

EMINENT QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS



# Where to Go From Here

The primary purpose of this document is to introduce the concept of “information quality” in general, and qualitative analysis strategies in particular. We are fortunate to be living in a time where qualitative analysis has matured into a disciplinary area where a number of analysis strategies have been rigorously tested under the highest “gold standards” that contemporary research has to offer. What’s more is that there are many freely available resources online. One only type in the names of one of eminent researchers above, or even just “qualitative research” you will be immediately rewarded with literally hundreds of references about qualitative strategies and methods from researchers worldwide. Moreover, you’ll find that many of these materials are not just

contained in scholarly papers, but in simple “how to” steps to obtain reliable and valid results. Many of the world’s largest humanitarian organizations use qualitative analysis extensively, so you’ll find “real world” example of how to conduct and interpret your results.

The Qualitative Analysis Subgroup of the RRCP Data Priority Area has also been actively working to develop products to support states as they engage in qualitative analysis strategies. Our challenge is to frame the use of qualitative and quantitative analysis within the context of the SSIP. That is, to develop and disseminate tools and strategies that are “doable” and add value to state

efforts to respond to OSEP’s Results Driven Accountability initiative.

In addition to this document, the Qualitative Analysis Subgroups has prepared two other documents. One such document is *Qualitative Data: Balancing More with Better* (Elmeski, 2013), which contains practical tips and suggestions for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Another document, *An SSIP Case Study: Incorporating Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis* (Schmitz & Hartsell, 2013) was created with a scenario constructed to show how quantitative and qualitative data can be used in the development of the SSIP, as well as state improvement strategies.



CONSIDERING QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Reasons and rationale for considering the use of qualitative analysis in addition to quantitative analysis to get the “big picture.”
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# Information Quality

RRCP Data Priority Area | 2013 | Qualitative Analysis Subgroup



Numbers are Not Always Meaningful

‘Er... Good morning, O Deep Thought,’ said Loonquawl nervously, ‘do you have... er, that is...’  
 ‘An answer for you?’ interrupted Deep Thought majestically, ‘Yes, I have.’  
 ‘Though I don’t think,’ added Deep Thought, ‘that you’re going to like it.’ ‘Doesn’t matter!’ said Phouchg. ‘We must know it! Now!’  
 ... ‘Alright,’ said Deep Thought.  
 ‘The answer to the Great Question...’  
 ‘Yes!...!’  
 ‘Is...’ said Deep Thought, and paused.  
 ‘Yes...!’  
 ‘Is...’  
 ‘Yes...!!!!...?’  
 ‘Forty-two,’ said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm...  
 ‘Forty-two!’ yelled Loonquawl. ‘Is that all you’ve got to show for seven and a half million years’ work?’  
 ‘I checked it thoroughly,’ said the computer, ‘and that quite definitely is the answer.’  
 I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you’ve never actually known what the question is.’

Adams, D. (1979). *The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. London: Pan Macmillan, 134-6.

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DATA PRIORITY TEAM  
Qualitative Analysis Subgroup

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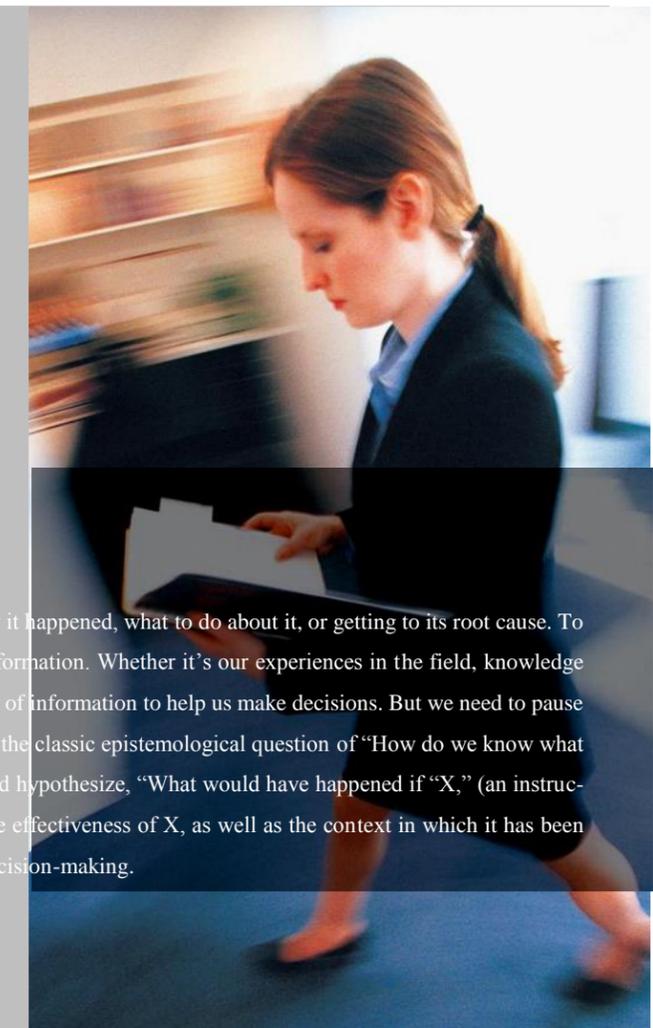
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## Why Information Quality?

WHILE WE ARE OFTEN CAUTIONED TO THINK ABOUT "DATA QUALITY," WE SELDOM HAVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE INFORMATION QUALITY. THINK ABOUT IT—HOW OFTEN HAS QUANTITATIVE DATA ALONE—EVEN QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS HAS MUCH TO OFFER IN SECURING RELIABLE AND VALID DATA FOR DECISION-MAKING. THIS PAPER IS ONE OF SERIES TO HELP TA PROVIDERS AND STATE-LEVEL WORKERS TO "THINK THROUGH" THIS VALUABLE OPTION.

IF IT IS QUALITY DATA-EVER REVEALED THE "WHOLE STORY" ABOUT STUDENT PERFORMANCE? RATHER, ONE MIGHT PREFER TO THINK OF QUANTITATIVE DATA AS THE PROVERBIAL "CANARY IN THE COAL MINE"—A SIGN THAT SOMETHING IS "HAPPENING," BUT WHAT? AND WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

By itself, quantitative data rarely offers few clues about what that “something” is, why it happened, what to do about it, or getting to its root cause. To understand the “why,” “what,” and “how,” we need to draw upon other sources of information. Whether it’s our experiences in the field, knowledge gained over the years, or by listening to experts, we often have to rely on other sources of information to help us make decisions. But we need to pause for a bit and ask ourselves, “What is the quality of this information? Here, we defer to the classic epistemological question of “How do we know what we know?” So, when we look at something like the achievement gap, for example, and hypothesize, “What would have happened if “X,” (an instructional or behavioral intervention) were tried?,” we would have to have evidence of the effectiveness of X, as well as the context in which it has been proven to be successful. Simply put, we need to consider information quality in our decision-making.



# 4 STEPS TO SSIP SUCCESS: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis

**1 IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF EXISTING DATA SOURCES**  
To answer initial questions about the “Who?” “What?” “When?” and “Where?,” the first step includes the identification and broad analysis of existing quantitative and qualitative data sources to identify the state’s selected focus area for improvement.

**2 IDENTIFY A FOCUS AREA**  
Based on what was learned from existing quantitative and qualitative data resources, the state identifies a focus area and generates a series of questions that will allow for a more in-depth analysis of causal factors—a root cause.

**3 CONDUCT IN-DEPTH DATA ANALYSIS OF FOCUS AREA**  
To address the “Why” of the focus area, the state conducts an in-depth analysis of quantitative and qualitative data sources to gather evidence of recurring data patterns and themes that lead to the identification of a root cause.

**4 IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSE AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES**  
The state summarizes the finding of the in-depth analysis and identifies the causal factors, or root cause of the focus area. The findings are also used to generate improvement strategies that will be implemented to address the root cause.

### Is a Qualitative Approach Appropriate?

If you want to: Understand the perspectives of all types stakeholders, or explore the meaning they give to problems or issues, or observe a process in depth...then the answer is yes, qualitative methodology is appropriate. *A Guide to Using Qualitative Research Methodology* (Brikci, N., & Green, J., 2007).

## Why Qualitative Analysis?

Even though we have the data to substantiate that a problem exists, we sometimes fall short of collecting information to tell us what’s “behind” the numbers. How do we know the other information we are looking at represents quality information? One way is to consider the many and varied strategies that qualitative analysis has to offer. Qualitative methods help us to understand the “why” and “how”-telling the story “behind” the numbers. Neumann (2005) asserts that qualitative data can be used “to capture and discover the meaning” of data. Such information can be used to generate hypotheses and provide

clues about what might serve as effective interventions. Jick (1979) goes further claiming that “qualitative methods, in particular, can play an especially prominent role by eliciting data and suggesting conclusions to which other methods would be blind.”

State-level workers use quantitative analysis strategies all of the time. Document reviews, focus groups, and interviews are often conducted to obtain information and other times as a way of supplementing other data sources to gather a “body of evidence”

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## The Evolution of Qualitative Analysis

### A BRIEF HISTORY ON THE EMERGENCE OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AS A RESEARCH DISCIPLINE

While qualitative analysis has been used by sociologists and anthropologists since the turn of the 20th century, it wasn’t until the 1960s that it came into wide use in the field of education (Bogdan, 2009). Since that time, its growth as a research discipline had been steady, but uneven. For example, for almost two decades, many researchers in the fields of education and psychology viewed qualitative analysis as “soft,” lacking the scientific rigor of the “gold standard,” i.e., randomized, controlled experimental designs. However, the social change that occurred throughout 1960s and thereafter, was a significant catalyst that required researchers to seek new ways of understanding social and educational phenomena. Also, it became increasingly clear that quantitative methods alone could not provide the answers. Unlike fields that are particularly responsive to quantitative analysis, such as Deming’s statistical

process control method used for quality assurance, educational issues represent an entirely different level of complexity. Educational contexts are highly variable, often exacerbated by a vast array of political and socioeconomic dynamics. As a result, one is compelled to “dig deeper” to examine the depth and breadth of an issue to gain an understanding of what may be “behind” the numbers. Even with the growing realization that something “more” was needed to study social and educational issues, Bogan (2009) observes that throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s, there was widespread debate about the utility of qualitative analysis, leading to conflict among researchers who eventually split into quantitative versus qualitative “camps.” But as more and more educational researchers began using qualitative methods in their research, the discipline rapidly grew, both in terms of its application and

methodological rigor. In the last decade, advances in technology have accelerated the application of qualitative analysis methods to address complex educational and social issues. Today, it’s safe to say the “war” is over. Clearly, qualitative research methods have won a place along with quantitative methods in all fields of research. With the exception of a few dogmatists on either side of the spectrum, the two approaches not only coexist, but are often integrated in research studies to more fully address the complex dynamics of the educational process. Once largely seen as a dichotomous, “either-or” choice, many educational researchers, both those trained in quantitative and qualitative approaches, routinely opt to incorporate both methodologies in their studies.



Why Qualitative Analysis?  
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## Qualitative Analysis Methods

Many of those charged with the collection of data at the LEA, SEA, and Part C Lead Agencies, conduct qualitative analysis activities, although not often formally recognized as such. For example, many state-level staff have either conducted or commissioned focus groups, such as in the case of obtaining feedback information from parents of children and youth with disabilities. Similarly, many are familiar with engaging in document review process through conducting on-site, LEA file reviews. Also, as a result of on-site monitoring visits, state level staff routinely conduct classroom observations. Finally, many have conducted or commissioned interviews to obtain feedback from stakeholders or a segment of the public on some policy or practice. In short, qualitative methods are often used at the state level to obtain information that adds value to the decision-

### USING WORDLE AS A SUPPLEMENTARY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOOL?

“Word clouds” are seen just about everywhere on the web to inform viewers about “hot” topics or high frequency words used on the site. But did you also know that it has also become a tool used by qualitative researchers to investigate various topics and issues? McNaught & Lam (2007), along with a number of qualitative researchers have encouraged the use of such web-based software to examine prominent word patterns from interviews and focus groups.

of its parts.” Researchers, both qualitative and quantitative, refer to this as “triangulation.” While this term is sometimes loosely used in social conversation, it does have a widely understood definition in the field of qualitative analysis. Denzin (1978) says, for example, that triangulation is “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon.” Triangulation helps to achieve what researchers (e.g. Jick, 1979) refer to as “convergent validity,”-does the information “hang together?” More specific information about the various strategies that can be used in qualitative analysis, including triangulation in a companion document developed to provide information about the qualitative analysis approach.

making process. As stated earlier, these strategies are not often thought of as “qualitative analysis,” but simply as effective ways of obtaining information.

So what’s different? If state level staff are already using these methods, why even bother bring it to anyone’s attention? Because while these methods are employed, they are rarely used in any integrated, systematic way. That’s really the “trick” of qualitative analysis-sifting through multiple information sources to put the puzzle pieces together to tell a story. And, much like a puzzle, the “whole” is truly more than “the sum

## Qualitative Analysis and the SSIP

No longer will progress be measured simply by a single indicator or by a collection of single indicators. The SSIP is focused on improved outcomes which can be measured using an array of analysis strategies including qualitative analysis. Phase I of SSIP includes a number of opportunities in which qualitative analysis methods will be particularly useful. For example, besides using data analysis strategies to identify a focus of improvement, states must also describe how they assessed their infrastructure “to support improvement and build capacity in LEAs/EIS programs to implement, scale up, and sustain evidence-based practices to improve results for children with disabilities” (OSEP, 2013). Also, as part of Phase I, The SSIP has been referred to as a “qualitative” indicator, suggesting that progress will be measured by looking at a “body of evidence,” not just one indicator result. Clearly, this “new way” of looking at improvement underscore the need to consider analysis methods other than quantitative data.

these kind of techniques is to understand context. Understanding context is critical aspect of any study. One must ask, “What contextual factors might have contributed to the results that we are seeing? In qualitative research, “Context is King.” It is one way of accounting for known variance and provides clues for uncovering and

**OSEP’s focus on Result-Driven Accountability (RDA) invites the use of mixed analysis methods, both quantitative and qualitative in the development and implementation of the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP).**