

## Case studies in educational research

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## Summary

Case study is often seen as a means of gathering together data and giving coherence and limit to what is being sought. But how can we define case study effectively and ensure that it is thoughtfully and rigorously constructed? This resource shares some key definitions of case study and identifies important choices and decisions around the creation of studies. It is for those with little or no experience of case study in education research and provides an introduction to some of the key aspects of this approach: from the all important question of what exactly is case study, to the key decisions around case study work and possible approaches to dealing with the data collected. At the end of the resource, key references and resources are identified which provide the reader with further guidance.

## Why case study?

*\*What does case study do and what kind of data can it provide?*

*\*What is the purpose of your research and how can a case study approach help in fulfilling the aims of the project?*

Firstly, a case study approach is often used to build up a rich picture of an entity, using different kinds of data collection and gathering the views, perceptions, experiences and/or ideas of diverse individuals relating to the case. This approach provides what is termed 'rich data', as it can give the researcher in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences within this particular context.

The use of multiple perspectives and different kinds of data collection is characteristic of high quality case study and lends weight to the validity of the findings. The use of two or more forms of data collection and/or the use of two or more perspectives is known as ‘triangulation’. Through triangulating data and/or perspectives, it is possible to gain a fuller and more robust picture of the case, enhancing claims to quality. Clarity over what case study is and what information and insights it might provide should then help to inform further research choices. For example, does the researcher wish to focus on depth of understanding through a single case or a number of cases, or does she/he wish to combine, for example, a wider overview of schools within the Local Authority in conjunction with a case study of one school to provide balance, breadth and depth? The key at this point is to reflect upon the essential qualities of case study and whether it connects with your research purpose and questions.

### **Defining the case to be used**

Case study, then, focuses on the idea of a bounded unit which is examined, observed, described and analysed in order to capture key components of the ‘case’. The case might be, for example, a person, a group of particular professionals, an institution, a local authority etc. Robert Stake (1995) describes this kind of case study as ‘holistic’, it captures the essentials of what constitutes this person/this role etc. Stake also offers an alternative form of case study, and this is the model which is used most frequently by those in education: an instrumental or delimited case study (Stake, p3, 1995). In this latter form, the focus is usually on an issue, problem or dilemma etc within the case. The case, therefore, still exists as a bounded unit but the research focus does not attempt to provide a broad inclusive portrait. Instead, research processes are shaped by the particular aspect of the case which is of interest. Further conceptualisations of case study can be found in a forthcoming resource in 2012 (Hamilton, Corbett-Whittier and Fowler).

### **Choosing your case**

Having determined that case study is right for your research, and having clarified the kind of case study you wish to undertake, the next step is to identify who or what the case will be. For example, if you have decided that your case study will focus upon a school-based issue, the next step will be decide how the school, or schools if more than one case study is desirable, will be chosen. As the case study work in this instance is qualitative in nature and limited in number, it is not possible or desirable to achieve sampling which is representative of a particular population. Instead, a purposive sampling which highlights schools with specific profiles might be helpful.

An example of this from my own work illustrates possible choices. My project focused on the constructions of ability in comprehensive and independent schools. Since the focus was on gaining an in-depth picture of the construct of ability in relation to the institutions and the individuals within them, only a small number of schools could be involved in the creation of these

instrumental case studies (Hamilton, 2002). It was necessary to reflect on how schools might be chosen. When considering the two systems, it was clear that the comprehensive schools were operating under the idea of all-comer, equal opportunity institutions but there were some major differences. One key distinction was faith or non-denominational character; the other was the socio-economic status of the families sending children to schools. The schools chosen from the comprehensive system reflected these profiles – a catholic comprehensive with a very mixed intake and high number of children entitled to free school meals and a comprehensive with a mixed intake but with a strong middle class intake. A similar review of the varied schools available in the independent system, highlighted key elements such as assessment of performance for entry/ informal interview for entry; highly competitive/ focus on nurture etc Since the project was to investigate constructions of ability, an additional component of this purposive sampling was the exam performance/profile of the school. In turn, this led to 4 schools being identified as having particular profiles. These choices provided case study schools with distinctive profiles and illustrated particular school types.

Comprehensive schools	Independent schools
Mixed SES of pupils Faith school (Catholic) Limited success in exam league tables	Informal interview pupils and parents for entry Comparatively new Success in exam league tables across a broad range of grades
Mixed SES but increasingly middle class Non-denominational High degree of success in exam league tables	Selection formal / by assessment of ability Long established High degree of success in exam league tables towards upper grades

A summary of key choices/decisions so far

1. Issue/problem
2. Creating a research aim and questions
3. Holistic or instrumental case study approach
4. Who are the key individuals who might participate in order to answer your research questions?
5. Data collection tools – which are most likely to provide you with the kind of data which will help you to answer your research questions? Some compromises may be necessary in terms of timescale, accessibility of participants etc
6. ‘Sampling’ careful consideration of choices and key aspects which might have relevance for the project
7. Risk assessment: potential problems and how you might deal with them. Possible compromises/back up cases

### **Analysing and reporting the case**

Having collected all the data for the case study and drawing also on any field notes you have made, analysing the data can seem quite daunting. There are certainly a number of ways to approach this and the references at the end of this paper will show authors whose work you will find helpful in this sphere. However, a starting point and straightforward approach might involve going back to your research questions and, taking each in turn, exploring the data and the possible answers, problems and conflicts which participants face in trying to respond. This can be a slightly messy process or at least one where it is necessary to go to and fro between research questions and data many times, exploring the commonalities and differences, the themes and exceptions which emerge (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To further enhance quality, you might ask a colleague to read your work and access the data from the case in order to review key elements (Bassegy, 1999).

After developing the analysis further, and having spent some time verifying the validity of the findings, it is important to consider the extent to which this work can be generalised, if at all. One of the weaknesses, it is alleged, of case study is that the focus on depth, does not allow people to generalise findings and so may be of little value. However, this view of generalisation needs to be

questioned with regard to this kind of research. Stake (p7, 1995) argues that case study work may not transform understanding but instead it may refine it. He highlights commonality as a powerful element:

[Many find] a commonality of process and situation. It startles us all to find our own perplexities in the lives of others. (Op cit)

Bassey's work (1999) suggests that fuzzy generalisation might be a means of generalising from a case in terms of typicalities:

... possible, or likely, or unlikely that what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere (op cit, p12)

Ensure that there is a clear sense of how the project will deal with such issues when reporting case study, taking care to provide a clear outline of the decisions made and why, so that others can gauge the quality of the work. Reporting the case as a whole is often advised, before looking at the specific groups within the case being researched as this approach helps the reader to gain a sense of the bounded unit in relation to the dilemma etc being investigated. The reporting of case study may take different forms but for the purposes of this resource, consideration is briefly given to descriptive and analytical forms. A descriptive report would be built around a portrait of the case, drawing on rich detail and supported by clear evidence. However, an analytical account of a case builds upon a critical analysis of the stories generated about the people, relationships and purposes of the case. The former suggests a still image captured while the latter reflects an attempt to engage with moving images and actions.

## References and further resources

There are a number of case study specific books available although they usually have a broad remit as they look across social sciences. An exception is the excellent book by Michael Bassey (1999) which focuses on educational settings. Another author, who writes extremely well and gives helpful insights into case study is Robert Stake. Both texts are in bold below. All the issues presented in this resource are discussed in more detail in Hamilton, Corbett-Whittier and Fowler (forthcoming).

You may find as you explore the many methods texts available that writers may hold conflicting views which can be confusing. Nonetheless, the important thing to remember is that you will reach a point where you can evaluate the views given and finally establish your own decisions around case study.

## Case study

Bassey, M. (1999). *Case Study Research in educational settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brown, P.A. (2008) 'A Review of the Literature on Case Study Research' in *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 1/1.

Hamilton, L.C. 2002. *Constructing pupil identity: Personhood and ability*. *British Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 4: 591–602.

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Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*. London: Sage.

Swanborn, P. (2010) *Case Study Research*. London: Sage.

Thomas, G. (2011) *How to do your case study*. London: Sage.

Yin, R. (2009) *Applications of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

#### Research methods

Cresswell, J. 1998. *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. London: Sage.

Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y. 1998. *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. London: Sage.

May, T. (1993) *Social Research: Issues, methods and process*, Milton Keynes: OUP

Miles, M., and A.M. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage

#### Ethics

British Educational Research Association (2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational*

Research. Available online at: [www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php)

Coming in 2012

Hamilton,L., Corbett-Whittier,C., Fowler,Z. Using Case Studies in Education Research.  
London:Sage.