Case Studies as Qualitative Research

Most teachers, graduate students, and researchers in education and other applied social sciences have encountered case studies in their training or work. But while many have heard of case study research, there is little consensus on what constitutes a case study or how this type of research is done. Some of the confusion stems from the fact that, as I pointed out in Chapter One, case study is often equated with fieldwork, ethnography, participant observation, qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry, grounded theory, or exploratory research. The use of the terms *case history, case record,* and *case method,* sometimes in conjunction with *case study,* further confuses the issue.

Case studies, especially qualitative case studies, are prevalent throughout the field of education. From Wolcott's (1973) classic case study, *The Man in the Principal's Office,* to case studies of students, programs, schools, innovations, teachers, and policies, this type of research has illuminated educational practice for nearly thirty years.

The prevalence of qualitative case study research and the lingering uncertainty about its nature and appropriate usage suggest that a chapter like this one is needed—a chapter devoted to presenting case study research as one type of qualitative research. The first section of the chapter defines the case study and describes when it is appropriate as a research design. A second section reviews the various types of case studies, including multisite and comparative designs. In the final section, the strengths and weaknesses of this type of qualitative research are evaluated.

Case Study Defined

Part of the confusion surrounding case studies is that the *process* of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (the case) and the product of this type of investigation. Yin (1994), for example, defines case study in terms of the research process. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Stake (1994, 1995), however, focuses on trying to pinpoint the *unit of study*—the case. In the first edition of this book, I defined case study in terms of its *end product:* "A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). Wolcott (1992) also sees it as "an end-product of field-oriented research" (p. 36) rather than a strategy or method.

Of course each of these approaches reveals something about case studies and contributes to a general understanding of the nature of this kind of research. However, in the ten years since the first edition of this book, I have concluded that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case. Smith's (1978) notion of the case as a *bounded system* comes closest to my understanding of what defines this type of research. Stake (1995) adds that "the case is an integrated system" (p. 2). Both definitions allow me to see the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can "fence in" what I am going to study. The case then, could be a person such as a student, a teacher, a principal; a program; a group such as a class, a school, a community; a specific policy; and so on. Miles and Huberman (1994) think of the case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). They graphically present it as a circle with a heart in the center. The heart is the focus of the study, while the circle "defines the edge of the case: what will not be studied" (p. 25).

If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case. One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite amount of time for

observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case. Stake (1995) clarifies this distinction as follows. "The case could be a child. It could be a classroom of children or a particular mobilization of professionals to study a childhood condition. The case is one among others. . . . An innovative program may be a case. All the schools in Sweden can be a case. But a relationship among schools, the reasons for innovative teaching, or the policies of school reform are less commonly considered a case. These topics are generalities rather than specifics. The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing" (p. 2).

The bounded system, or case, might be selected because it is an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis. It would be, in Adelman, Jenkins, and Kemmis's (1983) words, "*an instance drawn from a class*" (p. 3, emphasis in the original). If the researcher is interested in the process of mainstreaming children into regular classes, for example, he or she could select a particular instance of mainstreaming to study in depth. An instance could be an individual child, a specific program, or a school. A case might also be selected because it is intrinsically interesting; a researcher could study it to achieve as full an understanding of the phenomenon as possible. Choosing to study a college counseling program for returning adult students is an example of selecting a case for its intrinsic interest. In both situations—the mainstreaming process and the counseling program—the case is identified as a bounded system. "The most straightforward examples of 'bounded systems' are those in which the boundaries have a common sense obviousness, e.g. an individual teacher, a single school, or perhaps an innovatory programme" (Adelman, Jenkins, and Kemmis, 1983, p. 3).

Unlike experimental, survey, or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study, although certain techniques are used more than others. Since this book focuses on qualitative research, data-gathering and analysis techniques characteristic of qualitative research are emphasized. The decision to focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and

interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. Case study has in fact been differentiated from other research designs by what Cronbach (1975) calls "interpretation in context" (p. 123). By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study focuses on holistic description and explanation. As Yin (1994) observes, case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context.

Several writers have advanced definitions of the case study that are congruent with this discussion. Wilson (1979), for example, conceptualizes the case study as a process "which tries to describe and analyze some entity in qualitative, complex and comprehensive terms not infrequently as it unfolds over a period of time" (p. 448). MacDonald and Walker's (1977) definition of a case study as "the examination of an instance in action" (p. 181) is congruent with Guba and Lincoln's (1981) statement that the purpose is "to reveal the properties of the class to which the instance being studied belongs" (p. 371). Becker (1968) defines the purposes of a case study as twofold, that is, "to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study" and "to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process" (p. 233).

The case study can be further defined by its special features. Qualitative case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic.

Particularistic means that case studies focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent. This specificity of focus makes it an especially good design for practical problems—for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice. Case studies "concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. They are problem centered, small scale, entrepreneurial endeavors" (Shaw, 1978, p. 2).

Descriptive means that the end product of a case study is a rich, "thick" description of the phenomenon under study. *Thick description* is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal

description of the incident or entity being investigated. Case studies include as many variables as possible and portray their interaction, often over a period of time. Case studies can thus be longitudinal (see Huber and Van de Ven, 1995). They have also been labeled *holistic, lifelike, grounded,* and *exploratory.* The description is usually qualitative—that is, instead of reporting findings in numerical data, "case studies use prose and literary techniques to describe, elicit images, and analyze situations. . . . They present documentation of events, quotes, samples and artifacts" (Wilson, 1979, p. 448).

Heuristic means that case studies illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known. "Previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied. Insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies" (Stake, 1981, p. 47).

Olson (in Hoaglin and others, 1982, pp. 138–139) has developed a list of case study characteristics that may illuminate the nature of this research design. These "aspects," as she refers to them, can be loosely grouped under three of the major characteristics just discussed. Three statements reflect the case study's *particularistic* nature:

- It can suggest to the reader what to do or what not to do in a similar situation.
- It can examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem.
- It may or may not be influenced by the author's bias.

Several aspects of a case study listed by Olson address its *descriptive* nature. A case study can

- Illustrate the complexities of a situation—the fact that not one but many factors contributed to it.
- Have the advantage of hindsight yet can be relevant in the present.
- Show the influence of personalities on the issue.

- Show the influence of the passage of time on the issue—deadlines, change of legislators, cessation of funding, and so on.
- Include vivid material—quotations, interviews, newspaper articles, and so on.
- Obtain information from a wide variety of sources.
- Cover many years and describe how the preceding decades led to a situation.
- Spell out differences of opinion on the issue and suggest how these differences have influenced the result.
- Present information in a wide variety of ways . . . and from the viewpoints of different groups.

The *heuristic* quality of a case study is suggested by these aspects. A case study can

- Explain the reasons for a problem, the background of a situation, what happened, and why.
- Explain why an innovation worked or failed to work.
- Discuss and evaluate alternatives not chosen.
- Evaluate, summarize, and conclude, thus increasing its potential applicability.

Attempts to define case study often center on delineating what is unique about the research design. As I mentioned earlier, the uniqueness of a case study lies not so much in the methods employed (although these are important) as in the questions asked and their relationship to the end product. Stake (1981) takes this notion one step further and claims that knowledge learned from case study is different from other research knowledge in four important ways. Case study knowledge is

- More concrete—case study knowledge resonates with our own experience because it is more vivid, concrete, and sensory than abstract.
- More contextual—our experiences are rooted in context, as is knowledge in case studies. This knowledge is distinguishable from the abstract, formal knowledge derived from other research designs.

- More developed by reader interpretation—readers bring to a case study their own experience and understanding, which lead to generalizations when new data for the case are added to old data. (Stake considers these generalizations to be "part of the knowledge produced by case studies" [p. 36].)
- Based more on reference populations determined by the reader—in generalizing as described above, readers have some population in mind. Thus, unlike traditional research, the reader participates in extending generalization to reference populations (Stake, 1981, pp. 35–36).

In defining a phenomenon such as a case study, it is often helpful to point out what it is *not*. Case study research is not the same as casework, case method, case history, or case record. *Casework* denotes "the developmental, adjustment, remedial, or corrective procedures that appropriately follow diagnosis of the causes of maladjustment" (Good and Scates, 1954, p. 729). *Case method* is an instructional technique whereby the major ingredients of a case study are presented to students for illustrative purposes or problem-solving experiences. Case studies as teaching devices have become very popular in law, medicine, and business. "For teaching purposes, a case study need not contain a complete or accurate rendition of actual events; rather, its purpose is to establish a framework for discussion and debate among students" (Yin, 1994, p. 2). *Case history*—the tracing of a person, group, or institution's past—is sometimes part of a case study. In medicine and social work, case histories (also called *case records*) are used in much the same sense as casework—to facilitate service to the client.

Determining when to use a case study as opposed to some other research design depends upon what the researcher wants to know. Yin (1994, p. 9) suggests that for "how" and "why" questions the case study has a distinct advantage. Also, the less control an investigator has over "a contemporary set of events," and/or if the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time, case study is likely to be the best choice. Bromley (1986) writes that case studies, by definition, "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires), whereas experi-

ments and surveys often use convenient derivative data, e.g. test results, official records. Also, case studies tend to spread the net for evidence widely, whereas experiments and surveys usually have a narrow focus" (p. 23).

Case study is a particularly suitable design if you are interested in process. Process as a focus for case study research can be viewed in two ways. "The first meaning of process is monitoring: describing the context and population of the study, discovering the extent to which the treatment or program has been implemented, providing immediate feedback of a formative type, and the like. The second meaning of process is causal explanation: discovering or confirming the process by which the treatment had the effect that it did" (Reichardt and Cook, 1979, p. 21). Collins and Noblit's (1978) case study of a desegregated high school in Memphis, Tennessee, illustrates the two meanings of process. They discuss the city, the setting, and the extent to which desegregation had been implemented. They also describe how each of the school system's three subsystems (administrative, academic, student) affected the process of interracial schooling. Of particular interest were the differing experiences of the school under two different principals, the climate in the classrooms before and after desegregation, and the students' extracurricular activities. In summarizing the importance of a process rather than an outcome as justification for selecting a case study, Sanders (1981) writes, "Case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects, and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object" (p. 44).

Finally, a case study might be selected for its very uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to. Abramson (1992) underscores the value of unique or atypical cases. "First, since such data are rare, they can help elucidate the upper and lower boundaries of experience. Second, such data can facilitate . . . prediction by documenting infrequent, non-obvious, or counterintuitive occurrences that may be missed by standard statistical (or empirical) approaches. And finally, atypical cases . . . are essential for understanding the range or variety of human experience, which is essential for understanding and appreciating the human condition" (p. 190). Kline's (1981) case study of a back-to-industry program

for vocational instructors at a junior college is an example of a somewhat atypical case. At the end of her study, only three such programs could be located in the United States.

In summary, then, the qualitative case study can be defined in terms of the process of actually carrying out the investigation, the unit of analysis (the bounded system, the case), or the end product. As the product of an investigation, a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and not to be confused with casework, case method, case history, or case record. As in all research, the choice of a case study design depends upon what the researcher wants to know.

Types of Qualitative Case Studies

Qualitative case studies in education can be further defined by arranging them into categories or types based on disciplinary orientation or by function, that is, whether the overall intent is to describe, interpret, or evaluate some phenomenon or to build theory. Also addressed in this section are multisite or comparative case designs.

Disciplinary Orientation

Certain fields of study use case study research for specific purposes. Law, medicine, psychology, and social work, for example, often employ case studies on behalf of individual clients. Political science, business, journalism, economics, and government have found case studies helpful in formulating policy. Case studies in education can focus on individual students—to diagnose learning problems, for example. More commonly, though, case study research in education is conducted so that specific issues and problems of practice can be identified and explained; researchers in education often draw upon other disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology both for theoretical orientation and for techniques of data collection and analysis.

As I discussed in the first chapter, anthropology has influenced qualitative research generally and education specifically. A case study focusing on, for example, the culture of a school, a group of students, or classroom behavior would be an *ethnographic* case study.

In explaining ethnography, Bogdan and Biklen write, "Researchers in this tradition say that an ethnography succeeds if it teaches readers how to behave appropriately in the cultural setting, whether it is among families in an African American community (Stack, 1974), in the school principal's office (Wolcott, 1973), or in the kindergarten class (Florio, 1978)" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 38).

A second type of case study found in education is the *historical* case study. Just as ethnographic case studies distinguish between technique and account, so do historical case studies. This type of research employs techniques common to historiography—in particular, the use of primary source material. The handling of historical material is systematic and involves distinguishing between primary and secondary sources. The nature of the account also distinguishes this form of case study. In applied fields such as education, historical case studies have tended to be descriptions of institutions, programs, and practices as they have evolved in time. Historical case studies may involve more than a chronological history of an event, however. To understand an event and apply that knowledge to present practice means knowing the context of the event, the assumptions behind it, and perhaps the event's impact on the institution or participants.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992), in their discussion of types of case study, list historical organizational case studies as one form common in educational research. These studies focus on a specific organization and trace its development. "You might do a study, for example, of a 'free school,' tracing how it came into being, what its first year was like, what changes occurred over time, what it is like now (if it is still operating), or how it came to close (if it did)" (p. 62). The key to historical case studies, organizational or otherwise, is the notion of investigating the phenomenon over a period of time. The researcher still presents a holistic description and analysis of a specific phenomenon (the case) but presents it from a historical perspective.

Historical research is essentially descriptive, and elements of historical research and case study often merge. Yin (1994) discusses the two approaches:

> Histories are the preferred strategy when there is virtually no access or control. Thus, the distinctive contribution of the historical

method is in dealing with the "dead" past—that is, when no relevant persons are alive to report, even retrospectively, what occurred, and when an investigator must rely on primary documents, secondary documents, and cultural and physical artifacts as the main sources of evidence. Histories can, of course, be done about contemporary events; in this situation, the strategy begins to overlap with that of the case study.

The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. Thus, the case study relies on many of the same techniques as a history, but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian's repertoire: direct observation and systematic interviewing. Again, although case studies and histories can overlap, the case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations—beyond what might be available in the conventional historical study [p. 8].

An example of how historical research can be differentiated from a case study that is historical in nature might be as follows. A study of urban public schools in the late 1800s would rely primarily on public school records for data. A case study of an urban school in the 1960s would use public documents as well, but it might also make use of television or videotaped reports and interviews of persons who had been directly associated with the case.

A third type of qualitative case study employs concepts, theories, and measurement techniques from psychology in investigating educational problems. The focus of a *psychological* case study is on the individual. The most famous precedent for case study in psychology was set by Freud in the early 1900s. His intensive self-analysis, combined with case studies of a few individuals, led to uncovering the unconscious life that is repressed but that nevertheless governs behavior.

Psychologists investigating learning have had the most direct relevance to education. Again there are famous precedents for using case study to gain insight into learning processes. Ebbinghaus in the late nineteenth century, for example, self-administered thousands of tasks in the study of memory (Dukes, 1965). His findings provided the basis for memory research for the next half century. Piaget in studying his own children developed a theory about the stages of cognitive structure that has had an enormous impact on

curriculum and instruction. Indeed, his theory is still being tested and refined in educational research investigations. Finally, many studies in child and adult development have employed a qualitative case study as the mode of inquiry, such as Vaillant's (1977) findings about mental health derived from longitudinal case studies of ninety-five Harvard men.

The focus on the individual as a way to investigate some aspect of human behavior characterizes the psychological case study. In education a case study of an individual, program, event, or process might well be informed by a psychological concept. A case study of an elderly learner might draw upon Piaget's theory of cognitive development, for example, or research on behavior change might inform a case study of a patient education program.

Case studies in education might also draw upon theory and technique from sociology. Rather than focusing on an individual, the past, or on culture, *sociological* case studies attend to the constructs of society and socialization in studying educational phenomena. Sociologists are interested in demographics; social life and the roles people play in it; the community; social institutions such as the family, church, and government; classes of people including minority and economic groups; and social problems such as crime, racial prejudice, divorce, and mental illness. Hamel (1993), who traces the history of case studies in both anthropology and sociology, writes that "as a sociological approach, the case study strives to highlight the features or attributes of social life. This is true whether the latter is perceived as a set of interactions, as common behavior patterns, or as structures" (p. 2). Educational case studies drawing upon sociology have explored such topics as student-peer interaction as a function of high school social structure, the effect of role sets on teachers' interactions with students, the actual versus the hidden school curriculum, the relationship of schooling to equalities and inequalities in society at large, and so on (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993).

Thus sociology, like history, anthropology, and psychology, has influenced the theory and methods of case studies in education. What makes these case studies in *education* is their focus on questions, issues, and concerns broadly related to teaching and learning. The setting, delivery system, curriculum, student body, and theoretical orientation may vary widely, but the general arena of education remains central to these studies.

Overall Intent

Irrespective of disciplinary orientation, case studies can also be described by the overall intent of the study. Is it intended to be largely descriptive? Interpretive? To build theory? To present judgments about the worth of a program?

A *descriptive* case study in education is one that presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study—a historical case study that chronicles a sequence of events, for example. Lijphart (1971) calls descriptive case studies "atheoretical." They are "entirely descriptive and move in a theoretical vacuum; they are neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses" (p. 691). They are useful, though, in presenting basic information about areas of education where little research has been conducted. Innovative programs and practices are often the focus of descriptive case studies in education. Such studies often form a database for future comparison and theory building. Moore (1986), for example, conducted case studies of high school interns to find out how newcomers in organizations learn. He developed case studies of interns in such diverse settings as a furniture-making shop, an animal protection league, a hospital speech clinic, a food cooperative, a museum, and a labor union. With these descriptive studies he later devised a conceptual framework about learning in nonschool settings. Whatever the area of inquiry, basic description of the subject being studied comes before hypothesizing or theory testing.

Interpretive case studies, too, contain rich, thick description. These descriptive data, however, are used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering. If there is a lack of theory, or if existing theory does not adequately explain the phenomenon, hypotheses cannot be developed to structure a research investigation. A case study researcher gathers as much information about the problem as possible with the intent of analyzing, interpreting, or theorizing about the phenomenon. A researcher might study how students come to an understanding of mathematical concepts, for example. Rather than just describing what was observed or what students reported in interviews, the investigator might take all the data and develop a typology, a continuum, or categories that conceptualize different

approaches to the task. In another example, Medina (1987) studied the literacy-related activities of a rural farm family and interpreted the data in terms of the meaning of functional literacy in a rural context. The *level* of abstraction and conceptualization in interpretive case studies may range from suggesting relationships among variables to constructing theory. The model of analysis is inductive. Because of the greater amount of analysis in interpretive case studies, some sources label these case studies *analytical*. Analytical case studies are differentiated from straightforward descriptive studies by their complexity, depth, and theoretical orientation (Shaw, 1978).

Evaluative case studies involve description, explanation, and judgment. Much has been written about naturalistic evaluation, responsive evaluation, and qualitative evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1987, 1990, 1996; Stake, 1981; Greene, 1994; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Guba and Lincoln (1981) conclude that case study is the best reporting form for evaluations. For them, case study is best because it provides thick description, is grounded, is holistic and lifelike, simplifies data to be considered by the reader, illuminates meanings, and can communicate tacit knowledge. Above all else, though, this type of case study weighs "information to produce judgment. Judging is the final and ultimate act of evaluation" (p. 375).

Kenny and Grotelueschen (1980) offer several reasons for choosing a case study design when doing an evaluation. "Case study can be an important approach when the future of a program is contingent upon an evaluation being performed and there are no reasonable indicators of programmatic success which can be formulated in terms of behavioral objectives or individual differences" (p. 5). Case study is appropriate when the objective of an evaluation is "to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of a program. When it is important to be responsive, to convey a holistic and dynamically rich account of an educational program, case study is a tailormade approach" (p. 5). They also argue that a case study design can be justified on the basis that sometimes it is important to leave an account. "This goal of case study is essentially descriptive and of historical significance" (p. 5). Finally, "case study can be supported as the common language approach to evaluation" (p. 5). Using common language, as opposed to scientific or educational jargon, allows the results of a study to be communicated more easily to nonresearchers.

Other writers have identified other types of case studies, such as oral or life history case studies (Lawrenson, 1994), clinical case studies (Borg and Gall, 1989), action research case studies (Stenhouse, 1988), and journalistic case studies (Yin, 1994).

Multiple Case Studies

A number of terms can be used when researchers conduct a study using more than one case. These are commonly referred to as *collective case studies, cross-case, multicase* or *multisite studies,* or *comparative case studies.* This type of study involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within (such as students within a school). Instead of studying one good high school, for example, Lightfoot (1983) studied six. Her findings are presented first as six individual case studies (or "portraits" as she calls them); she then offers a cross-case analysis suggesting generalizations about what constitutes a good high school. The more cases included in a study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be. "By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 29). The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings (see Chapter Nine).

In summary, then, case studies can be identified by their disciplinary orientation, by their intent, or by some combination of the two. Thus in education, case studies are ethnographic evaluations, program descriptions, historical interpretations, sociological studies, and so on. While some case studies are purely descriptive, many more are a combination of description and interpretation or description and evaluation.

Strengths and Limitations of Case Studies

All research designs can be discussed in terms of their relative strengths and limitations. The merits of a particular design are inherently related to the rationale for selecting it as the most

appropriate plan for addressing the research problem. One strength of an experimental design, for example, is the predictive nature of the research findings. Because of the tightly controlled conditions, random sampling, and use of statistical probabilities, it is theoretically possible to predict behavior in similar settings without actually observing that behavior. Likewise, if a researcher needs information about the characteristics of a given population or area of interest, a descriptive study is in order. Results, however, would be limited to describing the phenomenon rather than predicting future behavior.

Thus a researcher selects a case study design because of the nature of the research problem and the questions being asked. Case study is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations. The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base. Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education. Educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy. Collins and Noblit (1978) note the strengths of this type of research, which they call *field studies,* for policy analysis:

> Field research better captures situations and settings which are more amenable to policy and program intervention than are accumulated individual attributes. Second, field studies reveal not static attributes but understanding of humans as they engage in action and interaction within the contexts of situations and settings. Thus inferences concerning human behavior are less abstract than in many quantitative studies, and one can better understand how an intervention may affect behavior in a situation. . . . Field studies are

better able to assess social change than more positivistic designs, and change is often what policy is addressing [p. 26].

The special features of case study research that provide the rationale for its selection also present certain limitations in its usage. Although rich, thick description and analysis of a phenomenon may be desired, a researcher may not have the time or money to devote to such an undertaking. And assuming time is available to produce a worthy case study, the product may be too lengthy, too detailed, or too involved for busy policy makers and educators to read and use. Some suggestions for dealing with reporting and disseminating case studies can be found in the literature (and are discussed in Chapter Ten), but the amount of description, analysis, or summary material is up to the investigator. Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 377) note an additional limitation of case study narratives. "Case studies can oversimplify or exaggerate a situation, leading the reader to erroneous conclusions about the actual state of affairs." Furthermore, they warn, readers may think that case studies are accounts of the whole: "That is, they tend to masquerade as a whole when in fact they are but a part—a slice of life."

Qualitative case studies are limited, too, by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. This has its advantages. But training in observation and interviewing, though necessary, is not readily available to aspiring case study researchers. Nor are there guidelines in constructing the final report, and only recently have there been discussions about how to analyze the data collected. The investigator is left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of this research effort.

A further concern about case study research—and in particular case study evaluation—is what Guba and Lincoln (1981) refer to as "unusual problems of ethics. An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated" (p. 378). Both the readers of case studies and the authors themselves need to be aware of biases that can affect the final product. Clearly related to this issue of bias is the inherently political nature of case study evaluations. MacDonald and Walker (1977) observe that "educational case studies are usually financed by people who have, directly or indirectly, power over those studied

and portrayed" (p. 187). Moreover, "at all levels of the system what people *think* they're doing, what they *say* they are doing, what they *appear* to others to be doing, and what in fact they *are* doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy. . . . Any research which threatens to reveal these discrepancies threatens to create dissonance, both personal and political" (p. 186, emphasis in original).

Further limitations involve the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability. As Hamel (1993, p. 23) observes, "the case study has basically been faulted for its lack of representativeness . . . and its lack of rigor in the collection, construction, and analysis of the empirical materials that give rise to this study. This lack of rigor is linked to the problem of bias . . . introduced by the subjectivity of the researcher" and others involved in the case. These issues, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter Nine, are the focus of much discussion in the literature on qualitative research generally.

Summary

Although most educators have encountered case studies in their professional studies or their professional work, the term *case study* is not used precisely; it has become a catchall category for studies that are clearly not experimental, survey, or historical. And to a large extent, the term has been used interchangeably with other qualitative research terms.

In this chapter, I have delineated the nature of qualitative case studies in education. Case studies can be defined in terms of the process of conducting the inquiry (that is, as case study research), the bounded system or unit of analysis selected for study (that is, the case), or the product, the end report of a case investigation. Further, qualitative case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Because a case study has these attributes, a researcher might choose this approach to illuminate a phenomenon. Case studies can also be understood in terms of their disciplinary framework, which commonly draws from anthropology, history, psychology, and sociology. Whether the studies describe, interpret, or evaluate a phenomenon or build theory are issues also considered. The chapter closes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this form of qualitative research.

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