**Section I**
# GETTING STARTED
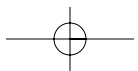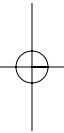
# 1

# EVOLUTION AND CONCEPT OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH

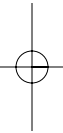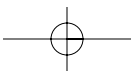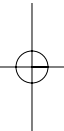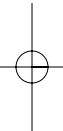This chapter explores *how* and *why* case study came to be a significant research approach for the study of social and educational programmes and outlines different conceptions and types of case study, its strengths and limitations. If getting started practically is your main interest you might choose to miss the early history, though part of the reasoning for the case study approach is embedded within it. I start by locating the emergence of case study in education within a broader social science and professional trend towards qualitative inquiry that has emerged over the past forty years.

## The Move to Qualitative Inquiry

In the late 1960s and 1970s in the UK and the United States case study developed a significant following in educational research and evaluation for understanding the experience of curriculum innovation. Predominant models at that time, such as the objectives model and systems analysis, had failed to provide evidence to develop the programmes and adequately explain success or failure. Alternatives were needed that included participant perspectives, were responsive to audience needs, attentive to the process and dynamics of implementation and interpretation of events in their socio/political contexts. Case study was one of a number of approaches that embodied these features in reaching an understanding of specific curriculum projects. At that time it was necessary to argue the case for alternative models to those drawn from positivist research.[1] Now case study is widely accepted as a research approach for evaluating complex educational innovations in specific contexts (Simons, 1980) and social and educational phenomena in general (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995).

This development of case study in educational research and evaluation, which is explored in more detail in the next section of this chapter, was paralleled by a renaissance of ethnographic research in sociology and of humanistic research in psychology, all part of that broad movement of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences that has evolved over the past forty years, and which Denzin and Lincoln, writing in 1994, referred to as 'a quiet methodological revolution' (p. ix). The practice of case study research (as distinct from professional case histories) has also extended to other practice professions, particularly nursing (Treacy and Hyde, 1999), health care (Dowell et al., 1995), social work (Shaw and Gould, 2001) and medicine (Greenhalgh, 1999; Greenhalgh and Worrall, 1997).

As a result of this 'quiet methodological revolution' we now have an extensive methodological literature on qualitative inquiry: see Denzin and Lincoln (1994) for a comprehensive account of the various forms and processes of qualitative research; Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1989) for arguments justifying qualitative inquiry vis-à-vis other forms of inquiry; and Silverman (2000) and Flick (1998), to note just two examples of many, for specific qualitative research methodological texts. See also Flick (2007) for the Sage eight-volume set of qualitative research texts. Given the wealth of this literature, I do not repeat here all the arguments that were necessary to advocate the case for qualitative case study as distinct from positivist forms of research in the study of social settings.

Case study, in common with other forms of qualitative inquiry, shares many of the same epistemological arguments and methods of fieldwork adopted in sociological and anthropological traditions. It cannot, however, be equated with qualitative research. Much qualitative research is not case study and case study can incorporate methods other than qualitative. While acknowledging this shared tradition, the focus in this chapter is on how we can characterize case study and its potential as a research approach starting with the reasons why this development was necessary in educational evaluation.

### Evolution of Case Study Research in Educational Evaluation[2]

Locating current practice of case study in this historical context is important for two reasons. First, as I have already indicated, the researcher is the main instrument in collecting and interpreting data. So it is with creating text. It is important to indicate in what contexts I have conducted case study so you can see what has influenced my understanding and shaped my practice. Second, it is easy to forget the origins for the growth of case study research now that we are familiar with its practice over several decades. It is useful to recall what problems it was designed to solve and why existing models at the time were inappropriate or inadequate to the task. Many of these problems still exist and many of the models advocated then are re-emerging as dominant approaches for conducting research in education (see Lather, 2004; Lincoln and Canella, 2004).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, in the context of evaluation, the task was to determine the effects of social and education programmes in order to inform decision-making and improve social and educational action. Evaluations were primarily experimental, quasi-experimental and survey, utilizing quantitative outcome measures of programme effectiveness (House, 1993: 5). Such approches failed to capture the complexity of these programmes in practice and provide adequate evidence as basis for action (Norris, 1993: Simons, 1987).

Many programmes were specific and innovative. No comparative control groups could be established to make sense of an experimental design, no benchmarks of normal' practice existed with which to compare the innovation, and focusing on pre post testing as the sole indicator of the worth of the programme clearly fell short of representing the programme in action. It was not sufficient to indicate solely what learning gains were achieved by testing learning outcomes. Developers, stakeholders

and other audiences needed to know how results were achieved, why some succeeded where others did not, and what the key factors were in the particular setting that led to the precise outcomes. Without such explanation results were inadequate to inform development, policy or practice and were potentially unfair.

### *Broadening the database – multiple data/multiple perspectives*

In the US, Stake (1967a) was the first to suggest that evaluators needed to widen their database and to rethink the role of evaluation itself. In his introduction to the inaugural issue of AERA Monographs on Evaluation, Stake wrote of the need for evaluators to tell the programme story, setting in motion a 'reconceptualisation of the evaluation task in terms of more idiographic traditions of research, and away from the idea of curriculum developments as poorly designed experiments in student learning' (Simons, 1987: 9).

Stake's 'countenance' paper, published in the same year (Stake 1967b), was aptly titled to reflect the changing face of evaluation. Here he drew attention to the need to include antecedent data, data about transactions and judgements, and data on outcomes in order to '*tell the programme story'*. Further papers argued for portrayal of the programme vis-à-vis analysis (Stake, 1972) and the need to be responsive to issues identified by stakeholders and participants iteratively throughout the evaluation (Stake, 1975).

In the UK around the same time, it was also evident that different data were needed to understand how curriculum programmes fared in action. In the evaluation of the Humanities Curriculum Project, MacDonald (1971) was developing the case study approach to capture the complexity of innovation and meet the needs of decision-makers. Having found from early fieldwork that generalizations derived from previous studies of schools and innovation did not fit, he set about documenting how the programme was implemented in the particular context of each institution – interviewing key players, observing classrooms, capturing images of the context, exploring the surrounding milieu. In doing so, he paid attention to the culture of the institution, its previous history, styles of teaching, patterns of staff mobility, experience and confidence, staff – student relationships and student reception of the new curricula as well as their achievements.

This early foray into how the project played out in particular schools led him to formulate a rationale for the case study design element of the evaluation that took account of the variability of human action in institutions and the different influences that determine it, the inter-relationships of acts and consequences, the judgements of those within, and the possible different perceptions of the goals and purposes of the programme held by those who designed the programme and those who implemented it. From here it was a short step to conducting detailed case studies that provided evidence of these effects in context to inform decision-making and explain success or failure.

Both these authors were forerunners of the evaluation case study movement in educational evaluation in their respective countries. MacDonald was later to be joined at CARE by Rob Walker who contributed to further development of case study research, particularly in rethinking the use of case study in educational settings, and

exploring methodological innovations in observation (video and film, for example), use of photographs and novel formats for reporting. From these early beginnings, these authors began to articulate and theorize the concept of case study in educational evaluation and research (MacDonald, 1971; MacDonald and Walker, 1974, 1975; Stake, 1980, [1978], 1995; Walker, 1974).

Around the same time in the mid-1970s support for the case study approach in educational evaluation came from two unexpected quarters and 1975 seemed to be a critical year. Donald Campbell, an experimentalist and measurement specialist, in the 1960s had limited the use of case study to exploratory studies and questioned their scientific value because of the lack of control and high probability of bias (Campbell and Stanley, 1966: 6–7). Yet in 1975, in an exploratory paper, '"Degrees of freedom" and the case study' (also published, with minor editorial change, in Cook and Reichardt, see Campbell, 1979), he had modified this view to recognize his early 'strong rejection of the single case study' (Campbell, 1979: 56) and the contribution of qualitative knowing to social action.[3]

In 1975 also, Lee Cronbach published a paper in which he argued that the two disciplines of scientific psychology (experimental and correlational research) were inadequate to meet contemporary needs for knowledge of social programmes, failing to account for contextual factors of time and place and the uncontrolled nature of complex social situations. Indicating a need for descriptive studies Cronbach suggested that instead of making generalization the ruling consideration in our research we reverse our priorities and observe and interpret effects in context (p. 123). 'As he [the observer] goes from situation to situation, his first task is to describe and interpret the effect anew in each locale, perhaps taking into account factors unique to that locale … This is, generalization comes late, and the exception is taken as seriously as the rule' (p. 125).

These observations from two leading psychologists and measurement researchers of what was needed to understand social programmes gave further warrant for pursuing the case study approach in educational evaluation.

## Further Evolution of the Case Study Approach

### The Nuffield conferences

This early development of case study research was taken forward in a number of conferences over the next thirty years between US and UK evaluators sponsored primarily by the Nuffield Foundation to explore alternative styles of evaluation. The first conference was devoted to reasons for the emergence of alternative styles, the second to case study itself and the third to naturalistic inquiry, the umbrella term that came to be adopted to cover a range of different qualitative approaches. These included case study (MacDonald and Walker, 1975), responsive evaluation (Stake, 1975), transactional evaluation (Rippey, 1973), illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976). What these approaches had in common was a focus on documenting complexity, interpreting in context, observing in natural social conditions and communicating in the natural language of participants. Later conferences focused on policy implications, assessment and appraisal, and the postmodern trend. These

Nuffield conferences are well documented and mark the developmental path of alternative approaches to evaluation (see Elliott and Kushner (2007) for an extensive account of their outcomes and publications).

Case study was one way of conceptualizing an alternative methodological approach to evaluating a *particular* programme or policy. Parlett and Hamilton (1976), the authors of illuminative evaluation, conceptualized this methodological shift as a move away from an agricultural botany model (related to experimental design and pre/post testing) to a social-anthropological model. While not advocating a case study approach, illuminative evaluation, with its emphasis on contextual understanding, people and places, and qualitative methods, had a strong affinity with the case study approach for understanding educational innovation in naturalistic settings.

### Political dimension

Beyond methodology, but closely connected with it, were other reasons for a shift to case study related to the purpose and role of evaluation in a democratic society. I want now to explore this dimension further to illustrate how the methodology and political purpose are linked. The purposes are many but are generally recognized to fall into three broad categories – accountability, development (of the institution or agency) and knowledge. The major role is to inform and promote public decision-making (Chelimsky, 2006; Greene, 2000). In exploring this link with methodology, there are three particular points to keep in mind about the nature of the evaluation field.

First, evaluation is about judgement, determining the merit or worth of a programme. Different methodologies consider the role of judgement in different ways. So there are methodological choices to make about how to determine worth (and these have political implications), and there are political decisions to make about whose role it is to do that. Is it for evaluators to decide the worth of a programme on the basis of evidence and their scientific judgement? Is it for audiences in relation to decisions they have to make or problems to solve? Or is it for the wider public to whom the results are disseminated to facilitate their contribution to policy debate?

Secondly, evaluation is inherently political, concerned with the distribution of power and the allocation of resources and opportunities in society. Evaluation has consequences for who gets what, whose interests are served in an evaluation, who stands to gain or lose by the findings of an evaluation. Thirdly, to be fair and offer a sound basis for informed action, evaluation is, or should be, independent of particular interests. It should be an impartial information service to all stakeholders, participants and the public on the value of the policy or programme to enable them to contribute to informed policy-making and debate (Simons, 2006: 245–246).

In the developing alternative evaluation tradition there was a growing awareness of the need for a shift in the power of research relationships away from regarding the evaluator as the sole judge of what was worthwhile to acknowledge the perspectives of participants in the case and the judgements of those who have decisions to make in policy or practice contexts. This shift in the locus of judegement was articulated by

MacDonald (1976) in his political model of democratic evaluation, which emphasizes participant judgement and engagement in the process of evaluation and dissemination to a range of audiences. It is also reflected in Stake's (1975) concept of responsive evaluation which, as its name suggests, is responsive to stakeholder and participant identification of issues and refinement and validation throughout the evaluation.

The case study approach is useful in this context. It involves and is accessible to multiple audiences. Using qualitative methods it can document participant and stakeholder perspectives, engage them in the process, and represent different interests and values in the programme. Case study reports that are issue-focused, comprised of naturalistic observations, interview data and written in the language of participants allow access to findings that others can recognize and use as a basis for informed action. There was, as Kushner (2000) has put it, 'a natural fit between this political ethic and case study methodologies' (p. 6). This is why, as I have argued elsewhere (Simons, 1980), case study in the context of evaluation is far from a straight 'lift' from the idiographic traditions of social science. It has to be seen within the complex nexus of political, methodological and epistemological convictions that constitute the field of evaluation (Simons, 1987: 62).

The fact that this shift in methodology and the role of evaluation in society occurred on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time, initially without knowledge of the other, indicates that it was not simply a one-off response to a local or national need. It represented a major sea-change in how evaluation could be conceived to contribute to social and political action. To some, it signified a more direct participatory, if not transformative, role for certain groups in society (see, for instance, Greene, 1994; Lincoln, 1995).

This then is a brief outline of how and why case study came to prominence in the field of evaluation and why the alternative forms of evaluation evolved to evaluate innovative curriculum programmes. For further discussion on the evolution of case study in evaluation see Simons (1987) and on the history of qualitative evaluation in general, Greene and McClintock (1991), Guba and Lincoln (1981, 1989), Patton (1997) and House (1993). Further challenges have arisen through the practice of case study research and these will be considered in later chapters.

## Definitions and Types of Case Study Research

The previous section focused on case study in the context of evaluation. From this point on I shall refer to case study research more broadly – that process of conducting systematic, critical inquiry into a phenomenon of choice and generating understanding to contribute to cumulative public knowledge of the topic. This is a different purpose from the role of evaluation in democratic society outlined above, though some forms of research, such as action research and participatory research, share similar aspirations. For the most part I will be discussing the conduct of case study research of programmes, projects, organizations and policies, not persons, although in Chapter 4 I explore the role of individuals within the case and in Chapter 5, the role of the case researcher herself.

### Seeking to define what is a case study

Case study, as several authors have pointed out (Gomm et al., 2004; Merriam, 1988; Stake 1995), has different meanings for different people and in different disciplines. In seeking to characterize what case study is some authors start by comparing it with other social research approaches. For example, Gomm et al. (2004: 2–4) note that the term is employed to identify a specific form of inquiry which contrasts with the experiment or social survey on several dimensions, the most important of which are the number of cases investigated and the amount of detailed information collected about each. Other features of comparison include the degree of control over the variables/issues investigated, the kind of data and the way they are analysed, and how inferences are drawn. In case study, the data are often unstructured, the analysis qualitative and the aim is to understand the case itself rather than generalize to a whole population (pp. 2–4).

Others start by indicating what case study research is not. Adelman et al. (1980), for instance, indicate that case studies should not be equated with observational studies (which would rule out historical case studies), are not simply pre-experimental (understandings are significant in their own right) and are not defined by methodology (many methods can be used) (p. 48). Merriam (1988) notes its difference from case work, case method (as a teaching device), case history and case work (in social work and medicine, for example) (p. 15).

This exploration is helpful in clarifying the scope and focus of case study. In the next section I try to characterize the concept more distinctively, so we have a clear sense of what it is before examining the process and to help you justify a case study research approach for your thesis or project. While precise definitions are difficult because of the variation in use described above, below are four characterizations of the concept from leading proponents of case study research.

### Definitions of case study

The first is from Stake (1995). 'Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (p. xi). In outlining his view of case study, Stake indicates that he draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological and biographic research methods. He does not pay as much attention to quantitative case studies that emphasize a battery of measurements or to case studies designed for teaching purposes, such as in law and business. These, he says, are special topics deserving books of their own. His focus is on disciplined, qualitative inquiry into the single case. 'The qualitative researcher emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual' (p. xii).

In referring to different purposes for case study and different disciplines that use the term, Stake reminds us of two important points. First, that it is important if you choose case study as your research approach to acknowledge the tradition you are drawing upon. Secondly, that case study is not synonymous with qualitative methods. This was noted earlier but is worth emphasizing here. It is a common misunderstanding. While case studies of the kind I am discussing in this book tend to use qualitative methods, this

does not define them. What defines a case study is its singularity – of the phenomenon being studied. Choice of method is related but it is a different point.

The second definition is from MacDonald and Walker (1975).

> Case study is the examination of an instance in action. The choice of the word 'instance' is significant in this definition, because it implies a goal of generalisation. We might say that case study is that form of research where n = 1, only that would be misleading, because the case study method lies outside the discourse of mathematical experimentalism that has dominated Anglo-American educational research. (p. 2)

What MacDonald and Walker are drawing attention to here is the tradition of social science research that acknowledges the possibility of generalizing from the particular, where studying the particular in depth can yield insights of universal significance. In highlighting the process through which such insights emerge, they indicate that case study calls for a 'fusion of the styles of the artist and the scientist' (p. 3). 'Case study is the way of the artist, who achieves greatness when, through the portrayal of a single instance locked in time and circumstance, he communicates enduring truths about the human condition. For both the scientist and artist content and intent emerge in form' (p. 3). Inspirations for these authors stem primarily from a qualitative social science tradition, and they aspire to artistic and literary forms of re-presenting and communicating findings.

The third definition, from Merriam (1988), is similar to the two above in its emphasis on the qualitative, the particular and the singular, as well as drawing attention to a major mode of reasoning in making sense of data. 'The qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit. Case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning in handling multiple data sources' (p. 16).

In this fourth definition Yin (1994) continues the practice noted earlier of describing the characteristics of case study compared with other research strategies and what each can achieve.

*'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)

However, because it is not always possible to distinguish between phenomenon and context in 'real-life' situations, he points out that other characteristics become part of the technical definition. A case study inquiry would explore many variables of interest, rely on multiple sources of evidence and 'prior development of theoretical propositions to guide the collection of data' (p. 13). In this definition case study is not defined by object or particularity but is a comprehensive research strategy, incorporating specific data collection and analysis approaches to investigate phenomena in real-life contexts.

I have selected these four definitions of case study to illustrate different emphases. What they have in common is a commitment to studying a situation or phenomenon in its 'real life' context, to understanding complexity, and to defining case study other than by methods (qualitative or otherwise). Differences relate to philosophical, methodological and epistemological preferences.

My own definition of case study is similar to the first two above though I phrase it slightly differently and extend it to include the purpose and research focus. Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action.[4]

## Types of Case Study

### Intrinsic, instrumental, collective

Stake (1995) distinguishes three types of case study: *intrinsic,* where a case is studied for the intrinsic interest in the case itself; *instrumental,* where a case is chosen to explore an issue or research question determined on some other ground, that is, the case is chosen to gain insight or understanding into something else, and *collective*, where several cases are studied to form a collective understanding of the issue or question (pp. 3–4). The point of making these distinctions, he says, is not because it is useful to sort case studies into categories but because the methods used will be different depending upon intrinsic or instrumental interests (p. 4). The same is true for the brief descriptions that follow of other types of case studies. Methods will differ according to the type and the purpose for conducting the case study.

### Further types and categories

To these three types we may add those indicated by Bassey (1999), in a reconstruction of educational case study, where he categorizes case studies as theory-seeking and theory-testing, story-telling and picture-drawing, and evaluative; and those by Merriam (1988), who characterizes types of case study from their discipline framework but also by the nature of how they are written up notes five categories – descriptive, interpretative, evaluative. Yin (1994), in the context of evaluation research notes five categories – explanatory, descriptive, illustrative, exploratory and 'meta-evaluation' – that is, a study of an evaluation study, the most important of which he say, is explanatory 'to *explain* the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies' (p. 15). It is not my intention here to discuss all these types in detail – the descriptors, for the most part, are self-evident – nor examine overlaps between them (see Bassey, 1999 for discussion of their similarities). I do, however, wish to highlight three of a more general kind.

### Theory-led or theory-generated case study

Theory-led case study has different meanings. Theory-led can mean exploring, or even exemplifying, a case through a particular theoretical perspective or, as in programme

evaluation case study, exploring at the outset what the theory of the programme is – what it is aspiring to achieve in order to focus and design the evaluation. If taking this approach, it is important to stay open to eliciting what the actual theory of the case may be in practice. This is not the same as testing a specific theory or taking a specific theoretical lens to the study. It is determining a specific theory of the programme to guide data collection in the case.

Theory-generated refers to generating theory arising from the data itself, whether this is through a classic grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) or some other interpretative lens that leads to an eventual theory of the case.

### Evaluation case study

Evaluation case study of public programmes has several imperatives. These relate to the discussion on the political dimension raised earlier. An evaluation case study needs, first and foremost, to discern the value of the programme or project that constitutes the case. How you do this will depend on which political stance you choose. It could be solely your judgement of value based on the evidence, or, if adopting a democratic or social justice perspective, it would include how different people and interest groups valued the programme. Within a democratic perspective you would also engage participants in the process and ensure that the final case study was disseminated to audiences beyond the programme.

Second, given the role of evaluation to inform decision-making, an evaluation case study needs to be responsive to multiple stakeholder and audience information needs and maintain effective negotiations with key participants throughout the process. In funded evaluation of public programmes, this may extend to stakeholders and programme commissioners having a say in what issues are explored and which methodologies used.

Third, as many evaluation studies have consequences for who gets what in society when resources are reallocated on the basis of evaluation findings, it is important to include and balance all interests fairly and justly in the programme.

### Ethnographic case study

Ethnographic case study has its origins in an anthropological or sociological tradition. This type of case study uses qualitative methods, such as participant observation, to gain close-up descriptions of the context and is concerned to understand the case in relation to a theory or theories of culture. It can be conducted in different timescales, in familiar or unfamiliar cultures and increasingly uses a wider range of methods than in classic ethnography. In this sense it differs from ethnographic research *per se*, which traditionally has involved long time immersion in the field in societies beyond our own, even though it is now widely conducted in familiar as well as 'strange' cultures. In contemporary educational and social research shorter ethnographic studies are sometimes referred to as micro-ethnography (see, for example, Ball, 1987) to distinguish them from a full ethnography. However, these are not necessarily case studies in the sense of

a bounded system, or 'instance in action' as described earlier. While sharing methods in common with classic ethnography, such as participant observation and interviewing, ethnographic case studies focus on a *particular* project or programme, though still aspiring to understand the case in its socio-cultural context and with concepts of culture in mind.

## Summary of Strengths and Limitations

From the conduct of case study research over several decades, it is possible to summarize its key strengths and note what problems or limitations people perceive or have experienced in practice.

### Strengths

- Case study using qualitative methods in particular enables the experience and complexity of programmes and policies to be studied in depth and interpreted in the precise socio-political contexts in which programmes and policies are enacted.
- Case study can document multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints, demonstrate the influence of key actors and interactions between them in telling a story of the programme or policy in action. It can explain how and why things happened.
- Case study is useful for exploring and understanding the process and dynamics of change. Through closely describing, documenting and interpreting events as they unfold in the 'real life' setting, it can determine the factors that were critical in implementation of a programme or policy and analyse patterns and links between them.
- Case study is flexible, that is, neither time-dependent nor constrained by method. It can be conducted in a few days, months or over several years and be written up in different forms and lengths appropriate to the timescale. It is responsive to shifts in focus and the unanticipated consequences of programmes in action. It can include a range of methods, whatever is most appropriate in understanding the case.
- Case studies written in accessible language, including vignettes and cameos of people in the case, direct observation of events, incidents and settings, allows audiences of case study reports to vicariously experience what was observed and utilize their tacit knowledge in understanding its significance.
- Case study has the potential to engage participants in the research process. This is both a political and epistemological point. It signals a potential shift in the power base of who controls knowledge and recognizes the importance of co-constructing perceived reality through the relationships and joint understandings we create in the field. It also provides an opportunity for researchers to take a self-reflexive approach to understanding the case and themselves.

### Potential limitations

To provide balance and signal some issues that will be discussed in later chapters I indicate here what some have seen as potential weaknesses of the case study approach. Often

these centre on the mass of data accumulated that is difficult to process, reports that are too long and detailed for stakeholders to read and narratives that over-persuade.

Reflecting on his practice of case study in curriculum research, Walker (1986) has noted three issues which caused him to think again about claims for this approach – the uncontrolled intervention that case study research is in the lives of others, the distorted picture it can give of the way things are and its essential conservatism – the case study is locked in time while the people in it have moved on.

Further concerns focus around the personal involvement and/or subjectivity of the researcher, the way in which inferences are drawn from the single case and the validity and usefulness of the findings to inform policy.

I appreciate and recognize these concerns, yet I do not see all of them as necessarily limitations of the approach. It is often a question of how they are perceived and interpreted. Several are addressed in subsequent chapters. Suggestions for how to make sense of the mass of data are offered in Chapters 7 and 8; how to improve reporting so it is accessible and authentic in Chapter 9; how to be sensitive to our interventions in people's lives in Chapter 6. Exploring and disciplining subjectivity is discussed in Chapter 5, and the issues of how to draw inferences and use case study to inform policy-making in Chapter 10. However there are five brief points I wish to make at this point.

First, in the conception of case study discussed in this book, the subjectivity of the researcher is an inevitable part of the frame. It is not seen as a problem but rather, appropriately monitored and disciplined, as essential in understanding and interpreting the case. Too much personal involvement, however, can be a problem and this is examined in Chapter 5.

Secondly, while the reports we write cannot capture (hold) the reality as lived (and in this sense are always historical) there is much we can do to highlight the timing of the study, the partial nature of interpretations and the conditions of their construction so readers can make their own judgements about their relevance and significance.

Thirdly, there are a number of ways to make inferences from a case or cases that are applicable to other contexts. These are not stated as formal propositions or generalizations as in random sample surveys or experimental design research. They stem from a qualitative database and appeal more to tacit and situated understanding for their link to other cases and settings.

Fourthly, the usefulness of findings for policy determination is partly dependent upon acceptance of the different ways in which validity is established and findings are communicated in case study research.

Finally, it is important to state that in many situations in which case study research is conducted, formal generalization for policy-making is not the aim. The aim is particularization – to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or add to knowledge of a specific topic. These issues of subjectivity, generalization and utility for policy-making are explored further in the final chapter. Now it is time to get started. The next two chapters focus respectively on the practicalities of planning and designing the case and choosing methods for your study.

Case Study Memo 1 **Concept, Type and Justification for Case Study Research**

- Think through the different types and purposes of case study and the origins from which each stems. This should strengthen how you justify the type you choose.
- Decide what kind of case study you will conduct for what purpose, and what issues or questions it will help you address.
- Acknowledge the particular tradition in which you are locating your case study.
- Justify why your choice is the best approach for the topic and purpose of your research.
- Demonstrate an awareness of any potential difficulties you might encounter and how you would address these in your research.
- Do not spend too much time arguing why you have not chosen other research approaches. This may be helpful to a degree. However, the more important point is to present a convincing argument for why case study research is most appropriate for your research topic.
- Consider the timescale you have in which to conduct the study and what difference this makes to the type you choose, for example – ethnographic, evaluative, theory-based – or intrinsic, instrumental, collective.
- Think about the political implications of the type you choose and the consequences for those in the case – who will benefit, who might not.
- Reflect on what type of case study report your main audience would find useful, for example, descriptive, interpretative, evaluative, explanatory.
- If considering case study for your thesis, decide whether it will be part of your thesis or the whole and how you would justify your decision. Think carefully about whether collective case study is viable. Students frequently opt for two cases thinking that comparison is helpful. It can be, but often is not needed. One case in depth may give you the information you need. Understanding about themselves their case and the research from working with you.

## Notes

1   The shortfalls of methodologies stemming from a positivist tradition for evaluating and under-standing social programmes are outlined in the manifesto from the first Cambridge conference (MacDonald and Parlett, 1973), which brought together US and UK evaluators to explore alternative forms of evaluation. The manifesto also indicated what changes in methodology were required at that time for future effective evaluation.

2   In this section I have drawn on Chapter 1 in Simons (1987), which outlines how the field of evaluation evolved. My focus here is only on those factors that led to the need for a case study research approach.

3   It is important to note that in this 1975 paper, '"Degrees of freedom" and the case study', Campbell was writing in the context of comparative political studies, where he regarded the single cultural study as the dominant mode of inquiry. While not entirely persuaded of qualitative forms of knowing, Campbell acknowledges both in this paper and elsewhere (Campbell, 1976, 1979) the lack of attention to qualitative evidence in quantitative evalua-tion studies and that science depends upon qualitative, common sense knowing even though at best it goes beyond this. In the conclusion to his 1975 paper he states that

methodologists 'must achieve an applied epistemology which integrates both [quantitative and qualitative forms of knowing]. I am indebted to Nigel Norris for this understanding.

Those who discuss the early use of triangulation in social research often draw attention to Campbell's early work in integrating these different forms of knowing (see, for example, Greene, 2007; Stake, 1995).

## Further Readings

Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
An account of case study in educational settings locating the concept within educational research in general. Explores concepts of generalization, theory development and dissemination. An exploration of case study in educational settings locating the concept within educational research and exploring concepts of generalization and theory development. Chapter 3 provides a useful overview of different concepts and definitions of case study.

Merriam, S.B. (1988) *Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey–Bass.
Focuses specifically on the field of education and qualitative case study, with an interest in what can be learned from the case study approach for professional practice. Chapters 1 and 2 focus respectively on defining the concept, types and uses of case study research, its strengths and limitations as a research design.

Stake, R.E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Explores the central precepts and process of qualitative case study with illustrated examples from an actual case. Chapter 1 provides a succinct conceptualization of the distinctiveness of case study research drawing a distinction between three main types – intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study.

Simons, H. (ed.) (1980) *Towards a Science of the Singular: Essays about Case Study in Educational Research and Evaluation*. Occasional Publications No. I0. Norwich: University of East Anglia, Centre for Applied Research in Education.
The first five chapters demarcate the distinctiveness of case study as distinct from other forms of social inquiry.

Yin, R.K. (1994) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* London: Sage.
An examination of case study as a research strategy. The introduction and first chapter indicates the range of research situations for which case study is appropriate compared with other research methods.

Ragin, C. (1992) 'Cases of "What is Case?", in C. Ragin and H. Becker (eds), *What is a Case: Exploring the Foundations of Social Enquiry*. Cambirdge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1–17.
Outlines found different approaches to defining what a case is – by object, through discovery (within the case), theoretical constructs that emerge from the study, and by convention or consensus of a common concept.

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M. and Foster, P. (eds) (2004) *Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts.* London: Sage.

This edited collection covers more than the concept of case study, the focus of this section of readings, but it is included here for two reasons. It has an excellent extended annotated bibliography of major texts on case study (pp. 259–70), including those above. Its division into two major sections on case study and generalizability and case study and theory outline much of the debate around these topics that it will be useful to be aware of throughout the process and in deciding what position to take on these issues.