

Giving voice to teachers through interpretative phenomenological research: a methodological consideration

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual article aims to examine the application of interpretative phenomenology to research on teacher experience. It covers methodological theory and practical interpretative approaches that are pertinent for generating useful insights into an educational issue.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on an illustrative research on secondary teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical reasoning and classroom practices in Ghana, this article explores the author's musings and introspection around carrying out an interpretative phenomenological research and demonstrates how the approach helped to amplify teachers' voices.

Findings – The article demonstrates that the canons of interpretative phenomenology and qualitative research in general, while translatable to practice, need to be regarded as a series of emergent decisions and actions rather than prescriptive set of principles. The article explains that educational researchers must recognise interpretation as the lifeblood of the approach and move beyond the description of essences and explicate participants' experiences of phenomena using workable frames of interpretation.

Originality/value – The article extends the current methodological knowledge base by contributing to international discussions on qualitative research and to an understanding of the applicability of interpretative phenomenological research design to research on teacher reasoning and practice. It also serves as a useful methodological resource for novice researchers.

Keywords Interpretative phenomenology, Qualitative research, Teacher experience, Classroom practice, Data analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Qualitative research is generally recognised as an inductive approach to enquiry that results in complex description and interpretation of meaning (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Patton (2002, p. 76) note that qualitative research is not “a single monolithic approach to research” but involves a variety of designs and methods. Qualitative research sheds light on an underlying interest factor. This interest informs what is researched, how it is research and how findings are presented. Most qualitative studies involving human participants attempt to gather multiple evidence that leads to interpretation of meaning, and these meanings are juxtaposed with conflicting ideas (Mertens, 2010; Guba and Lincoln, 2005). In making design and method decisions, researchers usually consider the nature of their research problem, the research questions that frame their study as well as the sources and forms of data that are appropriate, comprehensive and comprehensible enough to answer such questions.

From August 2016 to February 2020, I conducted educational research in Ghana about history teachers' experiences of history teaching. In this article, I reflect on the interpretative phenomenological design that I employed to explore these teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical reasoning and classroom practices. The article begins with a brief overview of the research and explains the justification for using a qualitative and interpretative approach. The article then addresses the data sources and methods for collecting, analysing and interpreting data as well as methods for ensuring quality and rigour. The article aims to



demonstrate that the principles of interpretative phenomenology and qualitative research in general, defined in the vast methodology literature, while translatable to practice, need not to be regarded as a one-size-fits-all linear approach to research. Rather, researchers must decide on the best-fit approach based on the nature and context of their research and their overarching epistemological posture. The article extends the current methodological knowledge base by contributing to international discussions on qualitative research and to an understanding of the applicability of interpretative phenomenological research design to research on teacher reasoning and practice. It also serves as a useful methodological resource for novice researchers.

Conceptualisation of the illustrative research

There is growing acceptance in contemporary education that students should be positioned as the developers of their own knowledge and understanding. History education research suggests that students attain optimal understanding if lessons are interesting and engaging enough to give them sufficient understanding to investigate the past for themselves (Wineburg, 2001; Barton, 2011). The Ghanaian secondary history curriculum recommends that students should be equipped with inquiry skills to collect, evaluate and interpret historical evidence (Ministry of Education, 2010). This suggests that students need to be given opportunities to participate actively in activities that facilitate the construction of their understanding. This has implications for the professional *lifeworld* of teachers, that is, their understanding of the history subject and its purposes (disciplinary reasoning); their thinking about their teaching, decision-making and reflections (pedagogical reasoning) and their approach to teaching (pedagogical practices).

Generally, secondary history teachers in Ghana complete a four-year university degree involving theories in historical content, teaching methodology, a 12-week microteaching with their peers and a 12-week supervised teaching practice at a senior high school to prepare them for the teaching profession. After their degrees, most of these teachers are employed by public schools. The history curriculum is overloaded with topics, and teachers lack the support systems to function to their best ability (Boadu *et al.*, 2020). Textbook-based teaching and other teacher-centred approaches are reported to be the commonest approaches to history teaching (Boadu, 2020). Teachers also work within a context where history is less patronised by students. The image of school history is in decline and the history teaching profession seems to be under attack.

Given that these teachers are at the frontline of implementing educational innovations, their understanding of their subject and their skill to translate the subject matter into meaningful forms for students' understanding is paramount. Therefore, the illustrative research examined history teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical reasoning and classroom practices to understand if these are orientated towards enhancing students' interest in and understanding of the subject. To achieve this, it was important to hear teachers' own accounts and give voice to their practices in order to obtain an understanding of their knowledge, expertise, methods of implementation of history teaching and the challenges they encounter in their teaching. Consequently, it was necessary to be involved in the work of teachers through purposeful interaction and engagement with them. In the illustrative research, therefore, I adopted a qualitative approach to find answers to these research questions: How do teachers reason about history and the purpose of school history in Ghana?; How do these teachers reason about their pedagogy?; What practices do teachers employ in teaching history and do these align with constructivist principles? and What challenges do teachers encounter in teaching for historical understanding in Ghana? This conceptual article does not report on the empirical results of the illustrative study but explores the interpretative

phenomenological approach that was employed to investigate teacher reasoning and practice.

Qualitative research approach: a justification

The decision to adopt a qualitative approach for the research was informed by my own assumptions about the world, how I conceptualised my role in the research process and the kind of knowledge I aimed to produce in the illustrative research (Willig, 2008). In considering these distinct but related issues, I made recourse to the problem under study, the research questions and the data that were needed to respond to them (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

First, I aligned myself with the philosophical position that there are multiple subjective approaches to reality, and that an understanding of the world is constructed through experience and the meanings derived from it (Merriam, 1998). As such, it is possible for people to have different experiences of a similar phenomenon. Consequently, I assumed that history teachers would come from different backgrounds, modes of training, schools of practice and professional experiences. In light of these individual and professional differences, teachers would have developed personal perspectives about the history discipline and its associated pedagogical decisions and practices. They might, for instance, adopt different approaches for developing and teaching a common curriculum topic, problem or issue, and any of these approaches would be viewed as valid from each teacher's own perspective. The qualitative research approach therefore facilitated the attainment and interpretation of a variety of meanings and experiences through the analysis and interpretation of multiple data sources.

Second, I argued that the subjective world of teachers was not accessible by simply taking an "outsider" position or by utilising deductive and reductive approaches but by developing an insider point of view in order to be open to "all possible realities" (Lodico *et al.*, 2006, p. 265). As a result, I maintained that the meanings that underlie history teachers' reasoning and pedagogical practice could be best understood by taking an active position and entering their "worlds," considering their actions and thoughts in order to understand and interpret how they implement their subjective social reality about history teaching. This research agenda required that I become familiar with, and immersed in, the professional *lifeworld* under investigation. Therefore, I approached the research with the awareness that my personal (prior knowledge and experiences) and functional (role as a researcher) attributes had the potential to influence analysis of the data and the resulting interpretation of teachers' experiences.

Furthermore, I subscribed to the view that the kind of knowledge that is generated from qualitative studies orientates towards "exploration, discovery and inductive logic" (Patton, 2002, p. 55). That is, most qualitative studies delve into the unknown or superficially known attributes of experience and attempt to analyse these experiences within the context of the meanings they evoke. In light of this, I sought to interpret teacher reasoning and practice by giving voice to teachers' individual and collective experiences of history teaching within their context of practice. Moreover, since history teachers' reasoning and practice have received little attention in Ghana, the qualitative approach presented a promising method to obtain insight into these teachers' experiences. Thus, the exploratory nature of the research and the interpretative knowledge I sought to construct favoured a hermeneutic approach. This approach enabled me to interpret teachers' reflections and understanding of their experiences in history teaching using an interpretative phenomenological research design.

Phenomenological research

At the design stage of the illustrative research, I considered a range of design possibilities under the qualitative research paradigm for its appropriateness and effectiveness for executing the research agenda of the illustrative research. After attempts to use ethnography and case study approaches proved not to align well with the purposes of the research, I turned

to interpretative phenomenology which seemed to be the most suitable approach to investigate the phenomenon under study.

Phenomenology is considered as a 20th century philosophical movement and research approach heralded by Edmund Husserl (Gadamer, 1976) and subsequently developed through contributions by Martin Heidegger and his followers (Langdrige, 2007). Phenomenology is widely used in the fields of health and psychology, but its applicability to educational research has been noted (van Manen, 1990; Van der Mescht, 2004). Van Manen's (1990) work particularly provides useful insights into how phenomenology facilitates interpretation, critical analysis and a form of reflection that is suited to pedagogy research. Phenomenology is therefore not new to the field of education as several recent studies have employed the approach to investigate teacher perspectives and experiences (see, for example, Tallman, 2019; Crawford, 2019), even though the approach is sparingly used for educational research in Ghana where the illustrative research was conducted. Phenomenologists continue to debate what constitutes phenomenology and phenomenological research (see, van Manen, 2017; Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, phenomenology's basic concern is the study of the nature and meaning of phenomena, the very essence of things and how people make sense of them (van Manen, 1990; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

Central to the phenomenological doctrine are the principles of *intentionality* and *epoché* (van Manen, 1990; Langdrige, 2007). *Intentionality* is indicative of an inseparable link between individuals and their worlds, which presuppose that individuals are conscious beings who act and interact on purpose and that their accounts are reflective of how they make sense of their actions (van Manen, 1990; Sokolowski, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Phenomenologists operate with the argument that the subjectivity of our perception of objects in the world is intricately connected to how we think about them (Langdrige, 2007). Applying this principle of intentionality, I recognised that teachers were experts whose decisions and practices were based on sound reasoning and judgement within their contexts of practice. Hence, I was able to question the underlying elements that constituted teachers' experiences in order to unearth the very foundations of their reality. The Husserlian principle of *epoché* implies the temporary bracketing of preconceived beliefs and assumptions about the object of interest, so that the inherent structure of the phenomenon is critically understood (Langdrige, 2007). Other phenomenologists have questioned Husserl's optimism and argued that it is difficult to completely bracket personal assumptions relating to phenomena since all understandings are grounded on prior engagement with the subject of interest (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 2004). As a former history teacher from Ghana who has a professional relationship with teachers, I was aware that my insider role could influence how I interpreted teachers' practices. Hence, my primary task was to reflect on the data obtained and illuminate the meaning of things through dialogic interaction with the teachers (Saldaña, 2011).

Phenomenological research can take a descriptive or hermeneutic/interpretative form (Langdrige, 2007). The suitability and applicability of each typology is an issue of academic dissensus between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenologists. Adherents of the Husserlian transcendental approach emphasise description and regard any form of interpretation as constituting a distortion of experience or reality (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneuticists, on the other hand, argue that hermeneutical reflection needs to be exacted on phenomena through the symbolic use of language because an understanding of the human experience cannot be made manifest in the void of interpretative entailments (see, Heidegger, 1962; Habermas, 1971; Gadamer, 2004). In the illustrative research, I adopted an interpretative approach to phenomenology to analyse teachers' professional *lifeworlds* through an examination of the accounts they gave of the theory that underpinned their approach to the planning and implementation of history teaching.

Why interpretative phenomenology?

The main aim of the illustrative research was to examine teachers' experiences by exploring their accounts and practices in history. The research did not confine itself to simply describing teachers' reasoning and practices, so descriptive phenomenology was not applicable. Neither did it take a narrative approach by only recounting participants' stories. Rather, through using an interpretative lens, I sought to delve into teachers' ideas and knowledge in order to interrogate and interpret their beliefs and actions. The justification for using the approach was that until the meanings of such experiences are coherently revealed through my interpretative engagement with the data, they could remain hidden in the individual teachers' own expressions and actions (Oxley, 2016; van Manen, 1990). The interpretative phenomenological approach suited the research agenda of the illustrative research because it enabled me to take an active stance in explicating the teaching of history by reaching the deeply entrenched and tacitly known frameworks that influenced teachers' practice.

Furthermore, the approach provided a methodological context, which enabled me to connect with the world of teachers and do a double hermeneutic. That is, it permitted a two-stage interpretation where teachers first made sense of their experiences, and I, in turn, attempted to make sense of their experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2009). I argued that interpretation of the lifeworld was not only aimed at understanding how teachers experienced their reality but also how such experiences came alive the researcher. The approach therefore enabled me to furnish nuance and meaning to teachers' experiences through fusion with my own horizons of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004). Since interpretative phenomenology is idiographic (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2009), the mediated interpretation enabled the exploration of participants' beliefs and practices both as individuals with unique understandings and as a community with shared commonalities and interests.

In particular, phenomenology was suited to the illustrative research for its focus on the *phenomenon*, which, in this case, was teachers' understanding and teaching of history. The research was an interpretative phenomenological approach because it focused on teachers' own accounts of their reasoning and professional practices and made interpretations of it. Also, the interpretative phenomenological approach helped to "distinguish between technique and account" (Merriam, 1998, p. 35). That is, it was effective in exploring the covert meanings teachers held about history as well as the overt pedagogical strategies they adopted in teaching the subject. Data obtained were analysed in order to understand not only what participants said they believed or did but also what they actually did in the classroom, how and why they did it. The opportunity to do a double hermeneutic made it an effective approach with which to meet both the phenomenological and interpretative repertoire of knowledge by getting as close as possible to teachers' experiences in history teaching and explicating them.

Although interpretative phenomenology approach helped me to uncover and understand the perception and interpretation teachers held about history and how they implemented their classroom activities, the approach has been criticised as being subjective, intrusive and reliant on researchers' influence, judgement and understanding of what participants say and do. The issue of subjectivity is often argued to be visible in the interpretations offered, effects of the researcher on the experiences of the research subjects, the veracity of conclusions drawn and in judgements as to what constitutes good phenomenological research (Van der Mescht, 2004; Smith, 2018; van Manen, 2017). It has also been argued that description of experience is a more valid and methodologically sound approach to phenomenological research because interpretation draws on inaccurate scientific discourse which obscures a clear understanding of phenomena (Langdridge, 2007). The objectivity versus subjectivity conundrum and issues about the representational validity of language are inextricably linked

to the human factor, which paradoxically represents a major strength of the approach. Patton (2002, p. 433) describes this as “a scientific two-edged sword” in qualitative research. To mitigate the weakness of any incidence of researcher bias on the illustrative research, I disclosed my position as a member of the history community in Ghana and the possible effect this might have on my interpretation of teachers’ experiences. I also argued that teachers held intellectual and professional authority over their own experiences, which I sought to explore in the illustrative research.

Population and sampling protocols

Samples in qualitative research are usually drawn purposively from an expert group, taking into consideration the aims, rationale and constraints of the research in order to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002; Langdridge, 2007). Even though small-sample sizes are often criticised as making broad generalisations impracticable, phenomenologists agree that samples need to be small in order to achieve depth of issues (Langdridge, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2009). In interpretative phenomenology, a group that shares an experience of interest is a desirable focus for research (Langdridge, 2007). In light of this, despite the many stakeholders who have an interest in history education in Ghana, I focused on history teachers because they were the primary implementers of a common history curriculum who were in the position to influence students’ learning and understanding of history. They therefore constituted an experience-sharing, homogeneous group appropriate to provide information on the teaching of history in Ghana. Besides, the nature of the research problem made history teachers the most suitable group to be involved in the research. Using a mixed purposive sampling technique featuring maximum variation (to identify and include schools that differed across a range of characteristics such as location, gender orientation and structure) and snowball sampling strategies (to identify schools that offered history and teachers that taught history [1]), 24 history teachers from 15 schools in Ghana’s Central Region were invited and involved in the research. By using these methods, I sought to account for the wider community of teachers as well as the diversity of the schools involved. In the illustrative research, I argued that insights generated from the exploration of reasoning and practice from a community of history teachers potentially hold useful implications beyond the individual teachers involved in the research.

Data sources

The collection of varied and detailed data provides rich evidence from which interpretations can be made. The inductive, constructive and generative nature of qualitative research requires data collection strategies that draw researchers close to participants (Lodico *et al.*, 2006). The illustrative study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations and documents (teachers’ lesson notes and schemes of work portfolio) as the sources of data. By interviewing, observing and analysing documents, I hoped to access and interpret the richness and texture of teachers’ experiences of history teaching and achieve methodological triangulation. To this end, I needed to capture teachers’ conceptions and practices in all their possible authenticity and variability, an objective which one method could not have achieved.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews mostly comprise open-ended questions designed to explore participants’ views on a subject of interest. The purpose is to gain insight into an issue of concern by co-constructing knowledge, meaning and reality based on the lived experiences of participants (Hennink *et al.*, 2011; Seidman, 2006). In interpretative phenomenological research, the focus on lived experiences makes semi-structured interviews a useful source of data (Smith *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Therefore, in the illustrative research, I employed semi-structured,

face-to-face interviews for the dual purpose of (1) exploring participants' experiential accounts for a richer understanding of their thinking and practices in history teaching and (2) facilitating interaction with participants with regard to the meanings they held about their experiences (van Manen, 1990). The interviews enabled the teachers to tell their own "stories" about their understanding the history discipline, their planning decisions and classroom activities and the constraints they faced. The semi-structured nature of the approach encouraged probing to elicit greater detail. In conducting the interviews, I followed van Manen's (1990) concept of conversational interview by which participants had the opportunity to seek clarification to any of the questions if necessary and received an unscripted explanation. Further, following the advice of Smith and Osborn (2003), I altered the order of questions based on the participants' responses. Where necessary, I paraphrased participants' responses back to them to ensure that their views were accurately captured. The conversationally flexible approach opened up the world of teachers to me as far and deep as possible and yielded responses that were experiential in nature. I audio recorded all the interviews in order to retain their experiential detail for further analysis.

Lesson observations

Observations are employed in qualitative research to gain an understanding of people's daily experiences through making direct contact with a target group of interest, actively witnessing the phenomena being studied and recording behaviour in natural or contrived settings (Hennink *et al.*, 2011; Marvasti, 2014). In phenomenological research, observations are aimed at gathering experiential anecdotes, and this means entering the experiencer's lifeworld by participating in it while retaining a reflective hermeneutic attention to the situation being observed (van Manen, 1990). In the illustrative research, I employed unstructured participant observations to uncover how teachers carried out their classroom practice. With this approach, I was able to absorb the atmosphere and dynamic of the class thereby minimising the Hawthorne effect often associated with non-participant observations (Oswald *et al.*, 2014). The use of lesson observations, as well as interviews, was based on the following premise: teachers may not be able to express their beliefs and practices clearly during interviews even though they may hold salient information; they may not have adequate vocabulary to describe tacit practical knowledge (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1986) and that dialogue can only yield partial knowledge (Heyl, 2001). Through the lesson observations, I gained access to information that was not possible to obtain only from interviews, and this helped to distinguish between teachers' accounts and classroom practices. I observed teachers on multiple occasions teaching different topics in different classrooms. This offered me an opportunity to see the variety of ways in which teachers carried out their teaching which gave me insights into the everyday classroom experience.

Documents

Documents are materials that are purposefully created to aid the sharing of information and the presentation of stories (Coffey, 2014). Documents offer a methodological potential for understanding social reality since many social settings within which qualitative research takes place are self-documenting (Coffey, 2014). While documents or mute evidence could pose as a challenge in interpretative research, which mostly emphasise dialogue in the construction of meaning (Hodder, 1998), they are valuable sources and unobtrusive means of uncovering the values and beliefs held by social groups (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Teachers in Ghana are professionally required to plan their lessons, and this should be embodied in documents such schemes of work (a breakdown the topics to be covered within a school term) and lesson plans (detailed lesson objectives, materials and activities designed for a particular lesson). In the illustrative research, I gathered and reviewed teacher portfolio documents (lesson plans and schemes of work) to add meaning and detail to the interview and

observational data. The schemes of work and lesson plans were of interest because of their direct relation to classroom teaching. I argued that their analytical affordance was evident in the fact that they were produced and implemented by teachers in the context of schools and classrooms and therefore provided an additional layer of meaning for teachers' reasoning and practice. These documents provided further insights into the reasons that informed teachers' decision-making and reflection on their teaching of history.

Data analysis and interpretation

Qualitative data analysis is often messy as it involves a recursive process of interaction with the data until tentative conclusions have been reached. It is an iterative process involving such activities as immersion (familiarising oneself with the data), analysis (organising data into chunks) and interpretation (making the chunks meaningful) (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). Data analysis in the illustrative research was both inductive and deductive. Patton (2002, p. 453) writes: "*inductive analysis* involves *discovering* patterns, themes and categories in one's data. Findings emerge out of the data through the analyst's interaction with the data" (emphasis in original). The deductive aspect took the form of drawing on key ideas from the literature to explain patterns in the data. The adoption of both approaches ensured that teachers' lived meanings and practices were represented, and results were interpreted to link with relevant theory and existing research.

Data were first approached from an inductive perspective, given the phenomenological slant of the illustrative research. However, I was aware that I could not escape my own active role in the coding and subsequent development of themes, since coding is inherently interpretative (Erickson, 2004; Saldaña, 2009). Srivastava and Hopwood (2009, p. 77) aptly describe this phenomenon as follows:

Patterns, themes, and categories do not emerge on their own. They are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings.

Hence, there was the need for me to engage fully with the data to facilitate an interpretative rapport and to unlock its meaning and significance. To achieve this, the analysis commenced concurrently with data collection and involved constant reflection and iteration, working from part to whole and from whole to part. Beginning with the "first interview, the first observation [and] the first document read" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 191), I made an effort to understand and interpret how participants enacted and transacted their experiences in history teaching. Data were prepared, coded and then categorised and themed.

Data preparation

All data were transcribed into textual formats. I checked the interview transcripts with the corresponding audio records to correct any transcription errors and to remove all identifying information. Further, all redundant and repetitive content that obstructed the content and coherence of salient experiential accounts were removed before subjecting the data to close analysis. In doing this, I paid attention to ensure that teachers' original perspectives were maintained in order to address issues of authority, representation and accuracy and to position me to elicit meaning from the data in the absence of the teachers who provided the information.

Coding

Before coding began, I realised that it was important that an approach be used to guide the analytic exploration of the experiential realities of teachers through description, explanation and theorisation without losing sight of their subtleties (Cunningham, 2003). A thematic

approach was chosen because it enhances hermeneutic phenomenological reflection and unveils the experiential structure of participant's lifeworlds (van Manen, 1990). I trial-coded one interview transcript manually by printing, identifying and applying words or phrases that represented essential knots of experience to various parts of the transcript. By touching, flipping and manipulating the data manually, I developed rapport with the data and ownership over the analytic process. However, given the number of participants and the multiple sources of data, which had purchase on the time available for the project, the manual coding was abandoned, and NVivo was used to make the data analysis more manageable. To orientate the codes towards the research questions, I adapted Kane and Trochim's (2007) idea of concept mapping and used the research questions as focus prompts. I generated statements in a complete-the-sentence format to prompt direct reflection on what the teachers were saying, doing or thinking. In the illustrative research, the following focus prompts were generated for each research question (RQ).

RQ1. How do teachers reason about history and the purpose of school history in Ghana?

- *Focus prompt 1:* In reasoning about history, teachers think that history is about
- *Focus prompt 2:* In reasoning about the purpose of school history, teachers think that school history is about

RQ2. How do these teachers reason about their pedagogy?

- *Focus prompt:* In reasoning about their pedagogy, teachers consider

RQ3. What practices do teachers employ in teaching history and do these align with constructivist principles?

- *Focus prompt:* The practices teachers employ in teaching are

RQ4. What challenges do teachers encounter in teaching for historical understanding in Ghana?

- *Focus prompt:* The challenges that teachers encounter in teaching for historical understanding in Ghana are

I chose words, concepts or expressions that most appropriately filled the blank spaces and used them as codes to represent significant information. The focus prompts allowed for descriptive and interpretative engagement with the data and provided direction for the analysis process. Further, it grounded the codes in the data such that the categories and themes were reflective of teachers' perspectives. Within NVivo, I created anchor nodes to represent each research question. These were – disciplinary reasoning, planning and practice and pedagogic constraints. I created a separate anchor node – career and professional status – to represent the biographic details of participants. Codes that related to each research question were initially grouped under the three anchor nodes to indicate how the experiential structure appeared in line with the research questions. The anchor nodes helped to organise the codes and subsequent categories in terms of the questions that guided the illustrative research but did not necessarily impose a *a priori* analytic framework.

To further keep the coding process in focus, I adapted a set of principles used by Cunningham (2003) to guide the process:

- (1) *Clarity and coherence*: The codes assigned to the transcripts had to be clear in definition and their application to the data had to be coherent and systematic. Code definitions were flexible to accommodate new insights and discoveries.
- (2) *Groundedness and recognisability*: Codes should have sufficient evidential support in the data. Where I brought in concepts from the literature, they needed to be substantiated by the data itself.
- (3) *Comprehensiveness*: I accounted for all data that were relevant to the thinking and practices of teachers and linked them to a code or set of codes.

I moved back and forth between the data and the codes to ensure that no aspect of the data that carried an experiential weighting was overlooked or lost. The preliminary analysis yielded 83 codes. As the analysis continued, some of the initial codes were revised and synthesised to create a more harmonised and concrete structure, which reflected deep-lying meanings. For example, an initial code, *experiential knowledge*, was recoded as *entry behaviour* and later changed to *entry knowledge and ability*, as this conveyed a broader and clearer conceptual representation of teachers' thinking about students' existing ideas and skills in history. Also, even though I had decided to code the data directly to the research questions (anchor nodes), it became necessary to merge codes that bore conceptual and practical linkage across research questions. For instance, I had created a code for *examination* as one of the purposes for teachers teaching of history and a separate code for *examination constraint* as a challenge that teachers faced. However, going through the data, I realised that teachers' focus on examinations as a purpose of history teaching was driven by the expectation for high academic performance in schools. It became evident from the data that this expectation was a constraint as most teachers focused on how students passed examinations at the expense of the understanding students could obtain. I therefore merged the two codes as *examination* to represent one of the challenges teachers encountered. Correspondingly, extracts from the data that did not best represent the codes were uncoded and recoded to the appropriate codes. The coding, recoding and synthesis process reduced the number of codes to 34.

Categorisation and theming

Codes were categorised into experiential clusters. I looked for connections between and among codes and clustered them to create patterns or categories. To ensure that the categories were grounded in the data, I continuously compared the codes with the data. Categories were judged according to the principles of internal and external homogeneity in order to determine the extent to which they held together meaningfully and the degree of clarity of the differences between them (Patton, 2002). In this process, codes that did not seem to fit into the experiential frame and those that did not have a strong evidential base in the transcripts were dropped.

I noted that some categories had fewer codes than others. Also, data extracts referencing particular codes and categories varied significantly. Yet methodologists caution that the number of references to a code or the number of codes that form a category is not necessarily indicative that the code or category in question is most important (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, applying the phenomenological principle of horizontalisation, I gave each category equal weight for its contribution to experience and not for how frequently teachers referred to it (Langdridge, 2007). Given that the anchor nodes were already linked to the research questions, the category groupings were based on how they were analytically connected to answering the research questions. Decisions, reflections and insights regarding the categorisation of codes and the relationship between codes were

recorded in the analytic memo, which helped in writing up the findings. The application of these progressive and iterative processes to all the data yielded an integrated list of categories, codes and sub-codes. In the process, the number of categories reduced from 14 to 8. The final list of categories was as follows: dialogue, truth and objectivity, intellectual training, patriotism and civic efficacy, preparatory mechanics, instructional dynamic, organisational structure and curriculum structure.

[van Manen \(1990\)](#) cautions that to capture a lived experience, the structures of experience (themes) should not be clouded in extant conceptual formulations or abstractions. To arrive at the themes inherent in the data, I re-examined the codes and categories with focus on identifying broader and coherent patterns of meaning that were grounded in the data. This helped in the derivation of four major themes and their associated sub-themes which were meaningful, internally coherent and connected enough to create a compelling account of teachers' reasoning and practice (see [Table 1](#)). The themes served as the anchor points around which interpretations were offered. I aimed to arrive at claims that suggested relationships between and among codes and categories in order to better understand teachers' thinking and practices. The interpretation provided a lens by which I understood the complexities as well as the commonalities in teachers' lived experience. Close attention was paid to all the evidence and major competing or disconfirming cases were taken into account. Throughout the analysis process, I retained reflexivity by recording my thinking behind the analytic decisions and actions throughout the research. Throughout the illustrative research, I followed all the ethical procedures required at the University where the research was conducted. [Figure 1](#) shows the iterative, cyclic and recursive approach to the analysis.

Trustworthiness

The concepts of quality and rigour in research have often been viewed from a positivistic perspective, leaving questions as to how the canons of experimental research can be addressed in qualitative studies. Even though qualitative research has a clear requirement to be valid, disagreements exist on the form and nature of validity ([Mays and Pope, 1995](#)). Since there are no specific approaches for ensuring trustworthiness in interpretative phenomenological research, I ensured quality and rigour by adhering to principles that are widely used in qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability ([Guba, 1981](#); [Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)).

Credibility

Credibility is the degree of correspondence between data and interpretations and the realities held by participants ([Guba and Lincoln, 1988](#)). Throughout the fieldwork, I engaged with teachers to build trust and to undertake focused observation of the issues that were

Main theme	Sub-theme
History as a dialogue involving evidence and its interpretation	History as a dialogue driven by the significant past
History as inculcating intellectual, nationalistic and professional outlook	The roles of evidence and the historian Capacity to engage with the past and enact ethical judgement National consciousness and social harmony Career development and literacy
Pre-lesson preparatory mechanics and the instructional practice	Pre-engagement decisions and actions Discursive interaction versus didacticism
Organisational and curriculum structures as constraints on practice	Administrative and logistical challenges Curricular and examination dilemmas

Table 1.
Themes and sub-themes

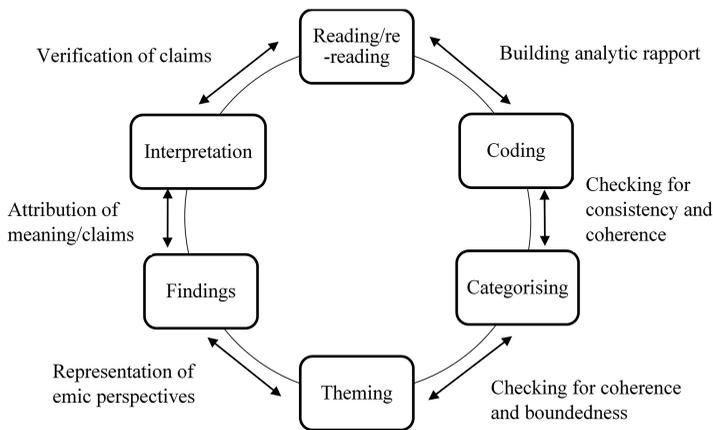


Figure 1.
Data analysis cycle

investigated. As well, I adopted a repertoire of data collection methods which allowed comparison of information from a range of sources. The use of member checking ensured the accurate representation of teachers' views.

Transferability

Transferability relates to the extent to which findings in qualitative research can be generalised to other settings and populations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While I did not seek to produce findings that could be generalised beyond the context of the illustrative research, I provided a detailed account of the research procedure to enable the reader to understand the theoretical and physical contexts within which findings were framed.

Dependability

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that dependability refers to the consistency between results and the data collected rather than whether the same findings can be replicated. Dependability of the illustrative research was ensured through data triangulation and peer debriefing. A broad description of the research process, the theoretical and epistemological frameworks employed to guide the illustrative research and the decisions made and the reasons for making them were also detailed to enable readers to authenticate the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability means showing evidence that interpretations made from data can be traced to its sources (Mertens, 2010). In the illustrative research, member checking was done to confirm the information generated. Again, verbatim extracts from the data were cited in the findings to ensure that interpretations and conclusions had support in the data.

Amplifying teacher voices

The silence characterising secondary history teachers' work in Ghana connects invariably with the numerous constraints that confront history education in Ghana. This situation partly evoked the illustrative research which sought to probe teachers' reasoning and highlight the empirics of history teaching in Ghana with a view to stimulating further discussion, generating support for and pushing teachers' work in significant and positive directions. The interpretative and phenomenological approach and its associated methods contributed to amplifying teachers' voices in different ways. With history struggling to

maintain its place within the Ghanaian school curriculum and given that the area of history teachers' work is under-researched in Ghana, the interpretative phenomenological approach used teachers' own accounts to shed light on the state of history teaching in Ghana, thus broadening the theoretical base and practical understanding of history teachers' work while adding a local voice to the international debates on history teaching. Methodologically, even though a few history education studies in Ghana have adopted a qualitative approach, these studies are predominantly single-method studies focused on few teachers (see for example, [Oppong and Quan-Baffour, 2014](#); [Boadu, 2016](#)). The approach employed in the illustrative research presented opportunities to explore the several layers of meanings teachers derived from their work using multiple interpretative methods, which helped to get the depth and substance of teachers' reasoning and practice. An alternative approach was to adopt a positivist orientation and employ statistical tools to measure teachers' perspectives and practices. Yet this would not have maximised teachers' interpretation of their own beliefs and practices in a Ghanaian context where teachers' voices are seldom heard. While the actual, empirical voices of teachers do not form the focus of this article, the interpretative phenomenological approach contributed to an understanding that history teaching in Ghana is a complex endeavour requiring the engagement, cooperation and intervention of government, education stakeholders and professional associations.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the interpretative phenomenological research design and methods employed to investigate history teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical reasoning and practices in Ghana. I have shared my musings and introspection around carrying out interpretative phenomenological research and demonstrated how the approach helped to amplify teachers' voices. The article highlights that the nature of the research problem, assumptions about knowledge, conceptualisation of the researcher's role and research context inform the design and implementation of qualitative research. The emergent nature of qualitative research requires researchers to be flexible to new ideas and to carefully think through their design and analysis decisions by ensuring logical consistency with a clearly defined epistemological and methodological approach. While all qualitative studies involve some amount of interpretative work, researchers who adopt interpretative phenomenology must recognise interpretation as the lifeblood of the approach and commit to moving beyond the description of essences to explicating participants' experiences of phenomena using workable frames of interpretation. The growing requirement for quality and rigour in research further suggests that interpretative researchers must carefully document their decisions and attend to all evidence for the verification of their claims and conclusions. Future researchers employing interpretative phenomenology for educational research focussing on teachers should consider the suitability of the research approach to their intended research topic and select specific data gathering and analysis methods that project the essences and nuances of the topic of interest. A focus on *an experience* and a clear understanding of the phenomenological and interpretative roles of the researcher are critical to an effective execution of the research agenda.

Note

1. In Ghana, not all secondary schools offer history. I used the snowball sampling to locate the schools that offered history and consequently the history teachers in those schools, beginning with a few teachers that I knew were teaching history.

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Giving voice to
teachers

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