

**Nancy K. Farber, Ph.D.,**  
is an assistant professor  
with the Department of  
Counseling and Student  
Development, Eastern  
Illinois University,  
Charleston. E-mail:  
cfukf@eiu.edu

# Conducting Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for School Counselors

*This article discusses the concept of school counselor as researcher. Qualitative research is defined, explained, and differentiated from quantitative research. School counselor questions that lend themselves to qualitative research are explored. The article also discusses the steps of qualitative research in depth, including developing questions, identifying gatekeepers, conducting interviews and observations, and analyzing data.*

Embarking on a research project can be an exciting journey. As school counselors take questions they have been curious about, and set out on an adventure to find answers, they begin to see how rewarding conducting research can be. Yet those who are new to the process of research often doubt their competence. When I discuss research assignments with my school counseling students, the initial reaction is frequently one of fear and dread. Unfamiliar words and terms can be intimidating for the novice researcher. Even the word *researcher*, which implies something other than *counselor*, can make counselors feel that they are embarking on a path that is beyond the scope of their capabilities. Yet as practitioners, we are all researchers every day. We study our environments and draw conclusions based on our observations. We gather information about students and generate our own theories about them. We also make predictions and test these out. In essence, school counselors are researching all the time.

The purpose of this article is to help you see that as a school counselor, you, too, can be a natural researcher. Your eyes and ears can be sources for collecting data. The purpose of collecting data is simply to inform what you already do. The more you know about a given situation or problem, the better equipped you are to apply this knowledge to your work. In this article, I discuss how one knows when a qualitative research procedure is warranted, the definition of qualitative research, and the specific procedures one uses in carrying out a qualitative research study.

## QUALITATIVE VS. QUANTITATIVE PROCEDURES: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

The first step in any research study is defining your research question. That is, ask yourself, "Specifically, what is it that I want to discover?" Once you have clearly determined your question(s), you can decide what type of procedure will best serve you. Qualitative approaches are used when you want to add richness or thick description to your findings.

Let's say your goal for discovery is "I want to understand more about the parents of my students in order that I may collaborate more effectively with them." You then must ask yourself, "What specifically do I want/need to know?" Perhaps your questions are ones that can be clearly defined and quantified, such as "How old are most parents in my community? What is the education level of parents in my community? Which topics would parents be interested in hearing about on Parents Night?" A quantitative approach such as conducting a survey in which participants are asked to respond to a list of brief questions will certainly be most time-efficient. You also will be able to include more people in your study.

Sometimes, however, you will find that your question is one that requires a deeper level of exploration that would necessitate dialogue with parents. For example, suppose you notice that you have difficulty relating to parents from different cultural groups. You would like to understand more about what the experience of that cultural group is like in order that you may understand, relate to, and work with parents more effectively. Your questions are likely to be open-ended. You wonder things such as "What is the everyday experience of people in this minority culture? How do members of this culture experience the school environment?" You may not even be quite sure what it is you want to know. You just know that you need to know something. A qualitative approach might be in order—one in which you spend time with, observe, and ask questions of people in order to understand their cultural patterns.

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## WHAT DEFINES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

The distinguishing characteristic of qualitative research is that it “calls for the investigator to enter into the lives of the persons being studied as fully and naturally as possible” (Stainback & Stainback, 1988, p. 1). The goal is to gain an in-depth, holistic perspective of groups of people, environments, programs, events, or any phenomenon one wishes to study by interacting closely with the people one is studying. According to Creswell (1994), “The researcher tries to minimize the distance between him- or herself and those being researched” (p. 6). It is important to note that qualitative procedures can never be completely value-free. Qualitative researchers deal with the fact that their own values cannot be kept out of the experience by admitting the value-laden nature of the experience (Creswell) and discussing their own biases and the implications for findings.

## STEPS TO TAKE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Here, I briefly outline the fundamental steps that researchers use to conduct a qualitative investigation.

### Define Questions of Interest and Concern to You

To reiterate, the first step in any research study is to be clear about what it is you want to understand. Research begins with wonder. It is important that you be truly passionate and interested in what you study. This will help ensure that you follow through with your research goals. The first step then is to define your questions so you know what it is you are going to be looking for. To illustrate, I will share examples of research questions that might lend themselves to qualitative research approaches. These are questions that both students of mine and I have wondered about in our work as school counselors. No doubt you have questions of your own that you wonder about. Here are the questions:

- What is the cultural makeup of families in my community? How can I better understand the culture(s) of my school community?
- What are the thoughts, values, beliefs, and biases of teachers in school? What accounts for their varying approaches with students?
- What are the communication patterns in this school? How does information flow?
- What is it like to be a student in this school environment? What do students see as problems or challenges?
- How is the culture of my school different from the culture of other schools?

- How has my group counseling program impacted the school?
- What do students in my school worry about?
- What is the nature of community involvement in children’s lives? What kinds of programs exist to support children?
- What are the levels of teacher morale in my school?
- How do students perceive peer group interactions in our school? Which groups are the most influential?
- What have been the academic trends of my school?

Notice that the preceding questions are all open-ended questions. They are not forced-choice questions in which we are expecting answers to fit into certain categories. While we may have some hypotheses about what we will find, the qualitative approaches are used more when we really do not know just what we will find but rather are interested in listening, exploring, and discovering meaning in situations. We use open-ended questions in order to keep an open mind. Notice, too, that the sample questions are quite broad. They provide an overarching focus to our study. Within these broad questions, we also will have more specific subquestions that we define specifically. These subquestions are what you will use to guide your study as you proceed through the data collection process. However, in qualitative research, the researcher remains open to new questions and hypotheses emerging during the research process. We go into the process with a specific set of questions, yet we remain open to new ones developing.

### Understand Your Research Instrument

To be a skilled qualitative researcher, it is important that you become familiar with your research instrument. No matter what you are studying, your research instrument will always remain the same. The research instrument is you.

How does the research instrument work? The research instrument asks questions. It makes observations. It notices things that fuel more questions. It records its observations. It records the answers to its questions. It notices its own reactions to observations. You are the human research machine collecting and synthesizing the data.

A term that is often used in qualitative research is *participant-observer*. This term captures the idea that you are part of the study and involved with the participants. While your level of involvement may vary, you are, nonetheless, always involved. Because you are interacting with the participants of your study, it is important to be aware of biases you bring to the study. Your active involvement with partici-

pants provides the benefit of close observation. By interacting with participants and developing relationships with them, you have the opportunity to learn information that you otherwise would not have access to. However, you also run the risk of influencing participants and their responses, so it is important that you be very aware of yourself in the process. Before embarking on any qualitative researcher endeavor, know yourself. Know your values, your biases, and your fears.

### Identify Gatekeepers

Once you have defined your research questions, the task before you is to set up your study. Setting up a qualitative study begins with relationship building. It is important to put yourself in the shoes of the people you will be studying and to think about what their concerns might be. If you are asking people to let you immerse yourself in their environment, observe them, and ask them questions, it is important to first establish rapport with the person or people who will allow you entry into their lives.

Not everybody will welcome you into their world, and they have the right to refuse you. However, if you are honest with potential participants about your goals, what it is you are doing and why, and how you will treat the information you gather (a process known as informed consent), you will be more likely to gain their cooperation. It is important to identify the key person whose permission and assistance you will need to enter into and study his or her experience. Examples include the teacher in a classroom you wish to study, the director of a community organization, or an influential person in a neighborhood who can connect you with others you would like to interview. In qualitative research, these people often are referred to as informants (Agar, 1980) or gatekeepers (Bogdan, 1972).

Essentially, an informant or gatekeeper is the person who will allow you access to the places, people, events, or documents that you wish to study. Establishing an honest, forthright working relationship with this person is the key to getting your study off the ground. If you are honest with people about what it is you are doing and why, they will be less hesitant to let you in. As Bogdan (1972) noted, “There is often temptation on the part of the new researcher to misrepresent himself because he doesn’t feel comfortable in the role of participant observer” (p. 15). From the participants’ point of view, there is often a healthy mistrust about goals and intentions of researchers. For example, suppose you want to study a classroom to gain an understanding of dynamics that occur in classroom settings so that you can be better informed to help teachers and students. Teachers may be concerned that you are there to evaluate what they are doing, and that you will be

passing judgment on them. They may see you as a spy. While you will certainly have your own biases and emotional reactions to any given teacher’s style, the purpose of your study is not to pass judgment but to observe and learn. It is important that you are clear and honest with the teacher about the general nature of what you are studying and how you will treat the data you collect. Listening to and responding to the concerns of your gatekeeper and participants is an extremely important part of setting up your study. Your counseling skills will surely help you with this part of the process.

### DATA COLLECTION

Let’s assume you are now clear about what it is you’re studying. With the assistance of your gatekeeper, you’ve also worked out the details of how you will do this, what you will be doing, and whom you will be interviewing. You have received the green light to begin. Now the fun begins. (Yes, fun.) What will make the data collection process valuable is if you totally immerse yourself in the experience and enjoy the process. Remember you have come here with wonder, to learn, explore, and discover. Like Christopher Columbus, you may begin the process expecting to discover India, but instead you will discover the New World. Remain open to the unknown.

Data collection in qualitative research generally includes two processes: interviews and observation. Depending on what you are studying, your research also may include another process that’s frequently used, that of studying documents.

#### Interviews

As counselors, we certainly have the skills for being effective interviewers. We know how to listen, clarify, reflect, and summarize. We are trained to listen without judgment. We know how to build rapport and make people feel comfortable. Professional school counselors have the training and experience that will help them to be skilled qualitative interviewers. Building rapport is an important component to conducting effective interviews. Counselors undoubtedly will be able to master this piece of the process.

**Where to conduct the interviews.** A question that people often wonder is where to conduct interviews. When you are asking people to share with you about their lives and experiences, it is important to make them feel as comfortable as possible. You are entering into their world. Therefore, it is important that they decide where the interviews be conducted. It does help, however, to request that you have a space that will assure privacy and confidentiality so that your subject feels free to share with you.

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**The goal of qualitative research is to gain an in-depth, holistic perspective of groups of people, environments, programs, events, or any phenomenon one wishes to study by interacting closely with the people one is studying.**

**How to conduct interviews.** Remember for a moment your experience as a school counseling practicum student when you learned that you would be required to tape record your counseling sessions. You may have felt dread as you imagined having your supervisor listen to your tapes. Many of us feared having to ask people to allow themselves to be taped. But you did it. You have mastered a skill that will help you in the research process. Tape recording interviews is an important part of the interview process, because unless you are gifted with infinite memory, it will be necessary to record your conversations so that you can later go back and analyze the “data” from your interviews. In situations where taping is prohibited, a researcher would need to take detailed notes and attempt to record word for word what a subject says. This can be difficult to do while remaining responsive to the interview process, which is why taping interviews is so important. Before beginning interviews, you must carefully explain to your participants the purpose of your interviews, and how you will treat the information they share with you. Obtaining informed consent is most important to avoid misleading or harming your participants.

The first steps in conducting any interview are similar to those you would take in a counseling interview. It is important to establish rapport, set the tone, discuss confidentiality, discuss your purpose, and address any concerns/questions your interviewee may have.

Once you have established the tone, you can move into the heart of the interview process. The goal of the interview is to stay attuned to your research questions and, at the same time, open yourself up to information that you had not anticipated learning about. Therefore, a semi-structured approach is best, in which you have a set of questions to be addressed but allow yourself to stay with the interviewee as the process unfolds. As with counseling, asking open-ended questions will allow you to gain a deeper understanding of your participants. Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggested that counselors conceptualize interviews as “guided conversations.” They stated,

As in ordinary conversations, only a few topics are covered in depth, and there are smooth transitions between the subjects. People take turns speaking and acknowledge what the other has said. People give off recognizable cues when they don’t understand and clarify ambiguities upon request. (p. 122)

It is important to be aware that skilled interviewing often will evoke emotional responses and may reveal critical problems and concerns on the part of

participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). You may be the first person that a subject has had the opportunity to talk with about a situation. As counselors, your listening skills certainly will help you in this situation. It is okay to allow yourself to be transformed by and affected by things you might hear. That is part of your process of discovery. But remember that you are in this situation to learn, listen, and observe. If you are interviewing about a controversial subject or topic, it will be wise to gain multiple perspectives from participants. Hearing both sides of an issue represented will help you to maintain your objectivity as a researcher.

### **Observation**

Patton (1990) suggested,

The purpose of observational data is to *describe* the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of those observed. (p. 202)

Observations may include descriptions of the participants, descriptions of the physical settings, and accounts of particular events and activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Observations also should include self-observations. That is, it is important for researchers to be aware of their own biases that they bring into any new situation and their personal reactions to these situations. Noticing how one responds to a new situation can help one let go of preconceived ideas and enter into a process of discovery. Self-observations include observations of your own reactions, thoughts, and feelings. They can include new ideas and questions that have been sparked. They can be used to formulate new questions.

Observation allows the researcher to collect less visible data. The observer’s tool is a journal in which he or she records everything observed that is relevant to the research questions. The question to ask oneself is simply “What do I notice?” Observations involve all of the senses. They include what one hears, sees, smells, tastes, and feels. They are the “aha” moments of noticing. They are feelings inside you that emerge. To illustrate, I will share an example of how I’ve used observation in my own research.

A number of years ago I conducted a qualitative study in Philadelphia to learn more about the gay and lesbian subcultures in the community. I focused primarily on the experience of gay men. My informant, Tom, took me to gathering places in the city where I could participate and interact with the members of the gay subculture. Tom introduced me to men who would be willing to be interviewed. As

I sat among the men in a local entertainment establishment, I observed and noted everything around me. I remember being struck by a large-screen television displaying music videos of performing artist Madonna and observing many pictures of the popular singer displayed on the wall. When I pointed out this observation to my participants, one of them informed me that Madonna was a strong symbol in the gay community because she represented freedom to be who you are. The discovery of a cultural symbol connected with a prominent cultural theme (freedom to be one's self) was an important part of data collection that I would not have experienced without the opportunity to observe and interact.

Observations allow for invisible data to become visible. In order to facilitate this process, it is helpful to take your journal into your setting and immediately record what you notice when you notice it. Discuss what you notice with your participants. Allow them to be involved in your research process. What you notice and record in your journal becomes the data that you will later analyze.

For ease of analysis, it can be helpful to organize and code your observational data as you record it. For example, suppose you are interested in the personal and social development of girls in your community. Your overarching research question is "How do the girls in my community experience themselves in relation to boys?" In addition to interviewing a number of girls about their experiences, you have decided to observe boys and girls in the classroom, on the playground at recess, in the lunchroom, and in the neighborhood after school. It will be helpful to create different sections in your journal in which you record observations across the different settings. This will enable you to go back later and compare and contrast observations across settings. Remember, too, that you will be recording your self-observations as well. It may help to use some kind of code, such as "S.O.," to denote self-observations. Appendix A provides an illustration of a hypothetical journal page of observations.

### Studying Documents

The term *document* refers to materials such as photographs, videos, diaries, manuals, memos, instructional materials, case records, and memorabilia of all sorts that can be used as additional information to supplement observations and interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

**Personal documents.** Personal documents such as letters, drawings, journals, photo albums, and videos are frequently used by individuals to share and document the experiences of their lives. Personal documents give us insight into how people perceive and experience their world. For example, the way one organizes a photo album and the types

of pictures one chooses to include in the album can communicate a great deal about that person's experience. Photo albums tell a story from the creator's perspective. Studying personal documents and recording observations of images, themes, and impressions that emerge from these documents is another method utilized in qualitative research.

**Official documents.** While personal documents communicate information about individuals, official documents such as files, yearbooks, employee policy manuals, academic calendars, student handbooks, memos, newsletters, and organizational Web sites can communicate information about an organization. Suppose, for example, that you have noticed that when you discuss upcoming school events and policies with students or parents, they often are unaware of these events and policies. You have decided to conduct a qualitative study to examine patterns of communication in your school. In addition to interviewing samples of students, parents, and teachers about their experiences, and recording observations, you decide that it will be helpful to study official documents of your school organization. Studying documents such as the school Web site, the school newsletter, the student handbook, and letters to parents may help you to reveal patterns about how information is communicated.

## DATA ANALYSIS

When your data collection is completed, you will find yourself with data that include a journal of observations, transcriptions of interviews, and, in some cases, documents or copies of documents. If you are like most qualitative researchers, you probably already will feel that you intuitively have many answers to your questions. You are likely to feel transformed by your experiences. Your task now, however, is to take a step back from your data and analyze it as objectively as possible.

### Coding Data

The major task of the qualitative researcher at this point is to analyze data by organizing it into categories on the basis of themes, patterns, concepts, or similar features (Neuman, 1997). In order to do this, one uses a process known as *coding* that simply means sifting through data and, as you note recurring themes, patterns, or concepts, labeling pieces of data to indicate what theme, pattern, or concept they reflect.

**Initial examination of data (open coding).** Strauss and Corbin (1990) used the term *open coding* to refer to the process of initially perusing the data and noting themes that are evident. This is a fun, exciting part of the research process in which you pull together all the data you have collected,

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read through it, and have “aha!” moments as you see patterns emerging. You intuitively will come up with tentative names or labels for the themes you observe. There are different ways you can code (label) the themes observed. Some researchers find it helpful to use different color highlighters to note themes. Others find it useful to write the label name near the phrases or passages that reflect that theme.

A theme may be evident in part of an observation, or in a paragraph, sentence, or word of an interview. The goal is to break down and closely examine the data in order to observe and categorize phenomena. As we focus in on a piece of data, we compare it to other pieces of our data in order to see patterns.

**Second sweep of data.** Because we don’t always notice everything upon initial examination, it is useful to go through your data a second time to search for themes you may have missed in your initial exploration. I find it helpful to think of this as the “second sweep” one makes of the kitchen floor. You may think you’ve swept the entire floor, but when you approach it for a second time, you notice crumbs you missed the first time. These crumbs may be an important part of your findings.

**Using a team of coders.** While, as noted earlier, a qualitative researcher is never entirely bias-free, the objectivity of any study can be enhanced by utilizing multiple individuals to code your data. You may find it helpful to involve other interested colleagues or students in your study and use them in the coding process. Having different people search through the data to look for themes and then coming together to discuss findings increases the reliability of the labels you develop.

**Sorting data into categories.** Once you have identified any and all themes and patterns you find in your data, the final step is to sort your data into categories. The themes and patterns are the answers to your questions. They are your findings. The specific words, phrases, statements, and observations are the data that you draw from to support your findings.

To illustrate this process, I will use the metaphor of organizing your closet. Your clothes are your data. As you passed through your closet the first time, you noticed categories of items that included pants, dresses, skirts, shirts, shoes, and other miscellaneous accessories. As you passed through the “data” a second time, you noticed that the categories could be further broken down and defined. Within the shirts, you observed both short-sleeve shirts and long-sleeve shirts. But as you looked again, you noticed that, even more prominent than the length of the shirt, you have some shirts that are quite dressy and others that are much more casual. Within the pants, you noticed dressy pants and casual pants as well. Upon further inspection of miscella-

neous accessories, you observed two patterns—clothing containers and clothing accessories.

Now that you’ve finalized your categories, you can begin organizing your data. So you create a section called “Shirts” and within that section you first place your dressy shirts. You sort these into long- and short-sleeve and then proceed to place your casual shirts into the casual-shirts sections. You go through a similar process with all of your data, sorting out items and placing them into categories. You place your gym bag, purse, and briefcase onto a shelf you have labeled “Clothing Containers.” You place your ties and belts into a section you have labeled “Clothing Accessories.” When someone comes to your house and asks you to explain why you have sectioned your closet so, you have the data in place to support your decision.

**Using a word-processing program to sort data.** In the early days of qualitative research, people would utilize a cut-up-and-put-in-folders approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) in which they used scissors to literally cut up pieces of data and then sorted them into folders designated with the category label. In the 21st century, one can easily use a computer to cut and paste pieces of your data into different sections.

Table 1 provides an illustration of interview data that have been “cut up” and pasted in categories or themes that were observed as the researcher swept through the data. The data are drawn from pilot interviews that were conducted to examine the question “How do girls experience themselves in relation to boys?” As researchers label themes, they ask, “Do I see these patterns in other places in my data?” Researchers look for patterns and themes that occur across both interviews and observations. The goal is to look for connections and patterns in your data.

### **Writing Up Your Findings**

How you write up your findings depends mostly upon who makes up your audience. So you first must determine with whom you are sharing your findings and for what purpose. Is this a report you are writing for the school in order to help effect changes in the school system? Are these findings that you want to share with other school counselors and are planning to submit to a journal? The nature of your medium will, in part, determine how you present your findings. However, as with quantitative research, providing an introduction, a discussion of your research questions, a discussion of the methods you used, and a discussion of your findings and implications will allow your audience to understand what you did, what you found, and how it is relevant to them.

Perhaps the most challenging part of writing up your study is thinking about how to present your

**Table 1. Illustration of Sorting and Coding of Interview Data for Sample Research Question, “How Do Girls Experience Themselves in Relation to Boys?”**

Theme	Cut-and-Pasted Portions of Individual Interviews with Four Girls (M, K, B, and S)
<i>Believe that girls have more freedom than boys</i>	<p><b>M:</b> Girls can basically wear all types of clothes, but boys can't. ...</p> <p><b>K:</b> I can change my mind and they can't. ... It's a woman's prerogative to change her mind. ... For example, I saw a show where these people were getting married, and the girl has always run off every time she tries to get married 'cause she gets scared to death. And nobody really thinks anything about it, and then the guy runs off and they say, "We can't believe you did that."</p>
<i>Experience boys perceiving girls as inferior</i>	<p><b>B:</b> They think you're not as good as them. ... All the boys were being police officers and they wouldn't let us be police officers. ... They think we can't be police officers because we're not as good as them ... like at sports.</p> <p><b>M:</b> Because boys have big egos. ... Alisha scraped up her knee and was crying and stuff ... and that's what I would not call "tough" because she in some ways is a sissy and I think that's what boys expect girls to be like. ... Girls think that boys think they're weaker than them ... like Stewart thinking girls aren't as good as him ... way back when people thought boys were better than girls.</p> <p><b>S:</b> Boys think that girls are very stupid ... trust me ... yes; he said that girls were stupid.</p> <p><b>K:</b> My granddad grew up in a very male chauvinistic family. ... He got home and looked at us and said, "Girls can't shoot." It's like he thinks we can't do anything he thinks a boy should do.</p>
<i>Experience boys excluding them</i>	<p><b>B:</b> All the boys were being police officers and they wouldn't let us be police officers. When we asked why, they refused to give us an answer ... felt left out.</p> <p><b>M:</b> Way back when girls weren't allowed to do the same things boys were. ... We used to go play behind his house in the dirt, but then he got involved with Robert and ... he wouldn't spend any of his time with me and my sisters.</p>
<i>Perceive boys as "weird"</i>	<p><b>M:</b> It's like thinking, "Hmmm, I wonder what their brain is like," and this one director said, "Do all men come with a manual?" And Alisha said, "That would make it a lot easier to understand their weird minds."</p> <p><b>S:</b> I think 'cause boys are nutty. ... And whenever he saw my dad get the mower out, he would run. Boys are weird!</p> <p><b>K:</b> They're crazy. They're nuts.</p>

findings. You may choose to use diagrams to illustrate themes and their relationships. You may use tables to present samples of your data as they relate to your themes. You may choose to discuss your findings strictly in a narrative. Many qualitative studies are published as books. In qualitative research, there is no one way to present and discuss your findings. What's most important is that your questions, methods, findings, and implications are clear to the reader. I have always found that if I am enjoying the process of writing, it is more likely that what I am

doing will be informative and interesting to the reader. It is important to trust yourself and your own creative process when it comes to writing up your findings.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is my hope that this article has provided you with a general understanding of how to conduct qualitative research and perhaps even inspired you to undertake a study you may have been thinking about.

Research in general is a wonderful way to make important discoveries that can enhance our effectiveness as counselors. Counselors can make excellent qualitative researchers. They have developed the skills of building rapport, listening, and observing, which are the main ingredients necessary in the qualitative research process. As I noted earlier, when I tell my students they are going to do qualitative “research,” I am often initially met with gazes of fear and disbelief. Yet, I am always excited to see the look on students’ faces as they turn in their research projects and enthusiastically discuss with me how much fun it was and how much they learned and discovered.

There is a great deal that needs to be discovered in order to maximize our effectiveness as school counselors. Surely you have questions you ask, things you would like to learn about that can enhance your effectiveness in helping students develop. However, the questions may not be readily clear to you. To begin the process of clarifying your questions, it is helpful to notice what you think about. What do you find yourself struggling with, worrying about, or interested in with regard to your profession? As you become aware of what you don’t know, you have a starting place to set out from on a journey of learning.

School counselors are in an excellent position to conduct qualitative research because they are right out there amid the people whom they might study. They are natural participant-observers. I invite you

all to make your own discoveries to share with yourself, your school, the profession, or the world. ■

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## APPENDIX A

### Example of a Page from an Observer's Journal

#### (Observations of elementary school children in the neighborhood)

*Saturday afternoon, 9/15, 4:00 p.m.*

B, who is one of the youngest girls (age 7), takes charge of the play activity. She leads the other girls in deciding what the game is that they will play and the rules of the game. She seems to set the tone of "Let's take charge." The other girls follow her lead.

J, the oldest boy, seems to set the tone for the younger boys. He is quiet and listens and accepts the rules that B and the girls set forth. The other boys are quiet as well and go along with the rules that the girls develop.

**S.O.** I am both surprised and impressed by how confident the girls are. I find myself also feeling sorry for the boys and worrying that they are not expressing themselves.

*5:00 p.m.*

M, K, S, B, and L (ages 10, 11, 8, 7, and 9) are building a clubhouse.

**S.O.** I find myself again being surprised and impressed by the young girls' use of hammers and nails. I wouldn't have expected that (my own bias).

They tell me that that they are going to name the club "Five Tough Girls" and that they will invite the boys to join but won't tell the boys the name of the club. L (age 9) appears to be taking a leadership role in this effort. She has brought over her father's tools: hammers, nails, and saw. She is hammering her part of the clubhouse with great exuberance and might and is very focused on her task.