

Using Case Study in Education Research

Lorna Hamilton &
Connie Corbett-Whittier



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For Lorna's daughter Katie, and for Connie's children Matthew,
Christopher, Benjamin, and Frank

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INTRODUCTION

Our purpose in writing this book was to help those who are comparatively new to case study to begin to find ways to understand, engage with and define their own approaches to this genre. We have deliberately written using a semi-formal tone and speak directly to you, the reader, as part of our aim to make this book as accessible as possible.

Case study research faces new challenges in the early part of the twenty-first century, where it is frequently positioned as a research approach which tends towards the atheoretical and which lacks warrant. We argue that case study research is an essential component of educational research rather than a luxury, and that there are achievable ways of making better use of this rich seam of evidence.

This book provides both practical advice and an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the research approach, enabling the reader to build expertise on the principles and practice of case study research as well as possible theoretical frameworks. The reader's journey through the text is supported through the combination of accessibly written theory, practical guidance, and boxed sections of text that offer richly descriptive anecdotes of established researchers' encounters with case study approaches. Guidance towards further relevant resources and readings are listed at the end of each chapter as well as some suggestions for extending your reading and engaging with topics in greater depth.

The book also aims to encourage the building of collaborations and community: evidence has shown the importance of shared communities of practice and collaboration when attempting to innovate and encourage active reflection. We strive to encourage this community aspiration through

suggesting means by which communities of researchers may be built; and through addressing ways in which such communities may generate spaces for discussion and collaboration.

We have attempted to write about, what we see as, the essential aspects of case study and the case study process in order to support readers in beginning to work with this genre. Our hope is that it will encourage you to gain confidence in carrying out and sharing, high-quality case study research.

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Lorna Hamilton
Connie Corbett-Whittier

SECTION 1

THE CASE STUDY APPROACH IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

Chapter 1

Defining case study in education research

Chapter 2

Ideas as the foundation for case study

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING CASE STUDY IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

Key points



- Personal definitions of case study
- Development of case study use in education
- Intrinsic versus instrumental case study
- Models of case study – making choices

Introducing case study

We believe that it is possible to use case study in educational research to enhance our understanding of contexts, communities and individuals. By helping to provide an accessible text which guides you through both the practicalities of carrying out research and the deeper issues surrounding them, powerful progress can be made in enabling new researchers to make constructive use of a research approach which can begin to capture the complexity of learning and teaching and the contexts and communities surrounding them. However, it is perhaps only by looking critically

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at the choices we make about case study, the ways in which we go about using it to shape data collection and analysis and the clarity with which we report case study, that we can argue for the quality and value of this approach to research in educational settings.

Prior to investigating definitions and changes in case study use in education, it can be helpful to reflect on your existing beliefs about what case study may mean and what shape it may have taken in your experiences up to now. Retain any notes from this preliminary activity so that you can revisit them as you progress through the book.

Activity 1.1



What are your assumptions about case study?

Before you read this first chapter, consider your own understanding of case study based on your reading and experiences to date – these may come from the media, from reading or personal experiences.

- What do you think are the key characteristics of case study based on your reflections?
- Is there anything distinctive about case study? If yes, what might this be?
- Write a brief paragraph outlining your conclusions.

Retain these accounts, as you may wish to return to them as you develop your understanding of case study to help you reflect on your changing perspective. Now, to establish an understanding of how case study has developed in research within education contexts, this next section considers the political influences key figures who have played a part in shaping case study use.

Developing use of case study in education contexts

In order to understand current work around case study use in education, it is important to consider, briefly, how this has changed and developed over the last half century. Case study use in education research began to gain great prominence in the 1970s in the UK and the USA as a reaction against the dominant positivist model which focused on measurement

and statistical analysis as the means of attaining valid and valuable insights into schools and classrooms (Elliott and Lukeš, 2008). In the UK, Lawrence Stenhouse was a particularly strong proponent of the use of case study and provides justification for case study as a means of gaining greater understanding within education communities (1978, 1979) and we will consider his particular contribution and arguments as well as developing issues around case study work in education.

Despite, the ebb and flow of politicians and policy, in the UK and USA in particular, where in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, simplistic and often narrow notions of what works and what reflects 'good' research have emerged (Oancea and Pring, 2008), case study continues to play an important role in education research. In the following section, we consider the emerging contexts for case study development, particularly in the UK and USA, key individuals establishing their own versions of case study and the frequently contested concept of case study itself.

Policy perspectives on research and case study

The emerging focus on case study as a means of carrying out education research took place through the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the UK and North America. To some extent, it could be argued that this was a reaction against the heavily quantitative bias in research in education up to that point and the primacy of measurement as a means of capturing meaningful data. Oancea and Pring (2008) chart the perceived policy desire for answers and evidence which can have universal applications during the 1990s and early twenty-first century in North America and the UK. They highlight the increasingly critical commentary of policymakers with regard to education research and the focus on a narrow orthodoxy (2008) of research which was concerned with 'what works', and the superiority of, for example, experimental designs and with 'scientific' research, particularly randomized control trials. In the USA, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, 2001 focused strongly on a narrow kind of scientific research as a basis for understanding and improving education. It could be argued that these approaches have assumed that there is a universally applicable model of research that ignores the complexity of education settings and the significance of the diverse individuals and organizations that enhance that complexity. This 'scientific' approach is also in danger of seriously disempowering those at the heart of the education process while failing to recognize the value of different forms of engagement with issues in education. In the face of such challenges to education research, case study emerges as a possible champion that might be able to deepen

understanding in real contexts rather than simply providing decontextualized 'evidence'. A striving for clear definitions of case study and modes of working within this genre in order to ensure quality has been the focus of much writing and debate over the last 30 plus years. In the next section, we consider some of the key figures who have been important voices in the development of case study.

People and case study

Stenhouse (1978, 1979) was an early supporter of case study in education research; he felt strongly that this was a means of capturing complexity but that a key component of such an approach had to be that it was verifiable. There was confidence in what might be discovered and used to enhance decision-making. Emerging approaches to case study were also being impacted by notions of ethnography which had its roots in anthropological research. Indeed, some researchers viewed case study as essentially ethnography. Stenhouse (1979) challenged such a view stating that originally ethnographic research had relied on certain assumptions that were not applicable in education. These assumptions were that the researcher would lack familiarity with the contexts and situations to be studied, that researchers would tend to draw on theory from ethnography rather than education, and that they would not normally make copies of field notes available. In education case studies, on the other hand, he argued that educationalists tend to be familiar with settings where research occurs and that there should be limits to theory specific to other disciplines being imposed on education. Finally, he argues that for research to be verifiable, field notes should be available as an important record of the study. Consideration of the possible significance of a case record as a means of enhancing verification and perceived quality in case study, is continued in Chapter 6.

Robert Yin's work (1983) was one of the few books on case study available in the 1980s and he writes from a broad social science perspective rather than an education specific one. His background is in quantitative work and his view of case study reflects this as he attempts to make it fit a quantitative model of research. Characterizing case study as a method, he has identified (2009) three forms of case study: **exploratory**, **descriptive** and **explanatory**. The first of these, exploratory, is simply characterized as the collection of data and subsequent looking for patterns in the data. Next, descriptive sets out a consideration of possible theories to frame the study and research questions to focus it. Finally, explanatory takes the previous two forms a step further as it proceeds to answer or

explain the how or why of the issue, situation, person or group being studied. He also tends to try to impose quantitative concepts of validity on case study research. We would argue that these concepts of validity are too simplistic for educational settings and that different definitions of quality need to be considered for case study. Later in this chapter, we suggest alternative approaches to case study models and how these might be defined.

Sharan Merriam (1988) is somewhat unusual in that her definition of case study has evolved over the years. In her first book, she focused on the end product of case study: 'A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit' (Merriam, 1988: 21). Ten years and much research later, she revised her definition to focus on the case rather than the outcome, agreeing with Smith (1978) and Stake (1995) that the most important aspect of case study is determining that the case is a bounded unit. She writes, the case is 'a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can "fence in" what I am going to study' (Merriam, 1998: 27). She admits, however, that case study may be defined as the process used, the case or bounded unit, or the end product and that all may be appropriate definitions (p. 34).

Merriam also describes three types of case study: **particularistic**, **descriptive** and **heuristic**. Particularistic focuses on a specific event or phenomenon. She suggests that it is an especially appropriate approach for practical problems, 'for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice' (1998: 29). Descriptive case study focuses on **thick description** of whatever is being studied. Thick description may be defined as 'the complete, literal, description of the entity being investigated' (pp. 29–30). Such studies may be longitudinal and study the ways in which many variables affect each other. The intent of heuristic case study is to increase understanding of the case: 'They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known' (p. 30).

Within the three types of case study, Merriam describes several designs borrowed from other disciplines and often used in education research: **ethnographic**, **historical**, **psychological** and **sociological**. Ethnographic case study tends to focus on institutional culture or particular groups, teaching methods, or behaviours, whereas historical studies are usually descriptive, tracing the development or evolution of such phenomena over time. Psychological case studies focus on a single person, whereas sociological studies address the larger social structure and its effects on individuals (Merriam, 1998: 34–7). Merriam also describes case studies based on the intent of your research: **descriptive**, **interpretive**

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or **evaluative**. In these scenarios, the methods of inquiry and analysis depend on what your purpose is for conducting the study (pp. 38–39).

Robert Stake does not characterize case study as method but instead as an object of choice with regard to the particularity to be studied. He sets out to shape the case as a portrayal that highlights its uniqueness while it encourages the readers of the case to a new understanding of their own context and processes. His work is accessible and thoughtful and can help to develop a deeper understanding of case study and so is one of our recommendations for further study. Unlike Yin (2009), he draws upon a broad social science approach which is based strongly on qualitative methods and ways of thinking obtained from ethnography and biography. He likens case study to creating a work of art:

Finishing a case study is the consummation of a work of art ... it is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers. (Stake, 1995: 136)

Stake's emphasis on the qualitative and the interpretation of the case contrasts sharply with Yin's (2009) scientific approach and highlights the different approaches that can be taken to defining case study, exploring how it can be carried out and how it can be understood. This can seem puzzling to researchers wanting to learn about case study but what is heartening about Stake's writing is that he emphasizes the need for each researcher to define case study anew bearing in mind what he/she has learned about possible manifestations of the case.

Activity 1.2



Review the views of case study illustrated so far and assess the extent to which they are similar and in what ways they differ.

- How helpful are these forms of case study?
- Which would you choose to draw upon and why?

Andrew Pollard's focus during the 1980s and 1990s was on using case study as a longitudinal strategy, intent on capturing the nature of learning. It is Pollard's complex, longitudinal studies that, in our view, helped to pave the way for modern case study work in educational settings as

he worked with parents, pupils and teachers, in schools and at home and using multiple forms of data collection to understand the complexity of the world inhabited by young people. He talks about the evolution of his approach to longitudinal case study:

I thought it was rather strange that sociology didn't bother itself with learning per se. I thought what would it look like if there was a more sociological account of learning. My Masters and PhD were done part time when I was teaching in schools so in a way working in a school and having long term relationships with people in them was how I felt comfortable and I felt that one got a kind of knowledge that wasn't available from more detached methods. And since I wanted to understand the social influences on learning which you would expect to be holistic, complicated and multi-layered, so it seemed to me that getting close to community and families was a necessary part of looking at that issue. (Andrew Pollard in conversation, 2011)

Unlike Stenhouse's original stance, Pollard embraces ethnography as his basis for case study. In his account of case studies of pupils aged 4–7 years, Pollard made use of multiple perspectives (teachers, parents and pupils) as well as multiple forms of data collection over three years in a longitudinal study. In addition to the longitudinal nature of his case studies, he also constructed a complex range of data collection tools that would allow him to produce very rich accounts of children's learning and social world: classroom field notes, classroom photos, video recordings in the classroom, playground field notes and video recordings, pupil work, pupil interviews, review of friendship groupings, teacher interviews, teacher documents, school event field notes, school documents and head teacher interviews. Data collection took place on a cyclical basis across three years. For new researchers, we wouldn't recommend such a complex range of data collection but it is an approach that can inspire others to think creatively about what might be included. Pollard's background in teaching as well as academia and his support for the idea of the reflective practitioner and practitioner researcher, reinforce his understanding of the complexities of schools and learning. His case study work uses this understanding to construct and interpret rich case studies that can inform our own perspectives on learning.

As a former primary teacher himself, he was concerned that the changes in education policy of the 1980s in England had led to an emphasis on accountability without a real understanding of classrooms and learning. His aim in generating longitudinal case studies was to, 'identify and trace the major social influences on children's approach to classroom learning' (Pollard with Filer, 1996: xi). Practitioner research, we would argue,

progresses naturally from the work of people like Andrew Pollard, focusing on understanding the complexities of the individuals, variables and interactions that are essential components of education communities and institutions. He also points the way forward in building longitudinal studies (which we will look at in more detail in the following pages) as a means of enhancing understanding and quality in the research process.

What kind of case study?

Contested concepts of case study – method, genre or approach?

In the Social Sciences Yin – (1983) and Stake (1995) – and in education-specific work, notably Andrew Pollard (1987, 1996), case study has evolved as an approach to research which can capture rich data giving an in depth picture of a bounded unit or an aspect of that unit. However, confusingly, in many research methods texts, you may find some subtle and not so subtle differences with regard to the nature of case study and whether it is a method, methodology or research design. Work by Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007) point out that case study is not prescriptive in its structure, content and data collection tools and so can't be defined in these terms. We would instead argue that case study should be seen as an **approach to research** or, as Elliott and Lukeš (2008) argue, as a **genre**, that aims to capture the complexity of relationships, beliefs and attitudes within a bounded unit, using different forms of data collection and is likely to explore more than one perspective. **Case study as a research genre** could then be defined as a way of **framing** a particularity (bounded unit), providing **guiding principles** for the research design, process, quality and communication (Swales, 2004).

Debate is on-going about whether case study can be characterized as method, strategy, approach or genre but it is important to be aware of the nature of this debate and where you may decide to locate your own work. If you wish to delve into the nature of these debates and differences in more detail, explore the reading list at the end of this chapter. However, in the end, having read the varied and, at times, conflicting ideas about case study, you must clarify what **you** believe case study to be, to establish the guiding principles for your work and to justify this to yourself and future readers.

At times, it can seem as if research students grasp for some kind of coherence for their work by calling it a case and hoping that this will provide a way of holding everything together without real thought as to the nature of the case. Choosing case study should be done thoughtfully and carefully as a result of reflecting on your research aims or purposes

and your research questions. To begin with, our intent is to discuss some essential aspects of the kinds of case study that might be possible and, in doing this, to give you the opportunity to reflect on your reasons for choosing this approach to research.

Key elements of case study:

- Case study as Research Genre
- Bounded unit – a person, a group, an institution or organization
- Located within personal, professional, local and national communities
- Involves interactions, communications, relationships and practices between the case and the wider world and vice versa
- Focus on collecting rich data – capturing the complexity of case
- Data may be collected over extended periods with repeated collections or may be collected during an intensive but short period of time
- Requires spending time within the world of those being researched
- Uses a variety of data collection tools (interviews, observations, reflective journals and others) and different perspectives (child, teacher, parent, researcher) to provide depth
- Employs two or more forms of data collection tool and/or two or more perspectives. This helps to triangulate the data and reinforces the legitimacy of the conclusions drawn.

Activity 1.3



- To what extent does the above list reflect your existing ideas around case study?

Intrinsic versus instrumental (or delimited)

Frequently, you will come across case study definitions that describe the case as a bounded unit that captures the essential notion of coherence and limitations. However, if we are looking for clarity on what this actually means and how we might fine-tune our thinking around case studies, we need to look at Robert Stake's work (1995) as he begins to grapple with the differing nature and purposes of case study work in the Social Sciences. He divides case study into two main forms, *intrinsic* or *instrumental*; where *intrinsic case study* attempts to capture the case in its entirety and the purpose of the research is to understand more fully the person,

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department or institution that makes up the case. *Instrumental*, on the other hand, focuses on an aspect, concern or issue of the case. In many ways, a full school inspection or accreditation visit could be thought of as an attempt to capture the case (the school) through the use of analysis of policies and resources, observations, interviews and questionnaires.

Activity 1.4



Reflection points:

- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the above intrinsic approach to case study generation?
- What is its purpose? How might this affect participants' responses? Whose views are missing?
- In what ways will the different approaches to collecting data affect the responses given?

On the other hand, an instrumental case study is concerned more with a key focus or concern about the case. For example, the case studies of four distinct schools detailed in Table 1.1 were concerned with the ways in which teachers, parents and young people understood and experienced the concept of ability.

Table 1.1

Comprehensive schools – all comers normally drawing on children from local catchment area (surrounding area)	Independent schools (private – education paid for by parents)
<p>St Thomas's High School Mixed SES (Socio-economic status) of pupils Faith school (Roman Catholic) Limited success in external high stakes testing taking place around ages of 16 and 17 years old</p>	<p>Longhurst Informal interview of pupils and parents for entry Comparatively new Success in external high stakes testing across a broad range of grades from top to pass</p>
<p>Macdonald High School Mixed SES but increasingly middle class Non-denominational High degree of success in external high stakes testing</p>	<p>Merchant Selection formal/by assessment of ability Long established High degree of success in external high stakes testing achieving high proportion of top grades</p>