various information about the new homeland of the Turks and I read them. (Ahmad, Grade 6).

Suggestions for the Social Studies Course

When the students were asked how they wanted the social studies course to be and asked for their suggestions, they made suggestions regarding the content of the course and the learning-teaching process. Regarding the content of the social studies course, the students wanted it to introduce the countries more and to give more space to the subject of migration. Regarding the learning and teaching process of the social studies course, they wanted it to be more travel-observation, to have more applications and to bring solutions to the problems that people experience. Examples of the students' opinions are as follows:

There should be more information about people who migrate and come to other countries. We want to tell about the poverty and lack we experienced as immigrants. (Nadir, 6th grade).

It should describe the difficulties that people face. For example, poverty. It should teach us how to overcome these problems. (Aduljabbar, 7th grade)

I would like to see more coverage of Iran in bridges between countries. This will help my Turkish friends get to know me better. There is also the issue of migration. People go through a lot when they migrate. They only wrote about it on one page in the lecture. We skipped it immediately. But there should have been more. There are very few topics on migration. We need to understand what people go through with migration. (Behram, 6th grade)

I would like to learn about the benefits of countries and what is inside countries. (Fatima, Grade 7)

I would like to go on more field trips (Kasım, Grade 6)

Discussion

In this study, in which the perceptions of asylum-seeker students about the social studies course were tried to be determined, important results were reached. First of all, as a result of the research, it was determined that the students had positive opinions about the social studies course and recognized the aims and characteristics of the social studies course. In this context,

they stated that the social studies course is a participatory, easy, fun and useful course that deals with real life, helps students develop the ability to produce solutions to problems encountered during life, improves their perception of time and space, history and geography, and allows students to socialize by talking and sharing things. In the literature, studies on asylum-seeker and refugee students and social studies education have yielded different results. While some studies have shown that these students like and benefit from social studies, some studies have shown that they are uninterested and unsuccessful in social studies. For example, some studies have found that asylum-seeking students find the social studies course useful and fun (Üstündağ-Şener & Başkan, 2021), and that students have positive attitudes towards the social studies course (Akman & Ekinci, 2021; Keçeci, 2019). On the contrary, there are also studies that show that asylum-seeking students are generally uninterested and unsuccessful in social studies (Çelik, 2019; Erten Özalp, 2019; Kızıl & Dönmez, 2017). Reaching such different results in the studies may be due to factors such as the efficiency of the social studies course, teacher influence, students' lack of Turkish language problems, etc.

The other result of the study is the students stated that they learned about Türkiye and Atatürk, the history and geography of Türkiye, communication and rules in social life, and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This result of the study is similar to the results of many studies on asylum-seeker and refugee students and social studies education. In Özdemir's (2020) study, according to social studies teachers, this course contributed to asylum-seeking students' respect and tolerance, loyalty to the homeland, recognition of different cultures, and empathy. In addition, although it was observed that Syrian students' perception of citizenship, democratic attitudes and values were lower than Turkish students (Özbilek, 2022). Bozkaya (2010) found that citizenship education and social studies courses contributed to immigrant students to know their rights and responsibilities, respect the rules, respect the rights of others, feel responsibility and have a sense of patriotism. In the same study, it was concluded that the social studies course had a significant effect on the formation of Syrian students' perceptions of citizenship. Uysal (2022), in his meta-synthesis study on social studies and immigrant students, concluded that the social studies course was "adaptive and strengthening the bond of citizenship" for these students, and that Syrian students were able to recognize Turkish culture and history, learn about their own country, and reach citizenship-related acquisitions. Similarly, Baloğlu et al., (2019) concluded that this course is necessary for refugee students to learn Türkiye's history and geography, social life and culture, citizenship responsibilities and social rules. In addition, Yaman, Aktaş and Kara (2023) concluded that the social studies course contributes to asylum-seeking students' learning and use of the Turkish language, learning Turkish lifestyle and behavior patterns, Turkish culture, and integration into Turkish society. In another study, students stated that they learned Turkish culture through the social studies course by saying "I learn the history, geography and culture of the country I live in" (Seçgin & Erten Özalp, 2020). In Şanlı's (2019) study, teachers emphasized that the Social Studies course is important for refugee students in terms of getting to know Turkish social life and culture and contributes to raising them as individuals with healthy identity development who know and adopt Türkiye's history, geography and culture. In some studies, it has been determined that courses such as history, geography and citizenship facilitate the integration of these students into society (Natanson, 2006, cited in Yaman et al., 2023). However, in some studies, it was determined that the social studies course had no effect on the adaptation of asylum seekers to Türkiye (Zayimoğlu-Öztürk, 2021) and the social studies course content was found to be insufficient

for the integration of asylum seekers (Zayimoğlu-Öztürk, 2018). In his meta-analysis study, Uysal (2022) revealed that social studies contributed to the integration process in classes where there was no or minimal language problem, while Aktaş (2023) stated that asylum-seeker students could not adapt to the class within the framework of culture and citizenship themes, especially due to the language problem, and that they were below the general in terms of cognitive and affective aspects, could not socialize and participate.

According to another result of the study, asylum-seeker students stated that they "apply the acquisitions of the social studies course and how they use them in daily life at home, in the bazaar, in the market and in all areas of life". In addition, the students explained that they also help their family members. This result shows that students are able to participate in social life and use the acquisitions of the social studies course in their daily lives. Similarly, Uysal (2022) stated that the social studies course provided these students with life skills and that the content of the social studies course had a positive effect on their preparation for life. The results of this research also coincide with the results of some studies that social studies is effective in solving the problems students face in their daily lives (Natanson, 2006, cited in Yaman et al., 2023). In addition, as a result of the research, asylum-seeking students stated that they also learned current issues in social studies course. This result of the study is similar to the result of Bozkaya (2021b) that the approach of teaching current issues expressed in the social studies curriculum is effective in ensuring the social adaptation of immigrant students.

In the results of the research, the students stated that they liked the topics such as migration, human rights, etc., the most in the social studies course, which touched on the conditions they were in due to their immigration status. This result of the research is supported by similar research results. For example, Seçgin and Erten Özalp (2020) concluded that asylum-seeking students participated more in the social studies course democracy, human rights, Nevruz holiday and religious holidays, UNICEF, UN and migration. In the same study, the topics in which asylum-seeking students participated the least were explained as symbols of independence, maps, scales, early civilizations, Ottoman Empire, Revolutionary History and Selçuk History. In addition, it was perceived that these students generally disliked the subjects related to Turkish history and geography and had difficulty in understanding the social studies course. In another study, social studies teachers stated that asylum-seeking students behaved more carefully and willingly in subjects related to their own countries (Erten Özalp, 2019). Kızıl and Dönmez (2017) emphasized in their study that the topics that asylum-seeking students dislike in the social studies course differ according to their countries of nationality. For example, it is seen that asylum-seeking students from Iran do not particularly like the subjects about secularism, revolutions and innovations, while asylum-seeking students from Syria do not particularly like the Ottoman and Revolution History subjects. According to the results of the research conducted by the Science Education Culture Research Center (2015), the reasons for Syrian refugee students' prejudiced view of Turkish history stem from the information about Türkiye included in the Syrian national education program. This information includes the fact that part of the territory of the Republic of Türkiye is called "Arab Homeland", that Türkiye has usurped these lands, that the Asi River is between Syrian inland waters, that the Ottoman Empire was a colonialist power, that Hatay is a city of Syria and that it was invaded by Türkiye (cited in Kızıl & Dönmez, 2017; Erten Özalp, 2019). Similarly, Aktaş (2023) stated in his study that these students had difficulty in understanding the themes in the Social Studies course such as elements of Turkish history, democratic government, national holidays, Turkish family

structure, and Turkish culture because these students from various countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya experienced conflict in their inner worlds because they evaluated these themes with their own social environment and cultural perspectives.

According to the results of the research, asylum-seeker students have difficulty in learning historical topics in social studies course. Students stated that they had difficulty in learning dates and wars in history subjects. These research findings are also supported by different research results (Seçgin & Erten Özalp, 2020; Polat, 2012). However, according to the results of the research, these students have difficulty in understanding abstract concepts in the social studies course, especially because they do not know enough language. Especially asylum-seeker students who know little Turkish have difficulty in understanding the social studies course because they do not understand the terms and concepts in social studies. The fact that these students do not speak Turkish causes them not to understand some abstract concepts in the social studies course and not to express themselves. There are other research results that support this conclusion. In one study, social studies teachers stated that asylum-seeking students have difficulty in learning because they do not understand the concepts of history and geography in the social studies course (Erten Özalp, 2019). Seçgin and Erten Özalp (2020) stated that social studies teachers said that asylum-seeker students are successful and interested in the social studies course when their language skills are good, but when they do not know Turkish at a sufficient level, they have difficulties in understanding and expressing the subjects, which affects their interest, participation and success in the course (Seçgin & Erten Özalp, 2020). Üstündağ-Şener and Başkan (2021) found that these students have difficulty in perceiving concepts that have no equivalent in daily life. Alpaslan (2019) found that these students had problems such as not being able to understand the lesson, not being able to focus on the lesson, and not participating in the lesson. Çelik (2019) reported that social studies teachers experienced problems with immigrant students such as language problems, lack of interest and failure in the lesson, finding the national issues in the content of the course distant, staying between Arab culture and Turkish culture and not being able to adapt.

As another result of the research, students wanted more practical, visual, excursion, etc. activities. In social studies education with refugee students, the learning and teaching process should be more inclusive, visual, communicative and practical. These requests of these students are also seen in different research results. For example, Yıldırım (2020) showed that asylum-seeking students do not participate much in reading, writing or speaking activities in the lessons, but prefer to participate in lessons where concrete and visual materials are used. Sel et al.,(2024) concluded that the differentiated instruction approach applied in the social studies course improved students' social adaptation processes.

As a result of this study, students expressed that they would like to see more topics related to immigration and the culture, history and geography of their own countries in the social studies course. In Zayimoğlu Öztürk's (2018) study, it is similar to the result that teachers suggested adding new topics related to refugees, including migration, refugee rights and freedoms, and elements of refugees' own cultures to the social studies curriculum. Şanlı (2019), on the other hand, suggested that in this course, in addition to providing Turkish language education in solving the problems of language and cultural differences of asylum-seeker students, activities and activities introducing culture outside and inside the school should be emphasized.

According to the results of this research, which aims to reveal the thoughts of asylum-seeker students about social studies education, suggestions can be given for practice and future research.

Recommendations for practices

- Issues and problems related to individuals who have experienced migration can be included more in the social studies course.
- Abstract concepts in the social studies course can be concretized and taught with visual materials.
- Social studies courses can be enriched with more active, interactive, collaborative and inclusive in-class and out-of-school activities.

Recommendations for research

- Detailed studies can be conducted to determine the subjects they have difficulty in each unit of the social studies course.
- Experimental studies using various teaching methods and strategies can be conducted to improve asylum-seeker students' learning of concepts in social studies.
- Similar future studies could be improved by using visual data collection methods.

Recommendations for policymakers

- The social studies curriculum could include more topics related to migration and migration-related issues.

Declarations

Ethics Statements

This study was conducted in ethical standards such as ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, parent research permission form.

Declarations Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest for this study.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Questions

Interview Questions:

1. What do you think about the social studies course?
2. What do you learn in the social studies course?
3. What did the social studies course bring you?
4. How do you use what you learned in the social studies course?
5. What do you think about the topics you like in the social studies course?
6. What are the topics you have difficulty understanding in the social studies course?
7. What are the difficulties you experience in social studies? How did you solve these difficulties?
8. How would you like the social studies course to be? What else would you like to learn?

An In-Depth Examination of the Online Fluency Development Approach for Addressing Reading Difficulties*

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to conduct an in-depth examination of the effectiveness of an online fluency development approach in addressing reading difficulties.

Method: A total of 36 sessions were implemented with a third-grade student selected through purposive sampling. The sessions were held three times a week, each lasting 40 minutes and conducted online. Data were obtained from the researcher's journal, interviews with the student's classroom teacher and family, the Prosodic Reading Scale, and pre- and post-assessments of the student's reading fluency skills. These assessments were grounded in program-based measurements, including the number of correctly read words per minute and scores from the Prosodic Reading Scale. The percentage change in reading speed was calculated by comparing the pre-test and post-test results, and the fluency data were interpreted accordingly. Furthermore, the student's prosodic reading scale scores were analyzed through pre- and post-test comparisons.

Findings: The findings indicate that the online fluency development approach enhanced the student's reading speed by 45% and improved prosodic reading skills. In addition, based on the views of the student, parent, and teacher, a notable increase was observed in the student's reading motivation and awareness.

Implications: Online reading programs can also be incorporated into the curriculum and teaching-learning processes, allowing for early intervention in students' reading difficulties. Moreover, longitudinal and follow-up studies could be designed to further examine the long-term effects of online intervention programs.

Keywords

reading fluency, reading speed, accurate reading, online reading

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Introduction

Reading is a fundamental skill that is frequently used and needed in daily life. It is an essential competency acquired during the school years. Students with advanced reading skills are generally expected to achieve higher academic success. However, students who struggle with reading often develop a negative attitude toward it. Such attitudes may lead to decreased performance in other subjects and feelings of failure, which can, in turn, adversely affect students' social lives and future career choices. Therefore, monitoring students' reading skills and providing support when necessary are crucial in the early years of education.

Fluent reading, a key component of reading ability, enables students to comprehend texts more effectively. To have a successful reading experience, individuals must be able to read fluently. Rasinski (2004, p. 46) defined fluent reading as the ability to devote less time to decoding and to recognize the deeper levels of meaning embedded within the text. He also identified three dimensions of fluent reading: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. Accordingly, fluent readers are expected to read a text accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with proper intonation.

Individuals must possess effective reading comprehension skills to keep pace with the demands of the modern age. Fluent reading is positively correlated with reading comprehension (Ceyhan, 2019; Keskin, 2012; Kodan & Akyol, 2018; Palmer, 2010; Rasinski, 2004; Şahin & Baştuğ, 2020; Yılmaz, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to identify students who experience difficulties with fluent reading and to implement appropriate interventions.

Various methods and strategies have been developed to enhance the fluent reading skills of such students. Examples include repeated reading, echo reading, paired reading, shared reading, choral reading, the neurological impress method, and peer tutoring (Baştuğ, 2020). Traditionally, these approaches have been implemented in settings where the teacher and students share the same physical environment. However, with advances in technology, reading—long performed with printed books—has shifted to digital platforms (Odabaş et al., 2020). Moreover, following the pandemic, alternative approaches to traditional instructional methods have begun to emerge. One of these approaches is the delivery of education in online environments.

Reading in Online Environments

With the increasing digitalization of education, reading in online environments has gained growing prominence in the field of reading education. In particular, prolonged school closures and accessibility challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic have further emphasized the importance of online reading practices. Such practices have become valuable tools for addressing students' reading difficulties and enhancing their reading fluency and comprehension skills. Online reading can be broadly defined as engaging in reading activities through digital texts using various reading strategies. International studies comparing the effects of online and traditional reading practices on students' reading fluency and comprehension are particularly noteworthy. For example, Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2022) reported improvements in the reading fluency and accuracy of elementary school students who participated in an online peer-assisted reading intervention. Similarly, Mize and Park (2021) examined the effects of an iPad-assisted repeated reading program on the reading fluency and attitudes of fourth-grade students with reading difficulties, reporting positive gains in both reading speed and attitudes.

An exploratory study conducted by Beach et al. (2021) examined the adaptation of a traditional summer reading intervention to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study involved 35 low-income second- and third-grade students who participated in 30-minute one-on-one Zoom sessions using the Sound Partners program over 22 days. The findings revealed that students maintained their reading fluency and accuracy while achieving approximately a 10% improvement on curriculum-based tests ($p < .001$, $d = 1.25-1.30$). Participant feedback also indicated that the online summer reading intervention was both feasible and effective. Similarly, Duijnen (2021) implemented a concurrent online fluency intervention with three second- and third-grade students experiencing reading difficulties. Students with comparable reading skills took part in an eight-week small-group program consisting of 15 sessions, each lasting 45 minutes. The results demonstrated improvements in students' decoding and accuracy skills, as well as their reading comprehension performance. Maki and Hammerschmidt-Snidarich (2022), in their meta-analysis, demonstrated that online reading fluency interventions are generally effective in improving students' oral reading fluency skills. Alves and Romig (2021) adapted a face-to-face instructional plan into an online synchronous intervention for students with reading difficulties, emphasizing that online education can serve educational purposes not only during pandemics but also in a variety of contexts. Findings from studies on improving reading skills in online environments suggest that such interventions can be used as alternative tools for enhancing reading performance. Nevertheless, further research on online reading practices is required, particularly within the context of the Turkish education system and its curriculum. In today's increasingly digitalized world, it is essential to conduct both theoretical and applied research to enhance the effectiveness of online reading studies, especially in developing a critical skill such as reading. In this context, the present study examined the effectiveness of an online reading fluency approach in addressing reading difficulties. To this end, the main research question of the study was: "What is the effect of the online reading fluency development approach on addressing reading difficulties?" The following sub-questions were examined within the scope of this study:

1. What is the effect of the online reading fluency development approach on improving reading speed?
2. What is the effect of the online reading fluency development approach on enhancing prosodic reading skills?
3. What are the views of students, parents, and teachers regarding the online reading fluency development approach?

Method

Model

This study, conducted to examine in depth an approach to improving online reading fluency in addressing reading difficulties, employed a case study design, which is a qualitative research method. Case studies are defined as a research design in which the researcher conducts an in-depth analysis of a situation, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2017).

The case study design was chosen to allow for a detailed examination of the role of online reading fluency in addressing reading difficulties from multiple perspectives.

Study Group

This study was conducted with a third-grade student at an elementary school in Istanbul during the 2022–2023 academic year. Purposive sampling, which “allows for in-depth investigation by selecting information-rich cases based on the purpose of the research,” was used in participant selection (Büyüköztürk et al., 2019, p. 92). The following criteria were applied to select the third-grade student enrolled at the designated school:

- The student’s native language should be Turkish.
- The student should have no diagnosed mental, visual, or auditory impairment.
- The number of correctly read words per minute should range between 0 and 60.

A student who met the above criteria and was enrolled to third grade during the 2022–2023 academic year was selected for the study. For ethical reasons, the student’s real name was withheld, and the pseudonym *Ece* was used.

Ece’s Reading Backstory: Ece is a third-grade student at a public elementary school who is academically successful and well-liked by her peers. However, she makes errors while reading. These reading errors generally stem from her tendency to guess words after reading only part of them, rather than relying on their phonetic structure to identify them letter by letter and syllable by syllable. In addition, when she encounters a difficult word, she tends to reread the previous word in an attempt to save time. This behavior negatively affects her overall reading performance.

Role of the Researcher

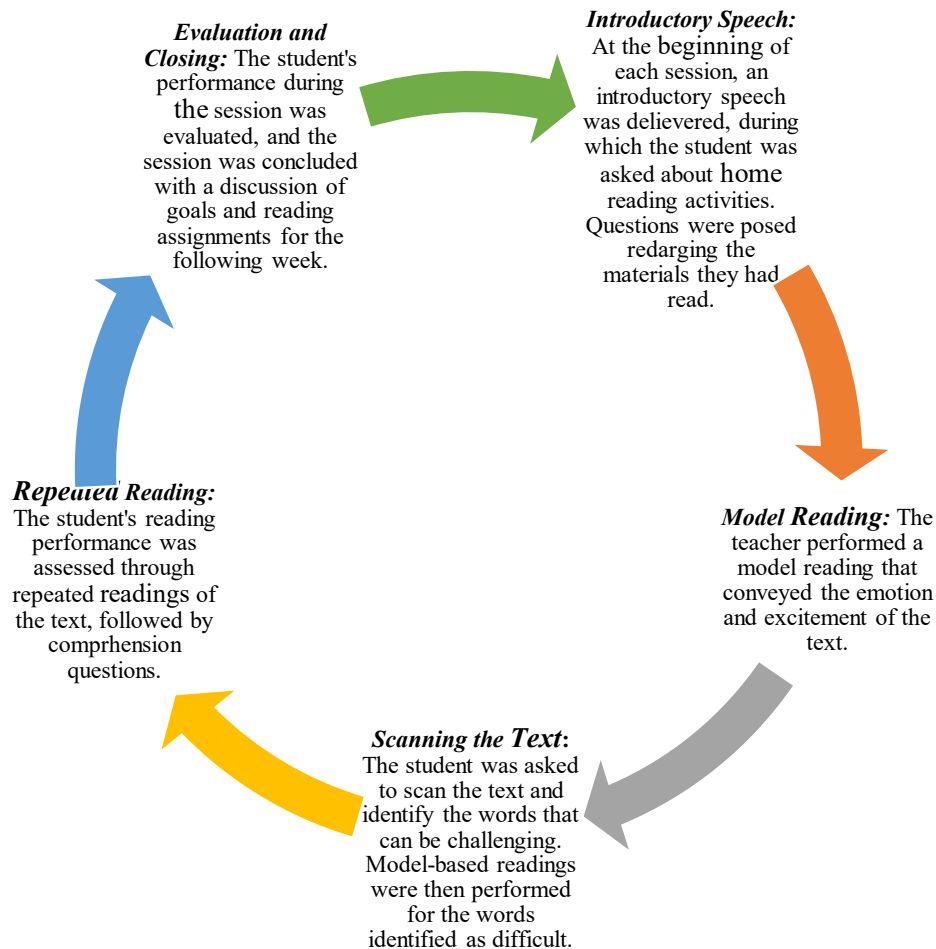
In this study, the researcher also served as the program implementer. Throughout the process, each reading session was conducted by the researcher, observations were made during implementation, and data were collected accordingly. Since the researcher also served as the implementer, steps were taken to minimize potential researcher bias. All reading sessions were video recorded to allow for external review when necessary. In addition, pre- and post-assessments were scored by an independent evaluator who was blinded to the sequence of the recordings. During qualitative data analysis, an independent coder contributed to the reliability process to further reduce bias. These precautions helped strengthen the trustworthiness and objectivity of the findings.

Implementation Process

After obtaining the necessary permissions, a study plan consisting of 36 online reading sessions, each lasting 40 minutes, was implemented with the student three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). The texts used in the sessions were provided by an academic expert in the field.

Figure 1

Structured Instructional Cycle of the Online Fluency Development Sessions



Each session followed a structured format consisting of four components: an introductory warm-up activity, guided repeated reading practices, performance-based evaluation, and feedback. During the warm-up, the student engaged in brief phonological awareness or preview activities to activate prior knowledge. The repeated reading component included model reading, echo reading, and independent reading attempts. At the end of each session, the student's performance was evaluated and brief feedback was provided regarding accuracy, rate, and prosody. The texts selected for the sessions were narrative passages appropriate for third-grade students. The selection criteria included readability, lexical accessibility, topic familiarity, and length (ranging between 80 and 120 words). Readability and age-appropriateness were confirmed through expert review. The texts were also examined for their suitability for repeated reading practices, including syntactic simplicity, rhythmic flow, and opportunities for prosodic phrasing.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through the researcher's diary, which is frequently used in qualitative research, interviews with the student's classroom teacher and family, and measurements of the

student's fluent reading skills taken at the beginning and end of the study. These measurements were based on *the number of correctly read words per minute* (Deno, 1985) and data obtained from the Prosodic Reading Scale included in the program-based assessment. The *Prosodic Reading Scale*, developed by Keskin et al., (2013), consists of fifteen items with a maximum possible score of 60. To ensure content validity, expert opinions were obtained from specialists in the field of reading and reading fluency. For construct validity, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was found to be .97, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .01$). Factor analysis conducted using the Varimax rotation technique indicated that the scale loaded on a single factor, which explained 79% of the total variance. The internal consistency of the scale, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was calculated to be .981. Students' reading speeds were determined by subtracting the number of incorrectly read words from the number of correctly read words. The percentage change in reading speed between the pretest and posttest was calculated, and the reading fluency data were interpreted accordingly. The student's pretest, midtest, and posttest scores on the Prosodic Reading Scale were also compared and evaluated. The qualitative data obtained in the study were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis, commonly employed in qualitative research, is used to gain an in-depth understanding by identifying meaningful patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. It involves organizing data systematically through processes of coding, categorizing, and interpreting it under specific concepts and themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). For this purpose, first, codes, concepts, and subthemes were generated, followed by the development and interpretation of the main theme derived from these subthemes. To enhance the credibility of the qualitative findings, the coding process was reviewed by a second researcher with expertise in reading education. After the initial coding was completed by the primary researcher, the second researcher examined a portion of the data and provided feedback on the coding scheme. Minor disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus. This process contributed to the trustworthiness of the analysis, even though the primary coding was carried out by the researcher.

Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the data collected in the study.

Findings Regarding the Effect of the Online Reading Fluency Development Approach on Reading Speed

Table 1

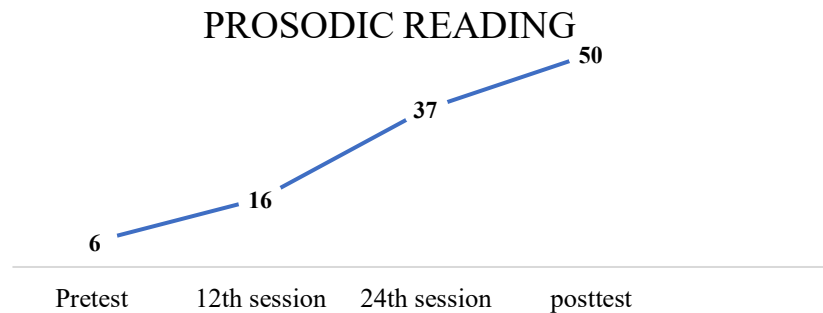
Findings Regarding the Effect of the Online Reading Fluency Development Approach on Reading Speed

	Total Words Read	Incorrect Words	Reading Speed	Percentage Change
Pretest	56	1	55	%45
Posttest	82	2	80	

Findings Regarding the Effect of the Online Reading Fluency Development Approach on Prosodic Reading Skills

Figure 2

Changes in Prosodic Reading Scores Across Sessions



According to the table, the student scored 6 points on the 60-point Prosodic Reading Scale in the pretest, 16 points after the 12th reading session, 37 points after the 24th reading session, and 50 points in the posttest (after the 36th reading session). Based on these results, it can be concluded that the online reading fluency development approach was effective in improving prosodic reading skills.

Student, Parent, and Teacher Views Regarding the Online Reading Fluency Development Implementation

The student, parent, and teacher views were obtained regarding the online reading fluency development implementation. The data were analyzed through content analysis, and corresponding codes, subthemes, and main themes were generated.

Table 2

Theme 1: Motivation and Participation

Main Theme	Subtheme	Statements
Motivation and Participation	• The student's anticipation of the lessons	• "The student expressed that she eagerly awaited the lesson days."
	• Willingly fulfilling tasks and responsibilities	• "It was stated that she completed her tasks and responsibilities on time and with enthusiasm."
	• Increased motivation by the end of the process	• "It was observed that she was making an effort to prove herself."
	• Effort to prove herself	

An evaluation of the online reading fluency development approach based on student, parent, and teacher views revealed that the student eagerly anticipated the lessons, willingly completed assigned tasks and responsibilities, and, by the end of the process, demonstrated increased motivation and a strong desire to prove herself. These findings suggest that the approach had a positive impact on the student's attitude toward the reading process.

Table 3

Theme 2: Development in Reading Skills

Main Theme	Subthemes	Statements
Development in Reading Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noticeable improvement in reading skills Progress recognized by classmates Increased interest in reading activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The student stated that she was aware of the progress in her reading.” “Classmates noticed and expressed the improvement in the student’s reading skills.”

The online reading fluency development approach led to a noticeable improvement in the student’s reading skills. This progress was also recognized by classmates, serving as a form of social reinforcement that significantly increased the student’s engagement in reading activities. This holistic development demonstrates the effectiveness of the approach in enhancing both individual learning outcomes and classroom interaction.

Table 4

Theme 3: Reading Habit and Passion

Main Theme	Subthemes	Statements
Reading Habit and Passion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness of reading books Habit of carrying books Development in reading passion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “It was stated that the student’s passion for and awareness of reading books had increased....” “It was mentioned that she carried at least one book in her bag wherever she went.”

The online reading fluency development approach enhanced the student’s awareness of reading, fostered a habit of carrying books, and cultivated a passion for reading. The student’s increased interest in reading, reflected in her daily life at the end of the process, demonstrates the lasting and positive impact of the approach.

Table 5

Theme 4: Attitudes Toward the Online Process

Main Theme	Subthemes	Statements
Attitudes Toward the Online Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding the process enjoyable Lessons meeting expectations Contribution of the online process to learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The student stated that the online lessons were enjoyable....” “The student’s opinions about the online reading fluency development approach were positive.”

The online reading fluency development approach was found to be enjoyable by the student, the lessons met expectations, and the process was observed to make significant contributions to overall learning. This demonstrates that online implementations can increase student engagement and make the learning process more effective.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study conducted an in-depth examination of the impact of an online reading fluency development approach on the reading skills of a student with reading difficulties. The findings revealed notable improvements in both the student's reading speed (a 45% increase) and prosodic reading skills. Furthermore, the student, parent, and teacher views indicated that the intervention had positive effects on motivation, awareness, and reading habits. These results are consistent with recent research. For example, Romig and Jetton (2023) found that online repeated reading interventions significantly improved students' oral reading fluency. Similarly, Cruz et al., (2022) demonstrated that both online and face-to-face fluency interventions are effective, and that online implementations can successfully serve as alternatives to traditional methods.

The literature supports that online practices enhance not only reading speed but also prosodic reading skills. Hudson et al., (2020) emphasized that one-on-one structured repeated reading practices are effective not only for speed and accuracy but also for prosody. Studies focusing on improving online reading have been found to positively contribute to the development of students' prosodic reading skills. These findings indicate that online reading environments and strategies can effectively be used to improve students' prosodic reading performance.

The improvements observed in reading speed and accuracy may be interpreted within the framework of Automaticity Theory (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), which suggests that fluent readers allocate fewer cognitive resources to decoding and more to comprehension. The student's increased prosodic competence also aligns with cognitive models emphasizing the role of prosody in supporting higher-level comprehension processes. Furthermore, the student's enhanced motivation during the intervention can be linked to Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy, as repeated success experiences may have strengthened her belief in her ability to read fluently. From the perspective of Participation Theory (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), the student's active engagement in the online sessions contributed to her developing a positive reading identity, thereby supporting both cognitive and affective growth.

This study also revealed increases in the student's motivation, awareness, and reading habits during the online reading sessions. Interventions designed to enhance reading skills additionally support students' affective domains. Cheng et al., (2021) demonstrated that fluency interventions allowing students to select their own reading topics positively influence not only performance but also attitudes toward reading. Accordingly, studies aimed at improving students' reading skills in online environments appear to support both their motivation and their perceptions of reading.

In this study, a 36-session intervention program was implemented. The duration and intensity of interventions are important factors in reading development research. A meta-analysis by Maki and Hammerschmidt-Snidarich (2022) emphasized the significance of intervention duration and intensity. The researchers noted that regular and structured practices have a moderate effect on improving students' reading skills. In this context, the systematic intervention program consisting

of 36 reading sessions conducted three times a week in the present study can be considered to have contributed to the improvement of the student's reading skills.

The findings of this study reveal that online reading fluency interventions are effective in both cognitive (speed, accuracy, prosody) and affective (motivation, attitude) domains. Many effective strategies and practices used in traditional face-to-face reading instruction can also be adapted to online environments. Both recent research in the relevant literature and the results of this study demonstrate that reading strategies can successfully be implemented online. Therefore, online reading interventions can be regarded as an alternative approach to improving reading skills. Based on these results, several recommendations can be made:

Online reading fluency interventions can be integrated into school programs for students with reading difficulties. They can serve as alternative learning environments and processes not only under normal conditions but also during extraordinary situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic or earthquakes. To this end, teachers can implement various reading strategies—such as repeated reading, paired reading, echo reading, and readers' theater—in online environments.

Online reading programs can also be incorporated into the curriculum and teaching–learning processes, allowing for early intervention in students' reading difficulties. This study was conducted with a limited number of participants; therefore, future research could be carried out with larger samples representing different socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, longitudinal and follow-up studies could be designed to further examine the long-term effects of online intervention programs. Furthermore, future research could also explore the effects of online practices on group interaction and collaboration in depth.

Declarations

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Ethics Statements: Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of İstanbul University–Cerrahpaşa (Approval No: 191, Date: 02.05.2023).

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from the student and the student's parent prior to data collection.

Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Examining the Role of AI in Qualitative Research: Insights from Document Analysis of Daisaku Ikeda's Peace Proposal

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Abstract

Purpose: The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has further complicated the debate surrounding software in qualitative data analysis. Misusing AI diminishes researchers' analytical skills and distances them from meaningful engagement with data, promoting the acceptance of merely "good-enough" AI-generated outcomes (Duke, 2025). This study examines these concerns by analyzing Daisaku Ikeda's 2020 peace proposal to illustrate how such challenges manifest in actual research practice.

Method: Before using AI tools, the research team independently analyzed Ikeda's peace proposal and answered the prompts separately. Afterward, the researchers exchanged and reviewed each other's responses and synthesized them into a single paragraph for each prompt, ensuring that each paragraph reflected the depth of Ikeda's messages. The human systematic meaning-making responses were then compared with AI-generated responses.

Findings: Findings indicate that, irrespective of retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) techniques, both standard and enhanced AI systems produce hallucinations and formulaic responses that lack nuance, context, and human emotion. The article concludes that while the efficiency of AI tools is appealing, researchers should always ponder the question: "What is the purpose of conducting qualitative research?"

Implication(s): Ultimately, research is not about presenting isolated pieces of information that can be easily generated by AI but about impacting lives through the depth of understanding.

Keywords

qualitative research, document analysis, artificial intelligence (AI), Daisaku Ikeda

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly used in data analysis, raising important questions about its role in qualitative research. Software applications like ATLAS.ti, NVivo, and MAXQDA have been widely used in qualitative research for decades. However, these tools are not without criticism. The integration of generative AI adds complexity to the ongoing debate about using software for qualitative data analysis, as such technology is now being incorporated into these applications and is accessible beyond their traditional boundaries (Paulus & Marone, 2025). Although AI technology has existed since the 1950s, the rise of generative AI by OpenAI in 2022 has significantly affected various aspects of education, including qualitative research.

As AI technology becomes more widely available, it is essential to examine its use in qualitative research. Duke (2025) argues that the uncritical use of AI technology deskills analytical practices and alienates individuals from engaging with data, leading them to settle for “good-enough” outcomes produced by AI. In a developing field like Ikeda/Soka Studies, both novice and experienced researchers can misuse these tools if they do not understand the nature of various AI models or lack a solid foundation in Ikeda/Soka Studies. Misuses of AI in document analysis are detrimental because they produce misleading, shallow knowledge in the field. Exploring AI in qualitative data analysis early can help ensure the integrity of qualitative research while recognizing the usefulness and need for continuous improvement in AI technology. Given the rapid development of AI and the fact that many novice researchers in the emerging field of Ikeda/Soka Studies still lack the skills to evaluate the validity of AI-generated responses and analyses, it is essential to critically examine AI’s impact.

In his article, “Daisaku Ikeda on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Existential Happiness: Intuition, the Poetic Mind, and Human Education at the Posthuman Turn,” Goulah (2024a) raises a concern, called “the pathology of the absence of human beings,” pervasive in society due to the rapid development of technology. However, this concern may have a limited impact when competing with seemingly efficient AI technology unless more concrete examples are provided in this area. Such examples would serve as a wake-up call to action for researchers and educators, particularly in qualitative data analysis, encouraging them to address the four discursive dilemmas discussed by Paulus and Marone (2025): (a) automated insight-generation versus systematic meaning-making, (b) chatting with documents versus analyzing data, (c) high speed versus high engagement, and (d) novelty versus agency.

This study aims to raise awareness of the complexities AI introduces to qualitative research. It seeks to address the following research questions: 1) In what context is generative AI technology appropriate to use in Ikeda/Soka studies, and 2) what are the incompatible epistemological foundations of qualitative research in Ikeda/Soka studies that AI technology cannot replace? While the findings may seem particularly informative in the field of Ikeda/Soka studies, their implications and applications extend to other fields of qualitative research that employ document analysis as a method in the age of AI. The following sections provide an overview of Daisaku Ikeda, his peace proposals to the United Nations, document analysis, and AI and its applications in qualitative research.

Daisaku Ikeda and His Peace Proposals to the United Nations

Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) was a philosopher, peacebuilder, educator, author, and poet committed to creating a lasting culture of peace through dialogue. He had engaged in over 7,000 dialogues with global leaders and scholars, addressing a range of pressing global issues (World Tribune, 2024a, 2024b). As the founding president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), Ikeda established six global institutions to promote peace, culture, and education. He also founded fourteen Soka schools worldwide, from kindergarten to university, to foster an ethos of global citizenship. By 2025, Ikeda had received honorary citizenship from more than 800 cities worldwide and over 400 honorary doctorates (Ikeda, 2025a). Presentations, publications, and applications of Ikeda’s philosophy are increasingly featured on national and international conferences, journals, and books, emphasizing the importance of human education in fostering “life-to-life encouragement, creative coexistence, dialogue, global consciousness, and value-creating approaches to knowledge, society, and power” (Goulah, 2024b, p. 1511).

Between 1983 and 2022, Ikeda published 40 annual peace proposals addressing a wide range of global challenges to promote a culture of peace and human security. His proposals address topics including dialogue, youth participation, gender equality, human rights, humanitarian relief, education for global citizenship, sustainability, war, nuclear abolition, and climate change. These works have been translated into at least 52 languages (Ikeda, 2025b). In his final peace proposal before his passing, Ikeda (2022) wrote: “Human beings inherently possess the strength to overcome any challenge. When youth stand up in solidarity, confident that they can determine the future, this fresh awareness and momentum will surely become the driving force toward a brighter future” (p. 18). In this last proposal to the United Nations, he emphasized climate change, youth education, and nuclear abolition as the top three issues. All of Ikeda’s peace proposals translated into English are available at <https://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/resources/works/props/>.

Document Analysis

Document analysis refers to the systematic, rigorous, and transparent evaluation of documents, both printed and electronic, for content analysis and meaning making (Bowen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Wood et al., 2020). This method can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative research. In quantitative studies, document analysis is often utilized for content analysis to identify the frequency or pattern of specific information. In contrast, qualitative studies focus on interpretation and the construction of meaning (Morgan, 2022). When the documents used as data are original, credible, and publicly accessible—such as Daisaku Ikeda’s peace proposals to the United Nations—this transparency enables others to replicate the study, assess the trustworthiness of the findings, and broaden the scope of future research. Typically, there are three stages of document analysis: *skimming* (superficial examination), *reading* (thorough examination), and *interpretation* through content analysis and thematic analysis. He highlights several advantages of document analysis, including its efficiency, availability, cost-effectiveness, lack of intrusiveness and reactivity, stability, precision, and broad coverage. However, limitations may arise depending on the nature of the documents, including insufficient detail, low retrievability, and biased selection. In a nutshell, he states:

Document analysis...is not a matter of lining up a series of excerpts from printed material to convey whatever idea comes to the researcher's mind. Rather, it is a process of valuating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed. In the process, the researcher should strive for objectivity and sensitivity and maintain a balance between both.

(Bowen, 2009, pp. 33-34)

Wood et al., (2020) argue that document analysis “demonstrates the value of a framework in sensitising the researcher to the different ways in which documents may be approached, and highlights some of the implications that may have for data collection and analysis...to offer some practical guidance on the application of a thematic analysis process in qualitative data analysis” (p. 467). Thematic analysis is “not a theoretically driven approach, and it does not prescribe epistemological or ontological frameworks” (Morgan, 2022, p. 73). Instead, it values the worldview of both the being (ontology; the researcher) and the knowing (epistemology; the chosen analytic framework). By reflecting on both the existence and the knowledge, researchers enhance their analysis, deepen their understanding of the documents, and improve the trustworthiness of the findings.

Thematic analysis is one common analytical approach for document analysis. Braun et al., (2019) identify three schools of thematic analysis. The first is the *coding reliability approach*, which focuses on accurately identifying codes and themes in the data through consensus among multiple independent coders, thereby creating domain summaries. This approach seeks to ensure the reliability of codes within the data by involving multiple independent coders. The second school is the *reflexive approach*, which emphasizes the researcher's role in actively developing meaning-based patterns without relying on predetermined themes. This approach may lead to subjective interpretations that are influenced by the researcher's background, experience, and personal beliefs. However, the reflexive approach views subjectivity not as a problem, but as a valuable resource. The third school is the *codebook approach*, which allows researchers to use themes derived from the data and those developed during data analysis. This approach blends the *coding reliability approach* and the *reflexive approach*.

AI and Its Applications in Qualitative Research

Thematic analysis helps identify patterns or themes within materials through a systematic, transparent process, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (Christou, 2024). Some advantages of using AI include facilitating transcription and helping researchers generate initial ideas from the data. It can refine or generate definitions for themes, cluster information to explore ideas, and select or edit wording. However, there are limitations to consider. These include the potential for algorithmically generated biased themes, the loss of the human element in interpretation, and the risk of misinterpreting prompts or the data itself.

It is important to note that AI-generated responses are based on clusters of accessible information and may not always prioritize strict accuracy. The degree of information validity varies among different AI models and their functions. For example, standard generative AI systems generate content using pre-existing internet data, often delivering broad information and ideas but making it difficult to trace specific sources. In contrast, enhanced generative AI that incorporates retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) techniques employed may reduce hallucinations by restricting responses to a vetted set of sources.

When an AI system misinterprets a prompt or cannot identify relevant information from its available data sources—whether these are broad internet resources or carefully vetted databases—it may generate information that does not exist (the so-called hallucinations) or inadvertently misrepresent data. Rather than viewing this as a flaw unique to AI, perhaps researchers should recognize it as an inherent limitation and exercise caution when using AI.

Furthermore, because AI systems primarily cluster information based on prompts and algorithms, users who are dissatisfied with the AI-generated results can continue refining their input until the AI produces results that meet their expectations. Researchers can also compare results from different AI tools to determine which to use or combine, rather than revisiting the original data to resolve uncertainties. The only transparent aspect in this process is the documentation of the prompts researchers use to generate results. This raises another question: if users repeatedly attempt to generate results, will AI tools produce results closer to the “accuracy” of the data, or will they merely continue producing answers until they align with researchers’ preferred results?

Ethical issues in AI should extend beyond plagiarism (i.e., using AI-generated content as one’s own work). Researchers have the responsibility to provide reliable and valid information to the field. AI hallucinations pose a risk when researchers lack domain expertise to distinguish truth from false information and instead rely on AI outputs. Even experienced researchers can misuse AI. For instance, while AI can automatically generate “themes,” researchers may struggle to determine whether these themes are accurate or fabricated if they have not thoroughly reviewed the materials. Paulus and Marone (2025) argue:

It is the human researchers who have the ability to delve into the complex social problems that their studies are designed to solve, who make meaningful connections with the people involved in the research study, who have knowledge of the theoretical frameworks that can be used to make sense of the data generated with the participants, and who understand the nuances, complications, and messiness of human existence. More than just an analysis of textual data, qualitative inquiry requires deep engagement with what these texts mean to the humans who generated them. (p. 396)

They continue to say:

We are aware that this study may sound just like that in just a few years due to advances in AI technology. Nevertheless, methodological rigor and human agency in qualitative research will always be worth consideration through a reflective and critical stance. No matter how shocking it may sound to future readers, some qualitative researchers actually enjoy doing the heavy lifting, finding thought-provoking and meaningful what others consider a headache. (p. 401)

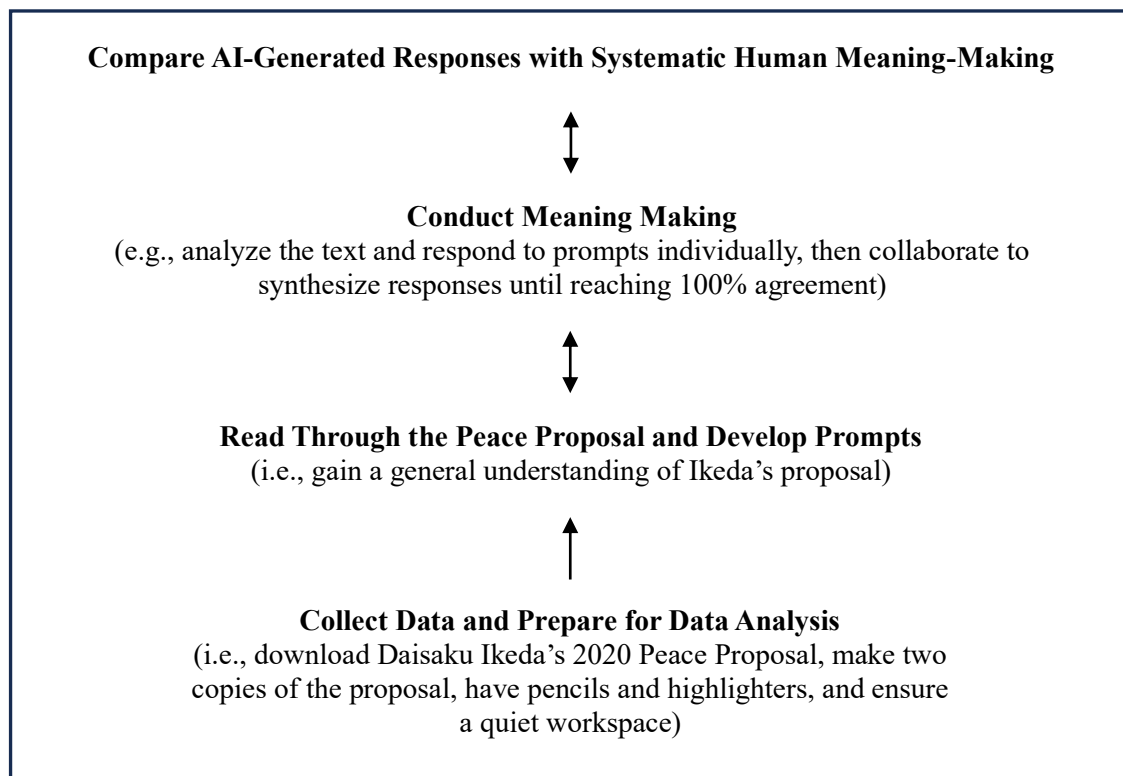
Paulus and Marone (2025) conclude that AI primarily assists with textual analysis, such as pattern detection. However, it falls short of the epistemological foundations of qualitative research, which emphasize systematic meaning-making, deeper data analysis, high engagement with the data, and recognition of human agency. They caution against the dangers of researchers becoming overly reliant on AI-generated automation, which often prioritizes efficiency over accuracy, meaning, and complexity. While they acknowledge the usefulness of AI, they believe that ongoing examination of its use will lead to improvements in both AI and researchers’ endeavors. Inappropriate use of AI technology leads to oversimplification of data, resulting in shallow understanding or misleading interpretations. Moreover, it can diminish researchers’ passion for uncovering thought-provoking and meaningful insights that only human agency can reveal, whereas AI technology tends to operate at a textual level.

Method

This study uses document analysis of Daisaku Ikeda's 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations to examine the ongoing debate over the use of AI in qualitative research. Figure 1 outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Figure 1

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures for Comparing AI and Human Responses



The research team consisted of the author and her graduate research assistant. Although the assistant had completed research methods courses, she had no prior knowledge of Daisaku Ikeda or his work, which ensured a neutral perspective in her analysis. The procedures for data collection and analysis were as follows. First, the team downloaded the English-language PDF of Daisaku Ikeda's 2020 peace proposal, "Toward Our Shared Future: Constructing an Era of Human Solidarity," prepared highlighters and notebooks, and arranged for a quiet workspace. The proposal is available at <https://www.daisakuikedas.org/sub/resources/works/props/2020-peace-proposal.html>. Second, they read through the proposal to gain a general understanding of Ikeda's message and developed four prompts. Third, before employing AI tools, both team members independently analyzed the proposal and responded to the prompts separately. They then exchanged and reviewed each other's answers, synthesizing them into a single paragraph for each prompt until they reached 100% agreement, ensuring that the final responses reflected the depth of Ikeda's messages. Disagreements were resolved through repeatedly revisiting the peace proposal, reviewing reading notes, consulting official resources, and engaging in discussions. Finally, the team compared AI-generated responses with systematic human meaning-making.

For the AI prompts, the team used Microsoft Education’s (2025) AI-prompting framework to develop adequate instructions. This framework comprises five elements: (1) persona—assigning a specific role to the AI tool; (2) objective—defining the intended action or output; (3) audience—identifying the target recipient; (4) context—providing relevant background information; and (5) boundaries—setting limitations or guidelines for the task. The study used two AI models: a standard generative AI that searches all pre-existing internet data, and an enhanced generative AI that incorporates retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) techniques to generate responses exclusively from the uploaded PDF of Ikeda’s 2020 peace proposal.

Findings

Building on the work of Paulus and Marone (2025) regarding the discursive constructions of generative AI and qualitative data analysis, this study aims to examine the four discursive dilemmas: “(a) automated insight-generation versus systematic meaning-making; (b) chatting with documents versus analyzing data; (c) high speed versus high engagement; and (d) novelty versus agency” (Paulus & Marone, 2025, p. 395) within the context of Ikeda/Soka studies.

Prompt #1. “Use a single, clear paragraph to analyze Daisaku Ikeda’s insights on climate action as stated in his 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations. Your analysis should use simple language so that anyone unfamiliar with Ikeda’s proposal can easily understand the main ideas.” Table 1 shows the AI-generated responses to Prompt #1, followed by human systematic meaning-making.

Table 1

AI-Generated Responses Regarding the Insights of Daisaku Ikeda’s 2020 Peace Proposal

Standard Generative AI Response (Based on all pre-existing internet data)	Enhanced Generative AI Response, RAG (Based on the PDF file of the peace proposal)
<p>“In his 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations, Daisaku Ikeda treats climate change as a shared human crisis rather than only an environmental or technical problem. He explains that climate change threatens human dignity, deepens inequality, and harms the most vulnerable people first. Ikeda stresses that the crisis is caused by human choices, so it can also be solved by human responsibility, cooperation, and compassion. He calls for global solidarity, long-term thinking, and ethical action that puts human life and future generations at the center. For Ikeda, climate action is inseparable from peacebuilding because protecting the planet also protects human security, social stability, and hope for the future.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)</p>	<p>“In his 2020 peace proposal, Daisaku Ikeda presents climate change as a serious threat to all humanity, similar in scale to the danger posed by nuclear weapons. He stresses that climate change is not just an environmental problem but a human one that affects people’s lives, dignity, and security, especially through extreme weather, displacement, and loss of livelihoods. At the same time, Ikeda sees climate change as an opportunity: because it affects everyone, it can inspire global cooperation and solidarity. He argues that how humanity responds to climate change will shape the future of the world, making it a defining challenge of our time that requires shared responsibility and collective action.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)</p>

What the Text Actually Says

Ikeda (2020) emphasized that climate change is a threat to everyone on Earth, both now and in the future. He highlighted recent extreme weather events—such as typhoons, rising sea levels,

earthquakes, and tsunamis—to illustrate their impact on both developed and developing nations. According to Ikeda, natural disasters have intensified the risks and challenges faced by those living in poverty and other vulnerable situations. Because no one can be exempt from its impacts, confronting climate change requires global solidarity and collective action. He discussed the elements required for solidarity and action, including leaving no one behind and recognizing unquantifiable indicators. Furthermore, he urged people to take collective, constructive action rather than merely share the sense of crisis, which often leads to feelings of powerlessness and indifference. He promoted creating opportunities for youth participation and believed that youth solidarity would bring indomitable optimism and limitless opportunities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Throughout the proposal, Ikeda often cited the teachings of his mentors, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and Josei Toda (1900-1958), as well as Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes the dignity of human life. He asserted that “while categories have been generated and given names within society, in terms of their humanity, there are no distinctions among people” (Ikeda, 2020, p. 5). Ikeda also highlighted international organizations and peace exhibitions actively working to address the impacts of climate change.

Prompt #2. “Use a single, clear paragraph to analyze Daisaku Ikeda’s first commitment to climate action—leaving no one behind—as stated in his 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations. Your analysis should use simple language so that anyone unfamiliar with Ikeda’s proposal can easily understand the main ideas.” Table 2 shows the AI-generated responses to Prompt #2, followed by human systematic meaning-making.

Table 2

AI-Generated Responses Regarding Daisaku Ikeda’s First Commitment to Climate Action

Standard Generative AI Response (Based on all pre-existing internet data)	Enhanced Generative AI Response, RAG (Based on the PDF file of the peace proposal)
“Ikeda’s first commitment to climate action focuses on ‘leaving no one behind,’ meaning climate policies must protect the people who are most at risk. He points out that poor communities, small island nations, older adults, and future generations suffer the most from climate change even though they contribute the least to it. Ikeda argues that justice and fairness must guide climate action, so support, resources, and technology should be shared with those who need them most. This commitment emphasizes listening to vulnerable voices and ensuring that climate solutions reduce inequality rather than deepen it. For Ikeda, climate action must be humane, inclusive, and grounded in respect for every person’s dignity.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)	“Ikeda’s first commitment to climate action emphasizes protecting the most vulnerable people. He points out that climate change harms everyone, but it hits the poor, the elderly, women, children, and marginalized communities the hardest. These groups often suffer the most from disasters and have the fewest resources to recover. Ikeda argues that climate action must focus on human dignity, not just economic data or national interests. Helping people rebuild their lives, protecting their sense of belonging, and ensuring that no one is abandoned are essential. For Ikeda, true climate justice means standing with those who are suffering and making their needs the center of global responses.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)

What the Text Actually Says

Ikeda (2020) argued that the impacts of natural disasters “tend to be concentrated on and felt by people already afflicted by poverty and those in the more vulnerable sectors of society, such as women, children, and the elderly” (p. 2). He emphasized the importance of recognizing the

actual suffering of individuals, stating, “When discussing the impacts of climate change, there is a tendency to focus on the scale of economic loss or other quantifiable indicators. But I think it is important that we attend to the actual suffering of the many individuals...and make this central to our efforts to come together in search of solutions” (p. 3). For Ikeda, it is not merely the numbers that matter, but the dignity of each individual in their daily lives. One should strive to protect and improve not only one’s life, but also those of others. He emphasized that economic growth and efforts to mitigate global warming are not mutually exclusive; for instance, renewable energy and improved energy efficiency can help mitigate these challenges. When vulnerable people, particularly those in poverty and those with illnesses, are supported, they find creative ways to make progress. Drawing on Makiguchi’s insights, Ikeda asserted that true transformation in human history arises from humanitarian efforts rather than economic competition; people enrich their own lives through working for the benefit of others.

Prompt #3. “Use a single, clear paragraph to analyze Daisaku Ikeda’s second commitment to climate action—the challenge of construction—as stated in his 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations. Your analysis should use simple language so that anyone unfamiliar with Ikeda’s proposal can easily understand the main ideas.” Table 3 shows the AI-generated responses to Prompt #3, followed by human systematic meaning-making.

Table 3

AI-Generated Responses Regarding Daisaku Ikeda’s Second Commitment to Climate Action

Standard Generative AI Response (Based on all pre-existing internet data)	Enhanced Generative AI Response, RAG (Based on the PDF file of the peace proposal)
“The second commitment, which Ikeda calls ‘the challenge of construction,’ focuses on building positive and practical solutions instead of only criticizing existing systems. He urges governments, institutions, and citizens to actively create sustainable societies through renewable energy, resilient infrastructure, and responsible economic models. Ikeda believes that climate action requires creativity, cooperation, and courage to redesign how societies produce, consume, and live. This commitment highlights hope and possibility, encouraging people to see climate action as an opportunity to build safer, fairer, and more peaceful communities rather than as a burden or sacrifice.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)	“The second commitment focuses on moving beyond fear and warnings to actively building solutions. Ikeda explains that simply sharing a sense of crisis can leave people feeling powerless or indifferent. Instead, he calls for a clear, hopeful vision of the future and practical actions that people can take together. Climate action, in his view, should be creative and constructive—such as restoring ecosystems, changing energy systems, and improving daily habits. Small actions, when repeated by many people, can create large change. This commitment highlights that hope, imagination, and steady effort are necessary to turn concern about climate change into meaningful progress.” (Source: ChatGPT-5)

What the Text Actually Says

Drawing on his dialogue with the peace scholar and a world-renowned environmental activist, Elise Boulding (1920-2010), Ikeda (2020) emphasized the importance of a clear, specific vision of what a peaceful society should be. He referenced the Seeds of Change and Seeds of Hope exhibitions by the Soka Institute for Environmental Studies and Research of the Amazon in

Brazil. As a Buddhist philosopher, he then used the Buddhist concept of an ideal land—not in some distant place but right where people live—highlighting that each individual can become a source of limitless human potential and help transform their own environment into a peaceful place. He quoted the Kenyan environmental activist and 2004 Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) during their conversation, stating, “The future does not exist in the future. Rather, it is born only through our actions in the present, and if we want to realize something in the future, we must take action toward it now” (Ikeda, 2020, p. 10). Another story mentioned in the Seeds of Hope exhibition is about Hazel Henderson (1933-2022), an American futurist and environmental activist who co-authored a dialogue book with Ikeda titled “Planetary Citizenship: Your Values, Beliefs, and Actions Can Shape a Sustainable World” in 2004. Ikeda firmly believed that “...climate change is one of the cornerstone issues driving dialogue at the UN...Through the kind of collaborative efforts that will emerge from these dialogues and through the expansion of a vision that people can connect with and share, I am confident that we will be able to accelerate momentum toward combating global warming even as we solidify the groundwork for a sustainable global society” (Ikeda, 2020, pp. 11-12). Global warming is human-caused, so the solutions must come from human beings (Ikeda, 2020).

Prompt #4. “Use a single, clear paragraph to analyze Daisaku Ikeda’s third commitment to climate action—youth-led climate action—the challenge of construction—as stated in his 2020 peace proposal to the United Nations. Your analysis should use simple language so that anyone unfamiliar with Ikeda’s proposal can easily understand the main ideas.” Table 4 shows the AI-generated responses to Prompt #4, followed by human systematic meaning-making.

Table 4

AI-Generated Responses Regarding Daisaku Ikeda’s Third Commitment to Climate Action

Standard Generative AI Response (Based on all pre-existing internet data)	Enhanced Generative AI Response, RAG (Based on the PDF file of the peace proposal)
“Ikeda’s third commitment emphasizes the central role of young people in leading climate action. He views youth not only as future leaders but as active agents of change today. Ikeda believes young people bring moral clarity, energy, and a strong sense of responsibility toward future generations. He calls on societies to trust youth, support their education, and create spaces where their voices influence policy and decision-making. Youth-led climate action, in Ikeda’s view, helps transform fear and frustration into hope and action, ensuring that climate efforts remain forward-looking, inclusive, and rooted in a long-term vision for humanity and the planet.” (Source: ChatGPT)	“Ikeda’s third commitment highlights the central role of young people in leading climate action. He praises youth movements for bringing urgency, energy, and moral clarity to the climate crisis. Young people, he argues, are not just future leaders but present actors who understand the science and demand change because their lives are directly affected. Ikeda supports giving youth a real voice in decision-making at local, national, and global levels, including within the United Nations. By combining their strong sense of justice with optimism and creativity, young people can drive powerful change and help guide the world toward a more sustainable and hopeful future.” (Source: ChatGPT)

What the Text Actually Says

Ikeda (2020) expressed his enthusiasm over the United Nations hosting the Youth Climate Summit, a significant event he had advocated since 2006 to encourage youth participation in

climate action. He acknowledged various student movements that have emerged globally, including Swedish high school student Greta Thunberg, who has inspired young people and individuals of all ages to join the fight against climate change. Ikeda praised Christiana Figueres, a key figure in the Paris climate conference, for her insights on youth activism: “She explained that the young people know that change is not impossible and that is why they are expressing outrage at the slow pace of efforts to prevent global warming; and that moving forward, if the outrage is married with optimism, we can expect something even more powerful to emerge” (p. 13). He also cited Aurelio Peccei (1908–84), his co-author of “Before It Is Too Late” and founder of the Club of Rome, emphasizing the importance of youth voices in climate action and social reform. Ikeda (2020) argued that “Precisely because it is so complex and requires a multifaceted approach, we can view the challenge of climate change as presenting a remarkable diversity of opportunities for human beings to give expression to their limitless potential” (p. 15). He is convinced that engaging youth in climate-related decision-making will enhance their contributions to peace and security. He concluded with a powerful message: “The path to resolving the problem of climate change and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not be smooth or easy. However, I am deeply confident that as long as there is solidarity among youth, there is no impasse we cannot surmount” (p. 16).

Discussion

Paulus and Marone (2025) highlight four key dilemmas at the intersection of AI and human research, each accompanied by reflection questions on the purpose of qualitative inquiry. To explore these issues in practice, the present study draws on concrete examples from Ikeda’s peace proposal to demonstrate how these dilemmas play out in the actual research context.

Reflecting on Discursive Dilemma #1: Automated Insight-Generation vs. Systematic Meaning-Making

While the AI’s automated insight generation may initially appear persuasive, its responses are often general and lack depth and nuance. For instance, in Prompt #1, the AI states that Ikeda “stresses that climate change is not just an environmental problem but a human one that affects people’s lives, dignity, and security, especially through extreme weather, displacement, and loss of livelihoods.” This statement does not capture the heartfelt core of Ikeda’s peace proposal, which expresses his deep compassion for those who have suffered from climate change and for individuals who have lost their sense of identity due to displacement from their ancestral lands. Both standard and enhanced AI fail to provide readers with a clearer picture of the human stakeholders involved. Young people, whom Ikeda emphasized as a driving force for optimism and progress, are also overlooked in AI-generated responses. Another nuanced discussion of economic competition is also missing. Drawing on Makiguchi’s perspective, Ikeda observed that “Makiguchi never denied the value of competition within the workings of society, considering a mutual striving for excellence to be an enriching source of energy and creativity. What he found problematic was our tendency to view the world as solely the site of competition for survival, to base our behavior on the assumption that our lives are independent of all others, and to remain in denial regarding the effects of such behavior” (Ikeda, 2020, p. 4).

Paulus and Marone (2025) caution that while AI technology offers increased efficiency in qualitative research, it may do so at the expense of data depth and richness. The findings of the present study support this concern, showing that AI-driven efficiency often comes at the expense of the nuanced understanding and complexity inherent in Ikeda's peace proposal. Researchers who over-rely on AI-generated responses and fail to engage directly with Ikeda's (2020) peace proposal risk overlooking its true significance and underestimating its depth. This can lead to a surface-level understanding and diminish the motivation to act meaningfully. Additionally, because AI-generated responses are constructed from patterns, accessible data, and algorithms, they are not always consistent—even when identical prompts are used. As a result, automated insights can be unreliable and may lead to oversimplified interpretations.

Reflecting on Discursive Dilemma #2: Chatting with Documents vs. Analyzing Data

The AI's response to the prompt does not accurately address the specifics of Ikeda's 2020 peace proposal. For example, in Prompt #2, while the AI states that Ikeda focused on the poor, the elderly, women, children, and marginalized communities hardest hit by climate change, his proposal explains how these vulnerable individuals are often overlooked when society prioritizes economic competition. Although the AI's response employs persuasive reasoning, the absence of a humanistic element makes it less impactful, as reasoning alone fails to resonate with people's hearts or motivate them to take action. Furthermore, even with highly specific prompts, the AI's responses tend to be general, allowing its statements and patterns to be easily adapted to different contexts with minimal modification. As a result, the concrete, specific examples Ikeda used in his proposal are replaced in the AI's responses with general statements.

Using AI for qualitative data analysis raises questions about the relationships among the researcher, the data, and the AI technology (Paulus & Marone, 2025). If researchers are not well-acquainted with their data, they will not be able to distinguish information generated by the AI. AI's responses are based on algorithms, which can make them appear reasoned and persuasive, but they are not necessarily accurate or reflect the depth of Ikeda's message. When the relationship between the researcher and the data is weak, the data may be distorted in ways that the researcher cannot detect, ultimately harming the integrity of the research. AI technology can be valuable when researchers are familiar with their data and use it to assist rather than replace their analysis. Ultimately, we—the people—are the superintelligence, not technology.

Reflecting on Discursive Dilemma #3: High Speed vs. High Engagement

The AI's response appears to have produced a general summary in a second by compiling information available online or from the file uploaded to the system, rather than engaging deeply with Ikeda's proposal. All the richness of the message conveyed in Ikeda's proposal is absent from the AI's responses. Especially in standard AI systems that allow searching all pre-existing internet data, AI rephrases the prompt and expands on it by drawing on various available resources. Such generic responses can be readily adapted to similar prompts by substituting Ikeda with another global leader without losing context. More concerning is the shallow information generated by AI, which often resembles preaching and is unlikely to inspire meaningful change.

Paulus and Marone (2025) warn researchers using AI that efficiency may come at the expense of research quality. The example from the present study on Ikeda's peace proposal clearly shows that speed does not outweigh quality; AI-generated information lacks substantive content relative to the original text. While AI technology may seem efficient, it ultimately costs researchers more time by requiring them to read shallow, irrelevant, or fabricated information, jeopardizing the credibility of their research and leading to confusion and disengagement. What seems efficient ultimately proves slow.

Reflecting on Discursive Dilemma #4: Novelty vs. Agency

The AI's response contains not only fabricated information but also inaccuracies regarding Ikeda's peace proposal, such as, in Prompt #4, saying, "Young people, he argues, are not just future leaders but present actors who understand the science and demand change because their lives are directly affected." This quote was actually from Christiana Figuerere's statement, not Ikeda's. It is evident that the AI's response is overly general and fails to address the specific nuances of the peace proposal. As a result, the richness of the proposal is lost in the AI's response, and the human connection that explains why and how to tackle climate change is also absent. Researchers who lack a solid understanding of Ikeda's peace proposal will gain little to no valuable insight and will easily be misled by the AI's responses.

Paulus and Marone (2025) emphasize the importance of reflecting on the nature and purpose of qualitative research, asserting that human researchers play a crucial role in data analysis. The complexity inherent in qualitative data analysis is not a problem to be solved. Instead, it enables researchers to uncover profound meanings hidden between the lines. Although analyzing large volumes of qualitative data can be time-consuming, the present study, using Ikeda's peace proposal as an example, illustrates how AI-generated responses tend to be general and often unrelated to the source material. Researchers who lack familiarity with their data may find it challenging to verify the accuracy of information produced by AI. Unlike numerical data, which can be definitively quantified (e.g., 1 plus 1 equals 2), AI technology cannot grasp the depth and richness of human messages in qualitative data; it merely collects and organizes information according to its programmed algorithms.

Conclusion

With AI being increasingly used in qualitative research, it is important to establish clear boundaries between what should and should not be handled by computerized intelligence. Human feelings and experiences can only be understood through life-to-life contact. The misuse of AI not only undermines the integrity of qualitative research but also diminishes the human experience for both researchers and research participants. Reading and disseminating shallow AI-generated messages leads people to oversimplify and lose their rich humanity. Developing intuition and poetic spirit is to embrace human imagination and creativity, from which hope and limitless possibilities arise, qualities that AI can never achieve (Goulah, 2024a). Ikeda (2000) states, "We must never lose sight of the fact that, however much...technology may advance, people still count. It is the individual - it is the character of each individual - that is decisive as the creator and protagonist of culture" (p. 5). Qualitative data analysis using AI leads to information consumption, while human-driven qualitative analysis fosters knowledge creation.

A healthy relationship among the researcher, the data, and AI can lead to better outcomes. In this balanced dynamic, both researchers and AI can effectively support one another. The allure of AI's false efficiency must be critically examined, and its role in qualitative research must be clearly defined. Research studies are intended to make a meaningful impact on people's lives and are grounded in genuine concern for those lives, not merely in moving data around. When researchers thoughtfully consider how their studies affect individuals, they are more likely to engage actively in their work and avoid falling prey to the false efficiency of AI in data analysis.

The four examples discussed in this article highlight the significant risks AI technology can pose to qualitative research, particularly in document analysis, when researchers have not spent the time to become thoroughly familiar with their data. Paulus and Marone (2025) have warned that, while AI's automated insights, chat box, rapid data processing, and novelty may seem efficient, they come at a cost. The trade-offs include a loss of systematic meaning-making, data analysis, high engagement, and human agency. In the era of AI, the question is not whether we should use AI in qualitative research, but rather who is using it and how. Letting AI do the work for humans is like sending a robot to the gym to exercise on someone's behalf. While AI can enhance human performance and protect well-being, the essential work—essentially the exercise—must still be done by humans. In other words, if researchers want to improve their research capabilities, they must put in the effort themselves; AI cannot do this for them. AI technology can assist researchers with what they already know, not with what they do not know. Since AI has no human intuition and does not possess what Ikeda referred to as “the poetic spirit,” a quality unique to human beings, it cannot inspire a transformation in a life or in society as a whole.

In conclusion, users of AI technology need to ensure it is used for its intended purpose: to assist rather than to replace human effort. They should also remain aware of the limitations of AI. A solid foundation of domain knowledge is essential for assessing the accuracy of AI-generated responses. While the efficiency of AI tools is appealing, researchers should always ponder the question: “What is the purpose of conducting qualitative research?” Ultimately, research is not about presenting isolated pieces of information that can be easily generated by AI but about impacting lives through the depth of understanding.

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Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent: Not applicable, as the study does not involve human participants.

Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are publicly available and can be accessed through Daisaku Ikeda's published peace proposals.

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Critical Validities: A Framework for Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Much has been written about the role, definition, measurement and enactment of validity in qualitative research, including seminal works that opine on the appropriateness of perspectives on validity with respect to the nature of qualitative research and frameworks that provide criteria to measure different types of validity. I argue that in conjunction with this previous work, qualitative research would also benefit from a tool that emphasizes the critical aspects, or lack thereof, in any particular work. Many of the structures and systems in which we operate uphold power dynamics to some degree that are worth examining as we, researchers in education, conduct research about phenomena, groups, individuals, behaviors, practices and beliefs that exist within these structures and systems. I refer to this tool as a set of critical validities that include contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, and transformative validity.

Keywords

qualitative methods, validity, critical research, education

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Introduction

Much has been written about the role, definition, measurement and enactment of validity in qualitative research. Seminal works such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1998) have pondered the appropriateness of perspectives on validity with respect to the nature of qualitative research. Others have put forth validity frameworks for different types of qualitative research. For example, Maxwell (1992) enumerates five types of understanding and validity – descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalizability, and evaluative – as well as their philosophical and practical dimensions. Lather (1993) defines the idea of transgressive validity through a check-list of ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic, and voluptuous validity. Anderson and Herr's (1999) five evaluative criteria for action research including outcome, process, catalytic, democratic, and dialogic validity. In addition to frameworks, literature on qualitative research methods identifies strategies to enhance validity such as audit trails, triangulation, external audits, member checking, thick descriptions, peer review, and more (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2020).

These frameworks and strategies offer rich means for researchers to conceptualize aspects of their research, but I argue that in conjunction with these tools, qualitative research would also benefit from a tool that emphasizes the critical aspects, or lack thereof, in any particular work. In fact, now more than ever, in an era of coded language that euphemistically covers up oppression, attempts to reverse diversity, equity and inclusion work, and works to spread misinformation and fear, a refined set of validities that focuses on critical dimensions for qualitative research is necessary.

To construct this tool, I start with Creswell and Miller's (2000) definition of validity based on Schwandt (1997): "In this discussion we define validity as how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p. 124). The authors also note with credit to Hammersley et al. (1983) that "Throughout this discussion, we make the assumption that validity refers not to the data but to the inferences drawn from them" (p. 125). I argue that many of the structures and systems in which we operate uphold power dynamics to some degree that are worth examining as we, researchers in education, conduct research about phenomena, groups, individuals, behaviors, practices and beliefs that exist within these structures and systems. Therefore, I believe that in order to make "inferences drawn from [data]" that have validity, it is necessary to take into account the power dynamics at work in any research context and articulate those dynamics to readers. To this end, I argue that critical validity is the degree to which researchers reckon with the power dynamics in effect that inevitably impact or are a part of their research.

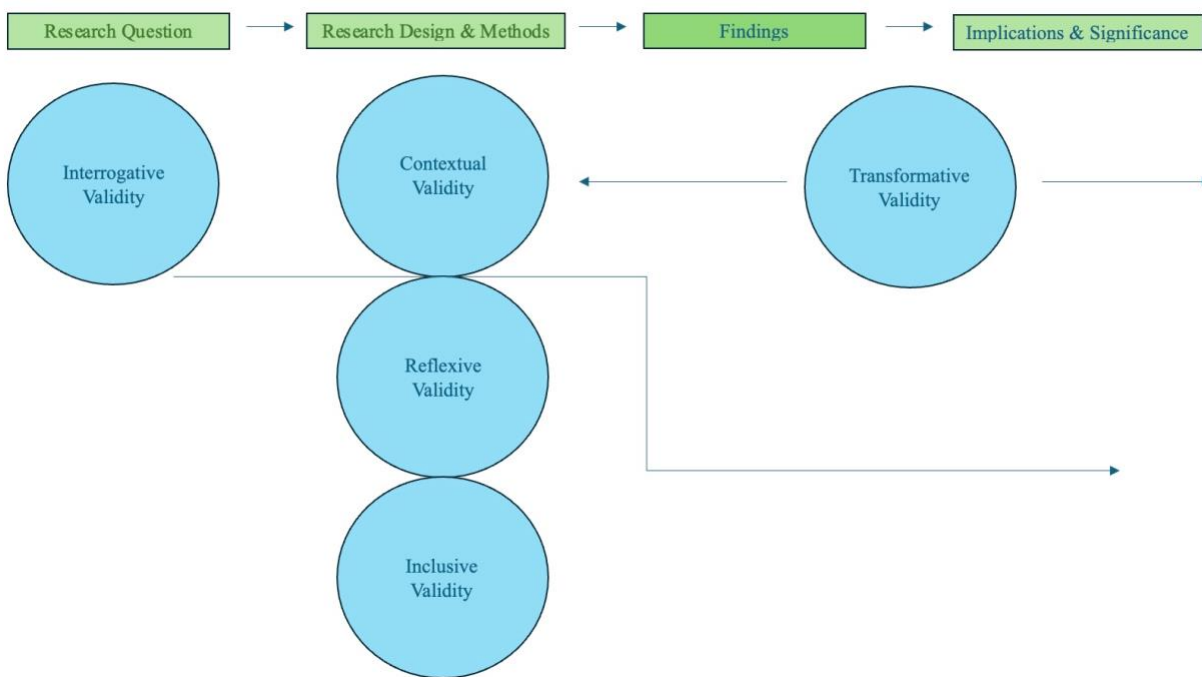
Because we, as education researchers, are examining inquiries largely within school systems and/or societal systems and bring our own set of intersectional identities to the work, there are always power dynamics at play. Therefore, I put forth a tool to aid in measuring the degree to which we are considering these power dynamics within our research and communicating those considerations to our audiences and readers. I refer to this tool as a set of critical validities. Without this tool, I fear that it becomes too easy to conduct research that reifies power structures or fails to capture the nuance of often complex webs of intersectional power. Education research that fails to interrogate these power structures is at risk of simply missing part of the broader story.

The Five Critical Validities

As part of the umbrella construct of critical validity, I propose the following five validity criteria: contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, transformative. None of these validities are necessarily new in concept; however, taken together, these specific validities allow researchers to dive deeper into the ways research can provide a critical lens to the world. They also allow researchers to further their own understanding of where research might perpetuate existing patterns or fail to examine some of the power structures that influence aspects of the work. Figure 1 provides a visual display of the criteria in conjunction with where they are likely most relevant to the research process. The subsequent sections detail each criterion in more depth.

Figure 1

The Five Validity Criteria



The first is contextual validity, defined as the extent to which the research thoroughly explores the dynamics of the context that surround the research participants, the phenomena, and/or sites and account for the various factors at play such as history, relationships between participants, relationships between participants and sites, and the nature of interactions between relevant actors among others. Given that a main purpose of qualitative research is to “take into account the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function” (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 275) “to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world problems” (p. 275), it stands to reason that contextuality is a well-documented, integral aspect of qualitative research across all disciplines. As an extension

of this basic aspect of qualitative research, a thorough accounting for context allows researchers to better understand the way any type of power – social, economic, racial, legal, institutional, administrative, and gender-based, to name a few – functions within the environment of the phenomena under study. A research study with a high level of contextual validity might have thick descriptions of the aforementioned factors of history, participant relationships, sites, and so forth, it might supplement interview data with site observations to glean more contextual details about the site, and/or it might include questions in the interview protocol about perspectives on relationships with factors in the site. In Figure 1, contextual validity occurs most commonly and prominently in the research design and methods of a study whether it be in the description of the site, participants, or other aspects.

The second is reflexive validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers themselves examine their own subjectivity, biases, awarenesses, and identity characteristics that influence the way they conduct and interpret research. While more positivist theories of thought privilege objectivity and impartiality, one of the strengths of qualitative research is that the researcher's identities and lived experiences allow for unique insight throughout the research process (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, the perspectives and characteristics of researchers can help interpret data through a certain understanding or elicit insightful observations and findings. In order for researchers to arrive at these observations and findings and any audience to comprehend them with any clarity, the researchers need to engage in rigorous reflexive thought and disclose what they bring to the research. A research study with a high level of reflexive validity might provide an author positionality statement at the beginning of an article, discuss the way author identities inform the lens they bring to the data analysis process, and be an ever-present component of each step of the research process and section of the write-up. Qualitative methodologies such as auto-ethnography or narrative reflection that encourage reflexivity lend themselves well to a strong degree of reflexive validity. In Figure 1, reflexive validity occurs again in the research design and methods aspect of the research process as who the researcher(s) are impact the lens through which they make decisions about how, where, and from who to collect data.

The third is interrogative validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers ask questions about the power structures at play relevant to their research focuses, the sites in which they research, the relations between participants, and other relevant factors. Research studies that use critical theoretical or conceptual frameworks to interrogate aspects of the status quo, research guided by research questions that inquire specifically about aspects of a power structure, the status quo, or systemic oppression, or a research study that might use an interview protocol that asks participants about why things are the way they are and how those things impact people of different identities might have a high level of integrative validity. Using a more critical lens in the study design can increase interrogative validity; however, it does not have to be the case. For example, a study that does not necessarily have critically oriented research questions might unearth power dynamics that the researchers take up in the way they ask follow up questions of participants or collect more data. In Figure 1, interrogative validity occurs in line with the research questions that inform the study since the research questions guide the approach researchers take to answer a question or problem. Formulating research questions with an eye toward criticality bakes an

interrogative nature into the study itself. However, there's also an arrow that spans the entire research process as interrogative validity might start in the way research questions are constructed but extend through the way the study is then designed, the findings are analyzed, and the significance is reported.

The fourth is inclusive validity, defined as the extent to which the researchers or research purposely seek to elevate the voices and perspectives of individuals in areas where they might constitute the minority and/or be excluded from power. One way that power structures maintain power is by excluding, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the perspectives and voices of those not in power. Somewhat along the same lines as inclusive validity, Anderson and Herr (1999) offer democratic validity as part of their criteria for teacher research with the definition of “the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation” (p. 16). Where inclusive and democratic validity differ, however, is that inclusive validity more radically extends to groups or individuals that might not necessarily have a stake due to the way that oppressive systems are built but should. Inclusive validity might also apply beyond teacher research to other types of qualitative research. Research studies that have a high degree of inclusive validity might highlight voices that provide alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo in some way. Teacher research, for example, generally has a built in degree of inclusive validity in the way that it is methodologically set up to put forth the voice of teachers in the predominantly university researcher-based world of academia. Other studies might seek to include a diverse array of participants that illuminate perspectives beyond solely the dominant one. In Figure 1, inclusive validity occurs most commonly in the research design and methods as researchers decide what participants or data to include.

The fifth is transformative validity, defined as the extent to which the research aims to reconstruct or reimagine a more socially just society. In other words, transformative validity measures a study's work in contributing to social change. Whereas inclusive validity focuses more on whose voices and perspectives are included in the research, transformative validity is a measure of the extent to which the study in its entirety – design, research questions, methods, orientations – works toward building a more equitable, humanity-focused, asset-based society. To tease out the difference between transformative and inclusive validity, a study might have transformative research questions designed with the purpose of bettering an aspect of society, giving it a high degree of transformative validity. However, the participants included in the study as relevant to the context might be limited, giving it a low degree of inclusive validity. For example, a study guided by a research question regarding how a district's curriculum aims to embody culturally responsive pedagogy to positively impact student sense of belonging and learning is designed with an inherently high degree of transformative validity as it seeks to examine the way curricula and pedagogy work toward affirming and effective student outcomes. However, the voices and perspectives included in the study determine its degree of inclusive validity. If the study solely drew upon curriculum documents created by district level administration, the degree of inclusive validity would be low. In contrast, if the study also drew upon perspectives from teachers, students, and parents/caregivers, the degree of inclusive validity would be high.

As part of Anderson and Herr's (1999) criteria for action research, they put forth catalytic validity – the degree to which the research process enables researchers to reconstruct their understanding of reality. While not dissimilar to the criterion of transformative validity in this study as both relate to an element of change or reconstruction, I understand catalytic validity to involve a change in the researcher's understanding of reality and transformative validity to involve or envision a change in the social justness of society or a microcosm of society (i.e. the education system). In Figure 1, transformative validity is situated between the findings and implications and significance as it is most readily apparent in the outcomes or impact of the outcomes in service of creating a better future.

The five validity criteria – contextual, reflexive, interrogative, inclusive, and transformative – operate together as a set to assist researchers in conceptualizing and appraising the degree to which aspects of their work challenge the status quo, resist pre-existing patterns, and expand criticality to dismantle oppressive structures. Table 1 provides a definition, relevant questions to consider for each validity, and potential strategies to gauge each validity. Additionally, the last column of Table 1 contains a description of a study with a high degree of that particular validity as an example.

Table 1

The Five Critical Validities

Validity	Definition	Relevant Questions	Possible Strategies	Example
Contextual	the extent to which the research thoroughly explores the dynamics of context that surround the research participants, sites, etc. and account for various factors such as actors at play, history, etc.	<p>What power dynamics are at play between the actors and the environment that surrounds the research phenomena?</p> <p>How do the power dynamics create access to resources and/or opportunities that differ based on a person's identities?</p>	<p>Thick descriptions</p> <p>Triangulation between multiple data sources</p> <p>Interview protocols that include questions intended to seek details about context</p>	Funk's (2025) work examines the experiences of one Black woman educator teaching secondary social studies in Tennessee. The study lays out the federal and state level context with respect to the many relevant events and legislation at the time in addition to the individual context of the study participant.
Reflexive	the extent to which the researchers themselves examine their own subjectivity, biases, awarenesses, and identity characteristics that influence the way they conduct and interpret research	<p>What experiences do I as the researcher bring to the research?</p> <p>What identity characteristics impact the way I approach the research?</p> <p>How does my intersection identity inform the lens I use at each step of the research process?</p> <p>What biases might I have that are necessary to be aware of as I engage in the research process?</p> <p>What strengths or unique perspectives do I bring to the research?</p>	<p>Positionality statements</p> <p>Descriptions of identity/lived experiences and how they inform the lens researchers bring to the work</p> <p>Autoethnographic or narrative reflection-based methods</p>	Martintelle et al.'s (2024) study contains a subsection labeled "researcher positionality" on page 230 that details important identity and experience related information about the authors that impact the lens they bring to the study. Furthermore, their roles within the course of focus are detailed further in a "context of the study" subsection, providing not only information on the authors themselves but the way that information interacts with their roles in the course.
Interrogative	the extent to which the researchers ask questions	In what ways, if any, does my research ask questions about power structures and/or the	Application of critical frameworks	Dobbs and Leider's (2021) study about early career teachers' beliefs

	about the power structures at play relevant to their research focuses, the sites in which they research, the relations between participants, etc.	status quo? How does the lens I use reveal aspects of power dynamics relevant to the research?	Research questions that focus on inquiring about aspects of the status quo Interview protocols that ask questions about why things are the way they are and what the impact is	related to language learning draws upon positioning and LangCrit theory to note that participant responses connected to personal experiences of language learning in their own lives or previous connected their individual stories to broader discourses and emphasized socially bounded hierarchies and the dominance of English as a teacher goal. The research aims, theoretical frameworks, and design of the study are setup to interrogate the power structures at play related language and the dominance of English in the U.S. education system.
Inclusive	the extent to which the researchers or research purposely seek to elevate the voices and perspectives of individuals in areas where they might constitute the minority	What voices are considered dominant with respect to the questions I am asking with my research? What voices are considered non-dominant with respect to the questions I am asking with my research? What voices and/or perspectives does my research center? In what ways can I include, if at all, the words, voices, and/or perspectives from a variety of individuals of different groups?	Member checking Multiple data sources from non-dominant viewpoints Inclusion of diverse array of participants	Renbarger et al.'s (2025) study about identifying strategies that school districts can use to overcome roadblocks to effective family and community collaboration since the onset of COVID-19 exemplifies a high degree of inclusive validity with respect to the diverse number of participants included that were relevant to the subject at hand. Interview participants included three district/school staff, four researchers, and eight community-engagement practitioners. Focus group participants included principals, teachers, and caregivers for a total of 47 participants.

				<p>Additionally, the study made efforts to include “those with perspectives on the challenges faced by marginalized populations” (p. 388).</p>
Transformative	<p>the extent to which the research aims to create a more socially just society and work toward equity and equality</p>	<p>In what ways, if any, does my research contribute to the goal of a more socially just world?</p> <p>In what ways, if any, does my research change an aspect of a power structure or shed light on an issue of social injustice?</p> <p>To what extent can the findings/conclusions of the study be used to construct a more just and equitable world?</p>	<p>Research questions that focus on inquiring about aspects of the status quo</p> <p>Application of critical frameworks</p>	<p>Brant’s (2024) study about how schools produce and reproduce policies and practices that harm transgender individuals draws upon qualitative interviews from seventeen gender diverse youth and identifies specific actions, practices, and policies that were helpful, purposefully harmful and unintentionally harmful. All three of the study’s research questions guide the work toward producing findings that assist in re-imagining schools and education for gender-diverse youth, particularly the third one: “In what ways can the experiences of these young people shape P-12 education and teacher education?” (p. 325).</p>

Application and Discussion

For the purposes of making the criteria more concrete, I exemplify the critical validities in action by applying them to two of my own research studies of different methodologies. While applying criteria to my own research articles involves a certain level of author subjectivity and bias that is worth noting, it also allows for making my own thinking process as it relates to the criteria clear. The first study (Nerlino, 2023) examined teacher perceptions of the media and public's portrayal of teachers and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic using survey data from 122 full-time, public-school teachers in Massachusetts. This study had a relatively high degree of contextual validity because it includes several sections detailing the state of policy and teaching in Massachusetts during the pandemic. It spelled out the context of the initial school closures and subsequent reopening sequence, the guidance from the state department of education, the backdrop of the teacher vaccine rollout, and specific headlines from major newspapers in the state. The purpose of including these details was to illustrate, as clearly as possible, the environment influencing the participants. The study had a moderate level of reflexive validity as I noted in a positionality statement that I myself was a full-time, public-school secondary English teacher in Massachusetts at the time, currently experiencing the phenomena under study. This aspect of my professional identity equipped me with unique insight that comes from the day-in-day-out experience of being a teacher at the while processing the rhetoric and policy about teachers and teaching.

In terms of interrogative validity, this study registers a moderate level. The research questions themselves are posed to somewhat challenge the status quo. The two research questions inquire into how teachers perceive the portrayal of themselves and their work in the news, media, and public during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact these perceptions have on teachers. Because of the historic feminization of the teaching profession in connection with well-established lower salaries, a lack of opportunity to influence policy, and the debate around whether or not teaching constitutes a profession, I would argue that there are elements of marginalization relevant to the working conditions and status of the profession inherent in asking about perceptions of teachers in the news, media, and public. Relatedly, this study has a moderate level of transformative validity in that it does strive to illuminate the way that negative perceptions of teachers further marginalize teachers and their work.

Lastly, the study has a modest level of inclusive validity. It does aim to elevate the voices of teachers and provide a platform to elucidate their views on the news, media, and public's perception of teaching. For this reason, the data solely consists of survey responses by teachers. At the same time, due to the concern about anonymity, the survey did not contain questions about teacher identity characteristics such as race, age, socioeconomic status and so forth. This limitation restricted any efforts to specifically target the experiences and perceptions of teachers of color and other historically oppressed groups of teachers whose intersectional identities would be important to include in this study.

The second study (Nerlino, 2025) is a piece of teacher research that documented my efforts as a secondary English teacher to introduce and then refine an inquiry project into my 11th grade English classes over the course of several years. This study had a relatively high degree of contextual validity with the inclusion of details about the grade, level, classes, and curriculum

in which the research took place. Furthermore, much of the impetus of the study came from the way the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting students; therefore, descriptions of the broader contextual backdrop were included.

With respect to reflexive validity, I included a positionality statement that detailed aspects of my own identity and previous teaching experience in the school and teaching the class in which I introduced and refined the project. Comparatively to the two aforementioned validities, the study had a lower degree of interrogative validity. It did prioritize adjusting a more student-centered project per Dewey (1938) and Freire's (1970) notions of designing curriculum around student agency in a way that brings their interests to the forefront; therefore, the research brought to light the power dynamics between teacher and student as well as the greater curricular system in the U.S. that still relies on the transmission based method of teaching. In terms of inclusive validity, it did include the voices of students through the use of their final reflections as data sources. Additionally, as a teacher myself, it uplifts teacher generated knowledge into the sphere of academia and research education. However, the inclusive validity could be improved by disaggregating student reflection by identity characteristics to see how the project and adjustments impacted different groups of students. With respect to transformative validity, it offered some degree as the insights could assist in the redesign of curriculum and teaching in high school English classrooms to be less transmission based – an approach that tends to re-imprint the status quo – and more student centered – an approach that elevates student thinking and inquiry. However, the findings related to adjustments to the project to improve student ownership over topics and the acquisition of meaningful research skills. Thus, the way in which the research challenged the status quo was slightly more indirect.

Comparing the application of these criteria to these two studies side by side for the purpose of further discussion, I would gauge the first example study as having a higher overall level of critical validity than the second. This estimation does not value one study over another as a whole but is helpful in that it teases out what the study does and does not offer by way of critical findings and contributions to the field. Furthermore, these criteria work in tandem with other criteria to ensure different types of validity. For example, in the teacher research study (Nerlino, 2025), I used Anderson and Herr's (1999) evaluative criteria for teacher research to help me better understand the way the research contributed to literature about student-centered forms of curriculum and pedagogy as well as literature that uses the same teacher research methodology. Some research such as teacher research inherently has some inclusive validity because it is elevating a teacher's voice and putting forth teacher generated knowledge of practice. However, the application of these criteria might help other research to take pains to increase its inclusive validity by prompting researchers to think through subgroups or other data sources that could be included.

In order to further operationalize these criteria, Table 2 contains each validity criteria with a checklist. The checklist consists of items that might help evaluate a piece of research using the criteria; however, the checklist for each criterion is not meant to serve as a list of requirements. Rather, it provides some ideas to think about as a researcher to work toward each criterion or a means for reviewers, readers, or consumers to evaluate a piece of work.

Table 2

Critical Validity Criteria Checklists

Critical Validity Criteria	Checklist
Contextual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes detailed descriptions of the context of the study -Captures the relationships between participants, environment, and research phenomena -Investigates the history of power dynamics within the site under study -Takes note of current power dynamics within the site under study -Includes means within data collection for participants to share about the site dynamics -Triangulation between multiple data sources to obtain as full an understanding as possible of site dynamics, relationships, etc.
Reflexive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes a positionality statement exploring researcher's intersectional identities -Utilizes methods such as autoethnography or narrative inquiry that promote self-understanding -Contains descriptions of relevant lived experiences that might influence the lens a researcher brings to the study -Includes a self-bias inventory -Specifies the data analysis process in detail -Includes descriptions of decision-making processes on the part of the researcher in methods and findings sections
Interrogative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Employs research questions that ask about power structures or the status quo relevant to the site or phenomena under study -Utilizes critical theoretical or conceptual framework to make philosophical underpinnings explicit and challenge existing power structures -Includes interview questions, survey questions or other means to target data collection in a way that gleans information about the status quo or power dynamics -Integrates a critical lens into the data analysis process (i.e. a codebook that draws from a critical theoretical or conceptual framework) -Uses a critical orientation to organize the findings of the study -Includes a discussion of the significance or impact of the findings that attend to power dynamics or the status quo
Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Includes a wide variety of participants that represent different groups, lived identities, and perspectives on a phenomena -Prioritizes the inclusion of participants or perspectives from marginalized populations -Utilizes member checking to accurately center the voices of participants and minimize the way the researcher might influence the perspectives/words of the participants -Co-authors with a member of the community under study -Makes participation in the study for all groups accessible and convenient and removes barriers to participation -Parses out power dynamics relevant to the phenomena or site under study and makes an effort to include aspects of all perspectives
Transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Uses research questions that set the study up to ask about aspects of the status quo and challenge or reconstruct systems for equity purposes -Makes use of a research design that contributes knowledge that improves the human condition and/or contributes to a more just future -Explores new ways to approach systems or aspects of society that create improvement for all people -Uses aspects of the research design to dismantle processes, the status quo, or systems that further oppression -Employs methodologies that promote liberatory practices -Addresses limitations to the study

Limitations

The purpose of putting forth these criteria is for them to serve as a guide rather than an end-all-be-all or a check-the-box tool that automatically translates a piece of research into a critical work. Essentially, these criteria support criticality as a spectrum and not a destination. Fulfillment of a critical validity criterion does not make a study critical or not critical; instead, it evaluates the study for one particular aspect, allowing researchers to look at what critical aspects exist as strengths and what aspects might lack within the larger scope of the study.

These criteria do not provide immunity from bias but might operate as a construct that assist researchers in thinking through more specific aspects of their studies and how they might support or detract from the overall critical validity of a work. Lincoln (2001) asserts, "...validity resides in three broad sites in any given research project: within the data, within the analysis of the data, and within the conceptual basis or assumptions which form the research program of the analytic techniques" (p. 41). While Lincoln's assertion provides three broad categories where critical validity might exist, the criteria themselves allow for more specific actions or ideas to include within these broader categories.

Conclusion

Qualitative research has long allowed for researchers to "draw out the complexities of social problems" (McAleese et al., 2019) in a way that gives credence to the human experience. As such, qualitative research can serve as a fundamentally liberatory platform. As another tool to grapple with the power dynamics, intersectional intricacies, and other factors at play, the concept of critical validity can be used at any point in the design, refinement, and analysis part of the research process and draws upon strategies and concepts already defined within qualitative research. This framework for critical validity offers a set of criteria to tease out how a piece of qualitative research interacts with power structures that are embedded within society in order to fulfill a liberatory purpose.

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