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## CASE STUDY APPROACHES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Duong Thuy Huong<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Case study is one of research designs which can be used in both quantitative and qualitative approaches, allowing the researcher to retain the holistic characteristics of real-life events while investigating empirical events. It is an in-depth investigation of a problem in one or more real-life settings over an extended period of time. However, this research design causes challenges to novice researchers in conducting the study properly because of a variety of approaches. The paper presents a review of literature on case study approaches in educational research by looking at different authors' perspectives in their works, definitions as well as classifications of the case study. This review may help novice researchers have a closer insight into different approaches of case study and make the right decision in choosing the most appropriate research methods for their study.

**Key words:** Case study research, method, strategy, approach, single case, multiple cases

### CÁC HƯỚNG TIẾP CẬN NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP TRONG NGHIÊN CỨU GIÁO DỤC: TỔNG QUAN LÝ THUYẾT

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu trường hợp là một trong những phương pháp nghiên cứu có thể được sử dụng theo cả cách tiếp cận định lượng và định tính, cho phép nhà nghiên cứu giữ lại đặc điểm tổng thể của các hiện tượng trong thực tế trong khi điều tra các sự kiện thực nghiệm. Đây là một nghiên cứu chuyên sâu về một vấn đề trong một hoặc nhiều bối cảnh thực tế khác nhau trong một khoảng thời gian dài. Tuy nhiên, thiết kế nghiên cứu này cũng gây khó khăn cho các nhà nghiên cứu mới vào nghề khi muốn lựa chọn nghiên cứu trường hợp là nghiên cứu chính của mình. Bài viết trình bày tổng quan tài liệu về các phương pháp tiếp cận nghiên cứu trường hợp trong nghiên cứu giáo dục bằng cách xem xét các quan điểm của các tác giả khác nhau về định nghĩa cũng như cách phân loại các dạng khác nhau của nghiên cứu trường hợp với hy vọng giúp một số các nhà nghiên cứu mới có cái nhìn gần hơn về các cách ứng dụng khác nhau của nghiên cứu điển hình và lựa chọn phương pháp nghiên cứu thích hợp nhất cho nghiên cứu của mình.

**Từ khóa:** Nghiên cứu trường hợp, phương pháp, chiến lược, hướng tiếp cận, trường hợp đơn lẻ, nhiều trường hợp.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are several ways that researchers gain some insight into their topics when they are initially planning their research. Based on their research paradigms, one can choose the most suitable research strategy to implement the study. The research paradigms can be characterized through their ontology which then leads to their epistemology, their methodological considerations and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection. Case study has been used in different fields such as medicine, law, anthropology, political science, psychology, and social work for a long time. Recently, education has acknowledged the advantage of using a case study research approach to get

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deeper understanding on the process of certain aspects of practice. As a result, more researchers choose case study as a research method to bridge the gaps or limitations caused by quantitative methods in many social science studies, making the role of case study method in research more prominent when issues regarded to education, sociology, and community-based problems (Zainal, 2007). Simon in her book titled *Towards a Science of the Singular* (1980: 1) noted that: “[case study] has antecedents in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and psychology and the professions of law and medicine, each of which developed procedures for establishing the validity of case study for their respective purposes. But the use of case study in education has been comparatively recent; its specific relevance to education has not been explored to the same degree.” Case studies are said to be an intensive study, which is defined as in-depth investigation of a problem in one or more real-life settings (case sites) over an extended period of time. The purpose of intensive studies is to get as complete a picture as possible of a situation, a phenomenon or event. Therefore, case study is considered to be a suitable research approach when we want to understand the interaction between a specific context and a phenomenon (Sanders, 2002). Case studies can be positivist in nature (for hypotheses testing) or interpretive (for theory building). The ability of this method is to discover a wide variety of social, cultural, and political factors potentially related to the phenomenon of interest that may not be known in advance. The case research method is particularly appropriate for exploratory studies to discover relevant constructs in areas where theory building at the formative stages, to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of the particular entity (why and how of a phenomenon), to discover systematic connections among experiences, behaviors, and relevant features of the context (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Johnson, 1992).

Case study is well-known and widely used in research, however, “there is little consensus on what constitutes a case study or how this type of research is done” (Merriam, 1998: 26). Case study is like a mysterious vast land which has not been explored thoroughly and makes it confusing for novice researchers who want to use case study as their main research method. This paper, therefore, tries to review different approaches of case study in education to help readers have a closer understanding about case study research.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The paper uses document analysis and employs secondary data from extensive literature on case study approaches in education research from previous studies to sketch a panoramic view of case study. This may help novice researchers, especially MA and PhD students who choose case study as their main method research for their study.

## 3. CASE STUDY APPROACHES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

### 3.1. Definitions of Case study

“What is case study?” is an easy question to ask but difficult to answer. Simply defining, case study is the study of one case. Case study is a type of research design and analysis which is most widely used as an approach to qualitative research in education (Gall and Borg, 2003), a method, a strategy (Punch, 1998; Yin, 2003) and an outcome of research which 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” (Merriam, 1998:34). Merriam (1998) also emphasized a case

study as an exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and rich in context. Data may be collected using a combination of interviews, personal observations, and internal or external documents. Case studies can be positivist in nature (for hypotheses testing) or interpretive (for theory building) which enables to discover a wide variety of social, cultural, and political factors potentially related to the phenomenon of interest that may not be known in advance. Case study research has been defined by the unit of analysis, the process of study, and the outcome or end product, all essentially the case (Merriam, 2015). Case study is differentiated from other research strategies because the focus of the research is a bounded system or case.

Among writers who have explored in depth case study as a research strategy, Merriam, Stake and Yin emerge as three case study researchers from different roles and perspectives. Yin (1984:23), whose background as a consultant in policy research has influenced his approach as a methodologist (Brown, 2008), defines case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context”. His definition reveals his advocacy for the presence of a legitimate method of research which can deal with limits left behind by other research strategies such as history, experiment and surveys. In other words, case study in Yin’s perspective is an empirical inquiry that investigates the case or cases by addressing the “how” or “why” questions concerning the phenomenon of interest.

Stake (1995) believed that the most important role of the case study researcher was that of interpreter. From his point of view, in case study, the researcher plays a role as the constructor to a clearer view of the phenomenon under study through explanation and descriptions rather than the explorer of an external reality. Stake (2000) also claimed that this approach is useful and makes sense to readers because it is “down-to-earth”, and “attention-holding” and it also closes to the understanding of the naturalistic word through our personal experiences. However, he also warned the researchers to avoid disadvantages of this method by looking at the aims of the study. If the research aims at providing explanation, propositional knowledge, and law, etc., the case study will reveal disadvantages. If the purposes of the research are understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known, the disadvantage disappears (Stake, 2000). Like other writers in defining case study (Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2008), Stake (2005) emphasized the boundaries in case study research. He acknowledged that although the case study itself is a system with boundaries and the researcher’s job is to identify “coherence” and “sequence” of the activities within the case’s boundaries. He also noted that the contexts of the case are important to consider, which “go a long way towards making relationships understandable”.

Merriam (1998), as an educational researcher, presented a comprehensive overview of case study as an application of qualitative research. She confirmed the choice of case study design as a way to gain understanding of the situation, where the process of inquiry is of interest to the investigator rather than conclusion of the research. In her opinion, although case study can be very quantitative and test theory, they are more likely to be qualitative in education. In her definition, case study is a unit, entity, or phenomenon with defined boundaries which help the researcher determine what will be studied and what will not be studied. Then, case can be a person, a program,

a group, a specific policy and so on, which represent a lot more comprehensive list than Yin's and Stake's. The case study's data collection methods focus on holistic description and explanation; therefore, it can be further described as particularistic, heuristic, or descriptive. Consequently, case study can suggest other researchers or readers what to do in the same context or situation; extend their experience, discover new meaning, or confirm what is known, which explains what happened and why; and the descriptive case shows the complexities of the situation in which information and viewpoints are presented from a variety of sources. Merriam's definitions of case study, therefore, is broader than Yin's and Stake's and provides flexibility in exploiting qualitative case study strategy to research a much wider range of cases.

Researchers using case study research often try to investigate the common and the particularity about the case. This can be the in-depth investigation of the nature, historical background, physical setting, and other institutional and political contextual factors of the case (Stake, 1998). An interpretive or social constructivist approach of qualitative case study research gives a research method which focuses on the interaction between the researcher and the case (Stake, 1995). A postpositivist approach to case study, according to Yin (2012), includes careful consideration of validity and potential bias and ensures that all elements of the case are evaluated and adequately described.

### 3.2. Strengths and weaknesses of case study research

Case study research has several strengths over competing other research methods such as experiments and survey research in either theory building or theory testing, while positivist methods can be used for theory testing only. Case study research also clarifies our thinking and allows us to link Abstract ideas in specific ways with the concrete specifics of cases we observe in detail. In addition, the phenomenon of interest can be studied from the perspectives of multiple participants and using multiple levels of analysis (Bhattacharjee, 2012). In case study research, if the research questions are discovered to be less relevant, they can be modified during the research process, which is not possible in any positivist method after the data is collected. Besides, case studies have several features that attract researchers rather than other research methods. They provide insights into other, similar situations and cases, thereby assisting interpretation of other similar cases. They have a high degree of completeness, depth of analysis, and readability. In addition, the cases may generate new hypotheses, models, and understandings about the nature of language learning or other processes (Duff, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007; Bhattacharjee, 2012).

At the same time, case research also has some inherent weaknesses. Cohen et al. (2007:256) cited from Nisbet and Watt (1984) pointed out three weaknesses of case study as: "The results may not be generalizable except where other readers/researchers see their application; They are not easily open to cross-checking; hence they may be selective, biased, personal and subjective: They are prone to problems of observer bias, despite attempts made to address reflexivity". According to Bhattacharjee (2012) the quality of inferences derived from case research depends heavily on the integrative powers of the researcher. A novice researcher may miss concepts and patterns in case data that an experienced researcher may see. Therefore, the findings are sometimes criticized as being subjective. It can be realized that case research is a difficult research method that requires advanced research skills on the part of the researcher, and is therefore, often prone to error. The research questions of the case study may have no specific or adequate answers if the original ones

are specific, or the case sites are chosen based on access and convenience rather than based on the fit with the research questions. Moreover, researchers often do not validate, or triangulate data collected using multiple means, which may lead to biased interpretation based on responses from biased interviewees.

Naturally, the strengths of one approach tend to be the weaknesses of the other. Therefore, listing advantages and disadvantages of case study research does aims at helping researchers with wise decision in choosing the right research design for their study. In addition, it also helps to alert researchers to some of the criticisms and challenges they might encounter and help them anticipate how to address them accordingly.

### 3.3. Classifications of case study

Definitions of the case study are most often expressed in terms of its functions, aims and appropriate uses, therefore, the types of case study are also diverse from different writers' perspectives. Literature in case study has a long history across many disciplines and often characterized as part of qualitative research tradition; however, many methods and techniques can be conducted in case study with both quantitative and qualitative (Yin, 2009).

Several sources discuss different types of case studies. Stenhouse (1985) identified four broad styles of case study namely ethnographic, evaluative, educational and action research case studies. Yin's (1984) classification with three different types which he labelled "exploratory", "explanatory" and "descriptive". He wrote: "An *exploratory* case study ... is aimed at defining the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent (not necessarily case) study... A *descriptive* case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context. An *explanatory* case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships - explaining which causes produced which effects. (Yin 1993: 5). Merriam (1988) also classifies four common domains of case study: ethnographic, historical, psychological and sociological. Stake (1995) distinguished three types of cases and study design frameworks. These include the *intrinsic* case, the *instrumental* case, and the *collective* or *multiple* case. The intrinsic case is used to understand the particulars of a single case, rather than what it represents. An instrumental case study provides an insight into a wider issue or is used to refine theory. It facilitates the understanding of the object of interest. A collective refers to an instrumental case which is studied as multiple, nested cases, observed in unison, parallel, or sequential order which helps to investigate a phenomenon or general condition. A multiple case study is, therefore, an instrumental case study extended to several cases.

In terms of single and multiple case study design, researchers should carefully choose to do single case study or a multiple one for the understanding of the phenomenon. Another important thing to take under consideration is the context (Yin, 2003). When a study includes more than one single case, a multiple case study is needed. One of the differences between a single case study and a multiple case study is that in the last mentioned, the researcher is studying multiple cases to find out the differences and the similarities between the cases (Baxter, 2008; Stake, 1995). In addition, the researcher is able to make data analysis both within each situation and across situations (Yin, 2003). While a holistic case study with embedded units only allows the researcher to understand one unique/extreme/critical case, in a multiple case study, we are examining several cases to understand the similarities and differences between the cases. Multiple case studies can be used to



indicate contrasting or similar results in the study so that the researcher can clarify the value of the findings. Baxter (2008) confirmed that the evidence created from a multiple case study is measured strong and reliable and that they create a more convincing theory when the suggestions are more intensely grounded in several empirical evidence.

### 3.4. Key Decisions in Case Research

Bhattacharjee (2012) introduced five key decisions in case research that must be made by a researcher when considering a case research method. First, "is this the right method for the research questions being studied?". He emphasized that the case research method is particularly suitable for exploratory studies aiming at discovering relevant constructs in areas where theory building at the formative stages, for studies where the participants' experiences and context of actions are critical, and for studies aimed at understanding complex, temporal processes (why and how of a phenomenon) rather than factors or causes (what). Second, "what is the appropriate unit of analysis for a case research study?". In this case, the researcher must make a decision of whether s/he wants to investigate a phenomenon at the individual, group, and organizational level or at multiple levels. Third, "should the researcher employ a single-case or multiple-case design?" The researcher should consider if the situation is unique or extreme, if it represents a critical or contrary case for testing a well-formulated theory, then a single case design is more appropriate. In contrast, the multiple case design is more appropriate for theory testing, for establishing generalizability of inferences, and for developing richer and more nuanced interpretations of a phenomenon. Fourth, "what sites should be chosen for case research?" site selection is a particularly critical issue because selecting the wrong site may lead to the wrong inferences. Fifth, "what techniques of data collection should be used in case research?" Although interview is by far the most popular data collection technique for case research, the collected data from interview can be supplemented with other techniques such as observation, documentation, presentation, etc. Furthermore, the researcher should triangulate or validate observed data by comparing responses between interviewees.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Case study research is more than simply conducting research on a single individual or situation. This approach has the potential to deal with simple through complex situations which make a good opportunity for the novice research to gain great insight into a case. Although the scope of the case study is bounded and the findings can be hard to be generalized, it provides rich and noteworthy insight into events and behaviors. It can "contribute uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organizational, social, and political phenomena" (Yin, 1984:14). The in-depth focus on the particular within a bounded system can help provide a holistic view of a situation. It is a view that includes the context as well as the details of an individual. It also provides a humanistic, holistic understanding of complex situations, and as such are valuable research tools. However, literature in case study reveals a variety of approaches which may cause confused to novice researcher. Therefore, researchers must fully understand case study and its place in the research process if they choose case study as their main research method.

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