

# USING PORTRAITURE METHODOLOGY TO TELL STORIES OF TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

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## ABSTRACT

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot pioneered a new qualitative research design, portraiture, in the 1980s. The aim of this integrative review was to analyze the use of portraiture in studies about general secondary education teachers to determine researchers' motivation for choosing portraiture over other similar qualitative research designs such as ethnography and phenomenology, and synthesize the findings to provide a research agenda about the use of portraiture methodology in studies about teachers.

Electronic databases Jstor, Taylor & Francis, and Springer were searched to identify studies about pre-service and in-service general secondary education teachers that used portraiture as the research design. Publications about early childhood education teachers and higher education teachers were excluded. Likewise, studies that portrayed students or schools were excluded. 10 publications were included in the review.

Within the publications, the most frequently reported reason for using portraiture methodology was that it allowed to portray the richness and complexity of teachers' lived experiences in a language that could be understood by readers beyond the scientific community.

For now, portraiture is not as widely utilized as other qualitative research designs. It has potential to become more accepted in educational research, as it allows researchers to share the nuanced and complex stories of teachers' strengths and lived experiences and, thus, drive social change.

**Keywords:** *general secondary education, in-service teachers, integrative review, pre-service teachers, portraiture*

## Introduction

The aim of this integrative literature review is to provide comprehensive understanding (Torraco, 2005) of studies about general secondary education teachers where portraiture is employed as the research design. The author seeks to answer the question of what researchers' motivations are for choosing portraiture methodology over other, more common qualitative research methodologies. A research agenda of two future research questions is proposed as the result of the review.

Portraiture is a qualitative research methodology, which aims to combine “empirical and aesthetic description” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13) to capture, interpret, and describe the lived experiences of the research participants. The rich and evocative language used by the researcher to craft the portraits is what sets this method apart from similar qualitative research methods like phenomenology and ethnography. In education research, being able to communicate complex ideas in an accessible and inclusive way can be a powerful tool for inviting the teachers who are not part of the scientific community to engage with research and participate in the academic discourse about topics that are relevant to researchers and teachers alike (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture subverts the deficit-oriented research tradition, instead focusing on “what is good and healthy” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 10). Due to this, it can appeal to researchers studying marginalized groups, which have been historically studied from a pathology perspective (Brooks, 2017; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Of the ten studies examined in this review, five used one or more theoretical frameworks that are concerned with social change, such as critical theory and its branch, critical pedagogy, ethnic studies, critical race theory, and decolonizing pedagogy. Focusing on the research subjects’ strengths allows the portrait to reflect the “authority, knowledge and wisdom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. XV) of the participants. In education research, this can help provide an insight into the things that make teachers successful, without sacrificing complexity and nuance or omitting the subtle details of school life (Hackmann, 2002).

In Chapman et al.’s (2020) portrait of an arts specialist teacher, the researchers clearly illustrate the difficulties that the teacher encounters in her work, even acknowledging that school can be a site of struggle for teachers and students, while simultaneously demonstrating the teacher’s capability to deal with the myriad of challenges. Similarly, Mascio’s (2018) work shows the demanding process of learning to teach through snapshots of a teacher intern’s and her mentor teacher’s collaboration. The portrait contains both moments of success and frustration, both of which are important parts of learning.

A rich description of context is another strength of portraiture. As Quigley et al. (2015) put it, during the data analysis in some qualitative research methods, the final data can “become disconnected from the context in which they arise” (p. 42), but the contextual information is essential in qualitative research, as it provides a deeper understanding of the research subject’s or target group’s experiences, values and beliefs. In education research, the cultural and socioeconomic factors can have a significant impact on the experiences of educators and students, which makes them essential to the portrait (Brooks, 2017). In Curammeng’s (2020) portraits of teachers, he starts by describing the physical setting of the study, in one case juxtaposing the school building and the fence surrounding it, likening it to a prison. Reyes McGovern (2016) describes the student demographics and the neighborhood of the school where her research subject teaches, linking her professional identity to her community. Details like these contribute to the aesthetic whole of the portraits and their authenticity.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) also talk about personal context, the experiences that have shaped the researcher's perspective and approach. By overtly inserting oneself in the portrait, the researcher encourages the reader to actively participate in the exploration and interpretation process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). For example, Ohito (2019) describes her first contact with her research participant Victoria providing personal context on how their relationship shaped the inquiry and informed the data collection process. Likewise, Curammeng (2020) notes that coming from similar backgrounds as his research subjects helps them recognize the importance of his work.

Researchers using portraiture methodology are primarily concerned with authenticity of the portraits, rather than solely focusing on the validity of the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), however, that does not mean the methodology lacks rigor. In *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997), the authors describe in detail the research process and the "structures that permit the improvisation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 9). In the studies included in this review (i.e., in Gibbs, 2020; Ohito, 2019; Quigley et al., 2015), authors use triangulation of data sources and member checking to ensure the validity of their findings.

## Methodology

To find studies with portraiture as the research design, three databases – Jstor, Taylor & Francis, and Springer – were searched. The initial search offered 1361 results, which were further narrowed down by filtering by subject (education), language (English), type (article) and keyword (teacher). The abstracts of the search findings were analyzed to find articles about pre-service and in-service general secondary education teachers. Studies about early childhood education and higher education were excluded. Similarly, portraits of students, administrators or schools were excluded. In the end, ten articles were selected for a complete reading and included in this review. It is possible there were other studies that fit the selection criteria, but were not identified with key words and, therefore, were not found in the searches.

The selected articles were analyzed and the authors' justifications for choosing portraiture as the research methodology were found in the articles. Four themes:

- a) evocative language
- b) context
- c) social change
- d) search for goodness

were identified and assigned to the justifications.

## Results

Table 1 shows researchers' motivation for choosing portraiture methodology in their studies and the assigned themes. *Evocative language* was assigned if the authors referred to rich and detailed descriptions and the goal of speaking to audiences beyond academia. *Context* was assigned when the authors explicitly mentioned the importance of various

contexts in their portraits. *Social change* was assigned when social justice aspects were mentioned in the justification. *Search for goodness* was assigned in cases when the authors aimed to focus on the successes rather than the shortcomings of their research subjects.

**Table 1** Reasons for Choosing Portraiture Research Design (arranged alphabetically by first author’s surname)

Reference	Justification	Theme
Chapman et al. (2020)	1. “(...) highlight the lived experiences <u>as authentically as possible.</u> ” 2. “to ‘document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 13), recognizing <u>the power of localized theory building (...)</u> ”	Evocative language, context, social change
Curammeng (2020)	1. “to ‘illuminate the <u>complex dimensions of goodness</u> ’ (xvii) for the Filipino American male teachers. (...) <u>summoning historical and political contexts</u> necessary for critical qualitative inquiry.”	Search for goodness, context
Gibbs (2020)	1. “(...) to convey the data gained in a more <u>rich and evocative way</u> than a traditional explanation of findings (...) The detail describing what choices teachers are making, how they are making them, and what the <u>consequences of these choices</u> are is of incredible importance.”	Evocative language, social change
Lynn & Jennings (2009)	1. “The notion of <u>searching for goodness</u> informs our move as researchers to go beyond the traditional emphasis on pathology (...)”	Search for goodness
Mascio (2018)	1. “(...) taking into account the person’s <u>thinking</u> as well as the person’s <u>sociocultural context.</u> ” 2. “Portraiture combines common ethnographic methods of naturalistic observation, interviews, and document analysis with the self-identified perspective of the researcher. Considering <u>the complex and dynamic nature of teacher learning</u> , its process can best be captured from such a nuanced “inside view.””	Context, search for goodness
Ohito (2019)	1. “As a researcher, I am concerned with “documenting their voices and visions – <u>their authority, knowledge, and wisdom</u> ” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, p. xv)” 2. “(...) portraiture is concerned with <u>social change</u> . This is motivation for eschewing the alienating opaqueness characteristic of academic writing (...)” 3. “(...) <u>honoring subjectivity and situatedness.</u> ”	Search for goodness, social change, context
Quigley et al. (2015)	1. “(...) <u>communities share knowledge</u> through sharing stories, and portraiture (...) <u>includes participants</u> in this endeavor.” 2. “(...) relates the story to wider contexts in society and culture.” 3. “Narrative <u>details are often lost</u> in other forms of qualitative inquiry (...) in which data are reduced to increasingly smaller segments and become disconnected from the context in which they arise.”	Social change, context, evocative language
Reyes McGovern (2016)	1. “(...) <u>nuanced ways to understand</u> the lived realities of activist educators engaged in visible teaching by complicating daily acts of resistance and change.” 2. “(...) <u>pushes back on dominant</u> ideologies that insist on curricular standardization.”	Evocative language, search for goodness, social change

Reference	Justification	Theme
Valdez (2018)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “To understand the <u>dynamic multilayers</u> of the elementary classroom (...)”</li> <li>2. “(...) to pushback on the sterilization of teacher experiences, highlighting the chaos of the classroom, where theory meets application (...)”</li> </ol>	Context, social change
Yazzie-Mintz (2007)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “I <u>shift the paradigm</u> from examining pathology of teacher practice (what’s not working) to describing what informs their practice and discussing <u>what can be learned</u> from their reflective teaching (...)”</li> <li>2. “(...) providing <u>rich description</u> of a person, an event, or understanding (...)”</li> <li>3. “(...) research findings can be shared in a way that <u>invites Native educators, parents, communities and students to speak about education together</u> in public discourse (...)”</li> </ol>	Social change, search for goodness, evocative language

The themes illustrate that the authors’ reasoning for choosing portraiture methodology aligned with Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2005) initial goal to challenge the limits of understanding through interpretive research by bridging the gap between narrative as art and science.

In seven out of ten articles, the social change theme was identified. Words and phrases such as *push back*, *power*, and *paradigm shift* were considered signifiers of the theme. In six justifications, the search for goodness theme could be found with phrases such as *what can be learned*, *complex dimensions of goodness*, *nuanced ways to understand* and others. Likewise, the context theme was identified in six articles, signified by words and phrases like *multilayers*, *situatedness*, *society*, *culture* and others. Rich language was mentioned in five articles; words such as *authentic*, *evocative*, *details* etc. were used by the authors in their justifications. It should be noted that while the author of this article chose to identify four distinct themes, the themes are related to one another and all four are present in Lawrence-Lightfoot’s and Davis’s (1997) definitions of portraiture methodology.

## Discussion

Qualitative research can serve the purpose of producing knowledge about the problem that is being studied, and it can be a means for catalyzing social change (Flick, 2007). Through an insider’s perspective and a rich narrative, portraitists aim to do both. In his article about the viability of portraiture methodology in education leadership research, Hackmann (2002) concluded that school leaders could be unwilling to implement findings from research in practice for two reasons: lack of faith that the findings could be applied in their schools and insufficient knowledge to read research and understand the implications. This argument could be extended to other stakeholders in education – teachers, parents, and students. With its accessible language, portraiture methodology can facilitate knowledge sharing within education communities.

Besides the social change portraitists strive to achieve with their research, it should be noted that portraiture is a boundary-breaking research methodology in itself. Lawrence-Lightfoot's aim to subvert the positivist research tradition is evident not only in the literary language portraitists use, but also in the small samples of the inquiry, often focusing on one participant to truly let their stories be "seen—fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6).

The success of a portrait relies heavily on the relationship between the researcher and the research subject. The relationship between the two is dialectical, but the "power remains with [the participant]" (Quigley et al., 2015, p. 44). As established previously, portraiture is chosen to study agents from marginalized groups due to its focus on goodness, rather than deficiency. Because portraiture requires the researcher to spend a significant amount of time with the research participant, they can gradually obtain "insider" status that allows them to learn information that would not typically be offered to the outsider. For teacher-researchers using portraiture methodology to study fellow teachers, they might come to the field as an insider. This perspective can be valuable, but it also presents its own set of challenges, namely, researcher bias and research ethics. Using methodologies as intimate as portraiture, the researcher must be all the more vigilant to act with integrity and prioritize the best interest of the research participants, especially if they are researching marginalized groups. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) wrote that insider research "needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position" (p. 139).

## Research Agenda

As a result of this review, two questions for future research are proposed. Firstly, in what ways could ethical concerns such as ensuring participant anonymity be mitigated in portraits of teachers? Ohito (2019) wrote about the challenge of ensuring anonymity of her research subject considering the abundance of personal and situation-specific data she had collected during her inquiry. Although member checking partially solves this issue by allowing the research participants to share only information that they feel comfortable sharing, researchers still need to consider the potential implications of their work, especially in small communities, and consider the power dynamic between themselves and the research subject.

Secondly, could portraiture be used as a tool to promote teacher self-reflection skills and metacognition (as seen in Valdez's (2020) work, where she used a combination of portraiture and autoethnography to explore her work in the classroom)? It is known that reflecting on one's practice is necessary for professional improvement (OECD, 2020) and could be useful both for pre-service and in-service teachers as a means to promote the development of teachers' professional identity.

## Conclusion

The research question guiding this review was what researchers' motivations were for choosing portraiture methodology as opposed to other, more widely recognized qualitative research methodologies. It was found that portraitists working in the field of education research were primarily concerned with research as a tool of social change that allowed focusing on teachers' strengths and what could be learned from them, without minimizing the impact of sociocultural, historical and political contexts that influence classroom life. In addition to that, portraiture allowed for the data to be conveyed in the form of a compelling, accessible narrative that could be shared with and understood by audiences beyond the scientific community. As a result of this review, a research agenda was developed by the author, proposing two questions for future research.

## About Author

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