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Qualitative Article Critique

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**APA Citation**

Lucas, D. M., & Fugitt, J. (2009). The perceptions of math and math education in Midville, Illinois. *The Rural Educator*, *31*(1), 38-54.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of math and math education in a small, rural community. The participants were citizens of a community in Illinois, set at least 100 miles from the nearest metro complex. The city was dubbed Midville for anonymity. Data were collected using an experimental qualitative research method known as folknography. The participants were initially surveyed to gain a statistical idea of the popular opinion on math in Midville, and then the participants were interviewed for personal narratives of the same questions. The people of Midville believe that math is important in developing a future for individual citizens and Midville. They also believe that math education is poor in their community due to an emphasis on technology and not on arithmetic. It is also believed that the quality of the schools and teachers is poor in the community.

**Critique**

**Introduction**

The article clearly stated that the purpose of the study was to “investigate the perceptions of math and math education in a small rural Midwestern community” (p. 38). I don’t believe that the article clearly states why the study is important but does provide evidence in the literature review that it was important. The authors speak of a study where 7 out of 10 participants stated that “better math education would provide a critical competitive advantage to their state’s economic future (Fraser, Fleishauer, & O’Conner, 2004)” (p. 38). The authors then go on to talk about how “rural communities might refuse to devote much attention to mathematics education (Begg, 2004)” (p. 39). From these statements, the reader could infer why the study is important. The research questions seem to be taken from a previous study in Appalachia so I would say that the questions are well researched, just not in this specific instance. The introduction contained little overview of the design. Instead, the design is only described in the Design section of the article. The literature review is very pertinent to the article in that it speaks of similar research done in different size communities as well as point out general beliefs about math education in various communities. This study was essentially exploring the same types of questions, but in a rural setting. The literature is well analyzed in that many inferences are made that pertain to the study, and several studies are brought together to form a coherent thought.

**Methodology**

The research site is well described and illustrates its typicality as a rural community. The authors describe the many features that make this community similar to other communities in the area. The author says that “Midville offered insights into the perceptions and attitudes of rural communities, struggle with changing realities, adherence to agrarian traditions, and attitudes toward traditional public education” (p. 41). The entry into field was established by setting up a computer writing lab, breaking the team into smaller teams for canvassing, sending out preliminary surveys to the citizens of Midville, and doing some initial interview surveys to find information-rich informants. The role of the researcher was a folknographer, which is part of Dr. Lucas’s experimental folknography research method. The researchers prompted narratives from the informants in order to develop a voice of the folk. The authors do not acknowledge any limitations to their design, though they certainly must exist. The lead author, Dr. Davis, designed the specific type of research method they were performing so it is possible, and in my opinion likely, that bias was present in the reporting of the methodology. The iterative process was utilized in the study but was vaguely described in this article. The researchers began by asking questions about informant’s views on math then proceeded to ask specific questions as to why the citizens of Midville believe the youth are poor at math. They then probe deeper into questions about the state of the education system in response to the informants’ comments about the teachers of the city. The context of the study was clearly perceptions of math education of rural people and this study heavily focuses on that cultural lens. The recorded narratives take great care to leave cultural mannerisms and vernacular in the accounts.

**Findings and Interpretations**

The findings represent a slew of opinions from the people of Midville, often directly quoting their feelings where appropriate. The methodology of the research lead to some very detailed accounts of the researchers encounters with the informants, applying such detail as stated that an informant “blurted out” (p. 51) a response or that he “displays an anxious look, worrying that he has been to blunt” (p. 51). The researchers take care to include body language and other unspoken elements of the interview. The interviews represented multiple perspectives well. People of different ages were interviewed as well as people from different social classes. For example, when informants were asked about quality of schools, some spoke of the poor teachers in the classroom. Others spoke of the lack of individual attention provided to children with special needs. Some even spoke of the politics of the school depriving students of their rightful academic ranking in the school. I feel that the use of detail and multiple perspectives in the findings leads to well documented results. The opinions of the community are clear and I also appreciate that the authors included relevant surveys that were taken to support the narratives. For example, after presenting several narratives detailing various opinions on the importance of learning math skills for the future, a graph of the responses to survey asking the same question was presented (p. 49). Though well documented, the researchers did not document accounting for their own beliefs and biases. Due to the way they recorded the narratives in such high detail, I feel the researchers probably introduced personal beliefs to the study. Once the researcher writes “I become sad for him, but I try not to show it. I don’t want to display the pity I feel for him” (p. 46). I feel this addition to the narrative paints an emotional image that sways the reader’s opinion, but is obviously the researcher’s own thoughts. Still, the interpretations seem reasonable. Usually whenever the researchers added personal opinions, they were in accordance with the opinion expressed by the informant. Also, due to the large number of quotes and the additional of the surveys, the opinions of the citizens are easily recognizable.

**Conclusions**

The conclusions were logically consistent with the findings of the study. The authors succinctly summarized the popular vote on the issues discussed such as opinion on the importance of math education, condition of current math education, the specific problem with math education, and the state of the current schooling system. The opinions are clearly the popular opinions by the results from the surveys. Though the conclusions were logical and consistent, the authors do not comment on the design of the study and its limitation. This would have been an appropriate time to mention any issues with the design method, but as stated previously, the author created this design method and shows his bias for it by remaining silent on design limitations. Still, the implication of the study is clear and answers the initial question of the study. The researchers wanted to find out:

1. What are the perceptions of the people concerning math and math education?

2. What is the perceived quality of math and math education in the school districts under consideration?

3. What is the impact of math and math education on the future success of students upon their graduation? (p. 38)

The conclusion answers these questions, clearly illustrating the voice of the people of Midville, Illinois.