



EDITORIAL

A Journey of Method and Mindset: Embracing Qualitative Research in Education

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Qualitative research has a rich history in the social sciences, emerging as a powerful tool for understanding human behaviour, social structures, and cultural norms. Initially developed in fields like anthropology and sociology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, qualitative methods offered a counterpoint to the quantitative emphasis on measurement and statistical analysis that dominated early social science research. Scholars such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, demonstrated the potential of ethnography to reveal insights into diverse cultures, paving the way for qualitative inquiry as a respected academic tradition (see Malinowski, 2013; Mead, 1928; Bateson & Mead, 1942). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) promoted qualitative research as a global movement by emphasizing its value in addressing complex social issues and capturing nuanced lived experiences where quantitative methods fall short. Their efforts have inspired researchers worldwide, advancing the global recognition and legitimacy of qualitative inquiry (Hatch, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Over time, disciplines such as psychology, political science, and education also embraced qualitative methods as an essential approach to exploring the complexities of human experiences and social phenomena.

The rise of qualitative inquiry is no longer confined to North America, where it initially gained prominence. Over the past two decades, it has become a global phenomenon, deeply embedded within the social sciences worldwide (Morse, 2020). Today, researchers across continents are leveraging qualitative methods to address pressing questions in education and beyond. They see these methods as a way to reveal diverse perspectives and lived realities.

For decades, qualitative research in education has been overshadowed by the dominance of quantitative methodologies, often perceived as more objective or universally applicable (Mirhosseini, 2017). However, the educational challenges we face today - particularly in contexts like Vietnam - demand methodological pluralism.

Qualitative research invites us to think qualitatively, encouraging a deeper exploration of lived experiences, meanings, and the intricate processes underpinning educational phenomena. Thinking qualitatively transcends merely adopting a qualitative methodological approach such as doing an interview or an observation; it reflects a mindset - a way of engaging with the world that values depth, complexity, and context. This perspective is particularly vital in education, where understanding the dynamic interplay of culture, pedagogy, and policy demands methods that illuminate the nuances often obscured by numbers alone. Qualitative research in education is not only a method but a philosophy, valuing lived experiences and the complexity of human interactions over simplified metrics.

In Vietnam, qualitative research has been marginalized in favour of quantitative methods. This trend has been reinforced by decades of economic-focused development emphasizing indicators and quantitative measures. This bias is evident in educational policies and research, where the social sciences and humanities have not been afforded the same level of attention and resources as other areas, such as STEM and technology (Ho, 2023; Pham & Hayden, 2019). Yet, the complexities of modern society and its global challenges demand researchers to possess a more nuanced understanding and engage more rigorously with qualitative research, as it contributes to effectively addressing multifaceted educational and societal issues.

In response, this Special Issue aspires to meet the needs of both early-career researchers, eager to refine their skills, and experienced scholars, seeking to push the boundaries of qualitative inquiry. The articles in this Special Issue collectively offer a range of studies and methodological reflections, each contributing distinctive approaches and insights to educational research. These studies showcase Vietnam education's growing engagement with qualitative research, signalling a commitment to understanding education as a complex, culturally resonant field. Organized into three key themes, the seven contributions reflect the dynamic landscape of qualitative inquiry and its significance in educational research.

1. THEORETICAL ADVANCEMENT IN QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

As qualitative research gains increasing recognition in education, scholars continue to explore innovative methodologies that illuminate the intricate interplay between personal experience and broader social realities. Among these, autoethnography has emerged as a compelling approach, particularly in English language education and applied linguistics. By blending autobiographical reflection with rigorous analytical inquiry, autoethnography enables researchers to examine language learning, teaching, and identity formation through deeply situated, first-person narratives.

Building on this methodological expansion, the first paper in this collection, contributed by Quoc-Khai Tran and Quoc-Hung Tran, *Autoethnography in English Language Education and Applied Linguistics: An Integrative Literature Review*, offers a comprehensive synthesis of how autoethnography has been employed in these domains over the past two decades. This study provides a systematic review of 151 autoethnographic works, spanning high-impact journal articles and book chapters from leading publishers. By mapping key trends and methodological choices, the authors offer invaluable insights into research contexts, positionality, ethical considerations, and the transformative impact of autoethnographic inquiry on educational practice. This paper serves as a resource for researchers - especially novice autoethnographers - seeking to navigate the complexities of this method. By highlighting common challenges and areas for further exploration, it contributes to the growing recognition of autoethnography as a legitimate and powerful tool in educational research. In doing so, this study aligns with the broader aims of this collection: to expand the methodological horizons of qualitative inquiry and deepen our understanding of the lived experiences that shape education today.

While autoethnography offers a highly reflective and personal lens for educational research, other methodological approaches prioritize direct collaboration between researchers and practitioners to ensure that theoretical advancements translate into practice. Addressing this concern, the next paper in the collection, *Design-Based Research - A Research Format for Educational Research* by Kati Barthmann, Gabriele Schrüfer, and Veronika Eckstein, examines the persistent gap between educational research and classroom practice, a longstanding challenge for scholars and educators alike. Despite theoretical advancements in pedagogy and instructional design, the transfer of research findings into teaching practice remains slow and inconsistent. To bridge this divide, methodologies must be both rigorous and practice-oriented.

Barthmann et al.'s study introduces Design-Based Research (DBR) as a promising approach that fosters dynamic collaboration between researchers and teachers. Unlike traditional research paradigms that separate theory from practice, DBR integrates iterative research cycles, allowing for the co-development of teaching concepts and learning materials that are both contextually relevant and scalable for educational implementation. By presenting a compelling case study in Geography Education - specifically on teaching Africa-related content in German classrooms - this paper illustrates how DBR principles can be effectively applied in practice.

These two papers highlight the diverse methodological innovations shaping qualitative educational research today. While autoethnography deepens our understanding of individual lived experiences, DBR ensures that the research findings are directly applicable to classroom settings. As qualitative research in education continues to evolve, DBR stands out as a methodology that not only advances theoretical knowledge but also ensures meaningful classroom impact. This paper thus reinforces the importance of methodological pluralism, advocating for research formats that are responsive to both scholarly and pedagogical needs.

2. REFLECTIONS ON SOME QUALITATIVE METHODS

Narrative inquiry, despite being a well-established qualitative method, remains misunderstood - even among qualitative researchers. Another paper in this issue, *Thinking with Stories: The Potential of Narrative Inquiry for Vietnamese Education Research* by Hang M. Le, helps deepen the understanding of this methodology.

Hang M. Le traces the history of narrative inquiry and clarifies what it is - and what it is not - by highlighting its philosophical and methodological aspects. As a study of human experiences lived and expressed through stories, narrative inquiry should be embraced in a way that positions scholars as storytellers who think *with* stories rather than merely analyse them. Le argues that this perspective is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where the methodology's emphasis on context and relationships dovetails with cultural and philosophical traditions.

Through an engaging and insightful writing style, Le interweaves theoretical clarifications with reflections from her own experiences in data collection, analysis, and representation. The paper shows the value of narrative inquiry in capturing the complexities of lived educational experiences such as topics about teacher identities, school leadership, and student experiences, particularly in the context of educational reform. While advocating for its adoption, the author duly acknowledges the growing engagement of Vietnamese scholars with narrative inquiry yet calls for further contributions to this methodology in educational research particularly among Vietnamese scholars.

Complementing the discussion on narrative inquiry, Kien Nguyen-Trung's autoethnographic paper, *Becoming a Qualitative Researcher from Vietnam*, offers a deeply personal account of his journey into qualitative research. He recounts his academic path from Vietnam, where he was educated, to Australia, where he pursued an advanced degree in sociology. His evolving research identity was shaped through struggles and efforts to adopt and advocate for qualitative research - his true academic calling - though he came to realize that this approach was, and may continue to be, marginalized in favour of (post)positivist paradigms across education, academia, and workplace settings.

More than just a professional trajectory, the paper explores Kien Nguyen-Trung's self-transformation through what he calls "five conditions": the guidance of fieldwork mentors; interactions with research participants; engagement with methodology literature; the practice of writing and publishing qualitative research; and the continuous process of learning to be authentic as both a researcher and a human being. Beneath the personal narrative lies a wealth of insights, practical advice, and key references for emerging qualitative researchers, positioning this paper as a valuable resource on qualitative research methods.

3. CONTEXTUAL APPLICATIONS AND EMERGING PRACTICES

In *Trio-ethnographic Reflection on Using Digital Storytelling to Enhance Learners' Engagement*, Le Thi Phuong Lien, Duong Thi Van Anh, Dinh Nguyet Anh, Hugh Richard Willbourn, and Diep Tuyet Phuong advance trio-ethnographic methodology by illustrating how visual communication within sharing circles facilitates meaning-making and fosters collaborative trust. Le et al.'s study employs an innovative approach that merges duo-ethnography and photography to examine diverse perspectives on digital storytelling in English language teaching in Vietnam. By emphasizing dialogue and co-construction of meaning, their study provides a rich, multi-layered exploration of pedagogical experiences. The incorporation of photography adds a visual dimension to the inquiry, making abstract concepts more concrete and stimulating critical dialogue. This approach positions both the lecturers and students as co-researchers, actively involving them in the meaning-making process.

Building on this methodological innovation, trio-ethnography serves as a participatory and reflexive framework for investigating digital storytelling in education. Le et al. have demonstrated strong engagement with reflexivity, as they offered a nuanced and context-rich analysis. Given the inherently subjective and interpretive nature of this methodology, ongoing attention to methodological triangulation would further enhance the study's credibility and mitigate potential researcher influence.

While Le et al.'s study expands the use of ethnographic approaches in Vietnamese education research, the broader application of naturalistic inquiry remains underexplored, particularly in student assessment. Addressing this gap, Gam Luong's paper, *Exploring Student Assessment Practices in Vietnamese Teacher Training Universities: A Naturalistic Inquiry Approach*, examines lecturers' and academic managers' beliefs, values, and attitudes toward assessment practices. Using Lincoln and Guba's naturalistic inquiry paradigm, her study employs in-depth interviews and document analysis to explore tensions between traditional summative approaches and emerging formative ideals shaped by institutional and cultural factors.

Beyond its empirical contributions, Gam Luong's study also provides methodological insights for researchers navigating complex educational settings. It highlights challenges in hierarchical academic environments, where respect for authority may limit open critique of assessment practices. Luong emphasizes the importance of building

trust and navigating power dynamics to ensure data credibility. Her study also addresses practical challenges such as prolonged engagement, resource constraints, and logistical barriers, underscoring the need for careful planning to uphold methodological rigor.

Taken together, these two studies underscore the growing role of qualitative research in Vietnamese education. However, methodological divisions between qualitative and quantitative research traditions continue to pose challenges, particularly in doctoral education. Many PhD programs - especially in disciplines with a strong statistical foundation - tend to prioritize quantitative methods, often leading to skepticism toward qualitative inquiry. As a result, students trained primarily in quantitative approaches may struggle with epistemological and methodological shifts when introduced to qualitative research. Addressing this challenge requires innovative pedagogical strategies to bridge these divides and foster methodological openness.

Responding to this issue, Cuong Huy Nguyen's paper, *Teaching 'Qualitative Research Methodology' Course to Quantitatively Oriented PhD Students*, provides a practical action research study on how an instructor revised the doctoral-level *Qualitative Research Methodology* course over four years. Faced with PhD students' skepticism and disciplinary misalignment, the instructor employed iterative pedagogical interventions, including the use of discipline-appropriate readings and popular press books to foster engagement and create a shared intellectual space. While these strategies led to gradual shifts in student perceptions, the study also highlights the emotional and intellectual challenges instructors face when navigating resistance to qualitative methods.

By integrating empirical analysis with reflective practice, Nguyen's study makes an important contribution to the discourse on teaching research methods in interdisciplinary and quantitatively dominated contexts. Presenting an empirically grounded and reflective curriculum adaptation, the paper offers practical insights for educators seeking to bridge methodological divides in doctoral education. Moreover, it underscores the importance of sustained pedagogical experimentation, reinforcing the idea that changing research mindsets requires more than content delivery - it demands engagement, negotiation, and adaptation.

As is evident, a central thread across the seven papers in this issue is the marginalized status of qualitative methodology, a challenge highlighted by nearly all authors. Their experiences reveal how qualitative research is often misunderstood, contested, or resisted to varying degrees within their research or teaching contexts, either by their collaborators, mentors, colleagues, journal reviewers, or students. This recognition partly served as an initial catalyst for the inception of the *Qualitative Journeys* project and organically motivated contributors to share their reflections on their qualitative research paths. Yet beyond these challenges, what unites the authors is a deep appreciation for the richness and transformative potential of qualitative methodology. The authors' contributions offer grounded perspectives, first-hand experiences, and insightful reflections on their engagement with qualitative research, as well as their efforts to advocate for its broader acceptance, especially in the Vietnamese context.

As such, readers will find a range of practical recommendations drawn from the contributors' experiences with qualitative inquiry throughout the reflections. The authors' suggestions encompass strategies for thinking qualitatively, engaging with study participants, collecting and analysing qualitative data, and applying appropriate approaches to both doing qualitative research and teaching about this methodology in ways that align with its philosophical and methodological foundations.

This collection of studies is both an invitation and a challenge for educational researchers: to embrace qualitative methodology, whether by applying it in educational research or critically reflecting on its use. While the contributions in this collection provide valuable insights, several critical areas remain unexplored, which opens avenues for further research and discussion.

One of such avenues involves examining the application of qualitative methods particularly in underexplored domains such as *educational policy*, *STEM education*, *multicultural education*, and *inclusive education*. In addition, traditional qualitative research designs - such as *case studies*, *phenomenology*, and *(critical) discourse analysis* - deserve much deeper exploration in Vietnamese contexts to better understand their adaptability and relevance. At the same time, emerging approaches, including *post-qualitative inquiry*, *arts-based research*, and *AI-assisted qualitative analysis*, also hold significant potential for enriching educational research in a Global South context like Vietnam. Strengthening the integration of qualitative methods into *mixed-methods studies*, *alongside innovative analytical and interpretative strategies*, will further enhance methodological rigor. Last but not least, a more robust *engagement with theoretical discussions* in qualitative inquiry is essential not only for strengthening the methodological rigor of

qualitative research but also for expanding its explanatory power and conceptual contribution. By critically interrogating the role of theories - whether as guiding frameworks, interpretive lenses, or emergent constructs - researchers can deepen the analytical depth of their studies and more effectively articulate the significance of their findings within broader scholarly conversations.

Through this Special Issue, we seek to inspire and support researchers at all levels in engaging with qualitative approaches, thereby enriching educational research in Vietnam and contributing to the broader global discourse on qualitative inquiry. By bridging the identified gaps, future research can further advance qualitative methodologies and cultivate a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of education in Vietnam.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who helped bring our vision for this Special Issue to life. The contributors and editors represent a diverse blend of both domestic and international scholars, while many of our reviewers are esteemed qualitative researchers with a deep understanding of both the local and global educational research landscape. Through this collective effort, we strive to advance high-quality educational research in Vietnam, including qualitative methodologies. We take pride in fostering a peer review process that not only upholds rigorous academic standards but also supports early-career researchers in developing their peer-review skills alongside more experienced reviewers. We sincerely appreciate the support of the reviewers and VJE editorial team in embracing this approach.

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Author Biographies for the Special Issue of the Vietnam Journal of Education

Qualitative Journeys: Reflections on Educational Research and New Horizons

Dr. **Kati Barthmann** has worked for seventeen years as a teacher of geography and economics in the Bavarian school system for seventeen years. Fourteen of these years, she accompanied student trainees in the second stage of their training in her function as a seminar teacher for the subject of geography. In addition to her core duties at school, she regularly worked on various teaching and examination formats at the Chair of Didactics of Geography at the University of Bayreuth from 2005-2017. Since 2017, she has been contributing her professional knowledge and experience to the education of future teachers in the first, university education stage. In addition to her teaching activities, her research interests include the development and implementation of constructivist teaching concepts in geography teaching and teacher professionalization research.

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Anh Thi Van Duong (Đương Thị Vân Anh) obtained her B.A in English Linguistics and Literature at the University of Social Science and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and her M.A in TESOL from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She works as an inviting lecturer at Ho Chi Minh Open University and a full-time lecturer at the International School of Business, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City. Her research interests include English language teaching and learning strategies and digital innovation in English language teaching and learning.

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Veronika Eckstein holds an MSc. was seconded by the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs to the University of Bayreuth as part of the Quality Offensive Teacher Education at the chair of Prof. Dr. Schröfer. She is currently writing her dissertation on the topic of education in digitality in the subject of geography and has published four articles on this topic so far. She studied business administration and obtained a teaching degree at the University of Bayreuth. Subsequently, she worked as a high school teacher for eight years and served as a lecturer in teacher training.

Dr. **Hang M. Le (Lê Minh Hằng)** currently works as an independent scholar focusing on the politics of international development aid in education and global education policy transfer, particularly from a critical, race-focused, and decolonial lens. Her dissertation *The racial grammar of South-South cooperation: Vietnamese development experts in Mozambique* received the CIES Gail P. Kelly Award for Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation in 2023. Dr. Le also has considerable practitioner experience in the field of international development, including with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Save the Children, and the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Originally from Hanoi, Vietnam, Dr. Le moved to the U.S. after high school to pursue higher education. She received her BA with High Honors in Educational Studies and Political Science from Swarthmore College, PA and her Ph.D. in International Education Policy from the University of Maryland-College Park.

Lien Thi Phuong Le (Lê Thị Phượng Liên) is a multidisciplinary lecturer and curious researcher. With over ten years of teaching at universities and vocational colleges, she has encouraged students to explore their unique ways to grow through experiential learning and interdisciplinary curriculum. Currently, she is inspired by value co-creation and art-based research. She has worked as a Research Assistant on a project about academic integrity and innovative methods for staff development training. Her research focuses on bottom-up pedagogical reform and sustainable development in post-secondary education.

Dr. Gam Luong (Lương Thị Hồng Gấm) obtained her PhD in Educational Assessment and Master of Education in Australia. She is currently working at the Provost Office, Fulbright University Vietnam as a Quality Assurance Senior Advisor. Her research areas include educational assessment in higher education, quality assurance, curriculum development, professional development and teacher education. Dr. Gam joins the Instructional Skills Workshop Networks as a trainer and facilitator. She is also an assessor of the ASEAN Universities Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA).

Dr. Cuong Nguyen (Nguyễn Huy Cường) is a lecturer in English Linguistics and Literature at Ho Chi Minh City Open University. He holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education from Michigan State University (2017) and an M.A. in TESOL from the University of Canberra (2007). Previously, he served as Dean of the English Linguistics and Literature program at his former institution. His research focuses on critical language curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment, with a particular interest in the interrelationship between artificial intelligence (AI), mindfulness, and (in)formal language education. He has also taught M.A. and Ph.D.-level courses in qualitative research methodology across various academic fields, including TESOL.

Dr. Ni Thi Ha Nguyen (Nguyễn Thị Hạ Ni) is a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She holds a PhD in Education from the University of Leeds, UK. Her research interests include education policy, teacher education, curriculum development, and professional learning. She has contributed to esteemed national and international journals, as well as book chapters published by prestigious publishers. In addition to her academic work, she is an experienced translator of academic books, specialising in education and the social sciences.

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Kien Nguyen-Trung (Nguyễn Trung Kiên), PhD, is GEDSI Lead and Research Fellow at Water Sensitive Cities Australia, Monash University, Australia. He is an editor at The Qualitative Report and serves on editorial boards at Sociological Research Online, and International Journal of Qualitative Methods, and Disaster Prevention & Management. As founder of the Vietnam Social Research Methodology and Qualitative Methods Centre, he advances methodological innovation and capacity building in Southeast Asia. His interests span qualitative methods, generative AI, climate change adaptation, and disaster vulnerability.

Prof. Dr. **Gabriele Schrüfer** is a distinguished academic in Geography Education, currently holding the Chair of Didactics of Geography at the University of Bayreuth since March 2020. She completed her teaching qualifications in Geography and Economics at the University of Bayreuth, where she also earned her Ph.D. with a focus on intercultural learning in geography education. Prior to her current position, she served as a professor at the University of Münster, where she developed key research areas such as Global Learning, Education for Sustainable Development, and digital approaches to geography education. Her work emphasizes bridging theoretical insights with practical applications in teaching, addressing global challenges and fostering competencies for sustainability among educators and students. With expertise in qualitative research methodologies, Prof. Schrüfer's investigations into geographical education and Africa studies aim to prepare learners for a complex, interconnected world.

Quoc-Hung Tran (Trần Quốc Hùng), a senior lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (CTU), received his B.A. degree in TEFL from CTU, M.A. degree in Applied Linguistics from University of Massachusetts-Boston (USA), and Ph.D. degree in Second Language Education from University of Alberta (Canada). His research interests are EFL teacher education, theories and approaches in EFL writing instruction, EFL teacher mentorship and professional development, and qualitative research methodology. He has supervised several research projects of undergraduate and graduate students including Quoc-Khai Tran.

Quoc-Khai Tran (Trần Quốc Khải), an EFL teacher in Can Tho City, earned his B.A. and M.Ed. degrees from Can Tho University, Vietnam. His research interests are multimodal-based language pedagogy, informal digital learning of English, personalized vocabulary development, academic writing, interest-driven professional development activities, and qualitative research methodology. His Master's research project is an analytical autoethnography of his experiences in integrating English-speaking cultures into movie-based English language lessons.

Hugh R. Willbourn has a PhD in Philosophy from City University, London. In 1999 he co-founded Corr Willbourn Research and Development, an innovative commercial qualitative market research agency which grew a client list across many UK Government departments, NGOs and corporations such as Shell, Diageo and Novartis. He is also an author, psychotherapist and storyteller, and since 2024 he has been a Lecturer in the School of Communication and Design at RMIT. His research interests include Heideggerian Phenomenology, and Orality, Literacy and Cognition with special reference to Abstraction and Contextuality.