

X

EXEMPLARY CASE STUDIES: TOWARDS A DESCRIPTIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH TRADITION GROUNDED IN EVIDENCE

A PROPOSAL FOR SUBMISSION TO THE SSRC

Lawrence Stenhouse, Director, Centre for Applied Research in
Education, University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich

*"If anthropology and history once begin to collaborate
in the study of contemporary societies, it will become
apparent that here, as elsewhere, the one science can
achieve nothing without the help of the other."*

(Claude Levi-Strauss, 1968, p. 25)

Origins and Outline of the Proposal

During the session 1976-1977, I was awarded an SSRC Personal Research Grant to study qualitative and quantitative methods in research in curriculum and teaching. I devoted a good deal of time to a consideration of case-study, and I have concluded that three problems of case study - verification, cumulation and clearance of data - can be effectively attacked by the establishment of a convention which presses field workers engaged in case-study work to produce as an edited primary source an archival case record accessible to other scholars in microfiche form.

I presented an outline of this view in a paper at the American Educational Research Association meeting in New York in April 1977 and it aroused considerable interest. Since the paper was somewhat dense in texture, I later attempted a plainer, though less fully justified, account of what I had in mind; and this latter paper is attached to the present proposal as a background document.

The present proposal is for a one-year project from 1 April 1978 to 31 March 1979. Its purpose is to produce four exemplary case records which can be presented to colleagues in other institutions for discussion. Two of these case records

will be based upon interview, two upon participant observation. A conference to discuss them among colleagues from a number of English universities would be held at the end of the project at Easter 1979.

The Idea of Case Records

At present most reporting of descriptive case study seems to me both idiosyncratic and superficial. This is attributable less to the fault of the authors of the reports than to the absence of a disciplined convention which could support scholarly work in this genre.

I see the best promise for such a convention as lying in the recommendation that case-study workers produce case records from their field data which can serve as edited primary sources accessible to other scholars. The analogy is with the method of history which rests on the critical discussion among scholars of publicly accessible sources.

In the nineteenth century, when modern historical scholarship was in the making, this method involved historians in travel to consult the major archives of Europe, an expensive prerequisite of scholarly work. The accessibility of microfiche publication has transformed this situation. Thus, for example, I can sit in Norwich or Auckland and read the minutes of the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party.

A microfiche master reproduces 98 pages and costs £4.90. Copies cost 20 pence each. A 490 page case record can be reproduced in 20 copies for £44.50 or £2.23 a copy with unlimited further copies at 20 pence each.

Had the case studies produced in CARE in past years been based upon case records we would have provided already some eight to twelve school case records. Had the procedure been standard

in this country there would now be a substantial archive, probably already large enough to permit survey across schools of such topics as deputy headship, problems of mixed ability teaching or teaching of science. Soon the archive would be large enough to provide a selection of cases adequate to support useful retrospective generalizations (though not of course a representative sample as understood in the psycho-statistical paradigm: this is not the aim).

Verification, Cumulation and Clearance

The verification or validation of a case study would involve the writer of such a study in citing his microfiche record as an historian cites his courses. Thus a statement like:

"There is evidence that decisions made in the formal committee structure of the school are sometimes altered by the head as a result of pressures brought upon him in informal contacts with staff. For instance the decision to abolish detention, taken in the senior management committee, was reversed within two days after various members of staff had protested informally to the head at coffee break, lunch time and during free time."

might be footnoted: "Microfiche 7, frame 28, lines 4-21. See for parallel cases MF 3, f 72, ll 18-23; MF 4 55 23-25; MF 5, f.5, ll 9-16 and ll 20-22; MF 6, f.41, ll 3-11."

A scholar wishing to verify this judgement, perhaps in the course of writing about decision-making in the management of schools, would be able to review the evidence in the case record and thereby test the judgement against his own. Whereas verification in experimental science rests upon the replication of experiments, in history its basis is the critical study of the same sources by numerous scholars. This might be called replication of judgements, and it appears to be the procedure most appropriate to descriptive case study.

Cumulation would be possible because the growing record

archive would allow continual reassessment of the data base. Just as generalizations about Iron Age settlements are modified as more sites are investigated, so generalization about schools or educational problems would be subject to reappraisal as more cases became available in the record. A monograph on secondary school headship might ultimately draw on comparative study of the data from over a hundred case studies of secondary schools.

One of the great problems of case study, which is shared with contemporary history, is that of clearance of material about living persons. Obvious and necessary steps are the anonymisation of data by changing the names of places and people. Even then, however, it is impossible to anonymise a school from itself and, further, the publication of studies such as, for example, the Nailsea study do subject known individuals to public scrutiny which many find unacceptable.

It seems likely that microfiche publication of case records which are edited raw data will in any event not expose the subjects as books do. The audience is more restricted, the product less readable. And this protection could be greatly increased by the lodgement of case records in a national archive and citation by the national archive record numbers. This would provide no information about the geographical location of the case. Moreover, as the archive grew the protection would increase. The greatest problem is the early cases.

In the face of the three major problems posed in this section - those of verification, cumulation and clearance - the approach through case records in archive appears to offer the best prospect of progress.

Types of Case Study in the Present Proposal

The present proposal is directed towards the mounting of a conference at Easter, 1979. The purpose of that conference will be to consider: the appropriate criteria by which to judge the quality of a case record; the practical problems of compiling such records; and the utilization of case records in work with schools and in research settings.

In order best to serve that conference it is proposed that four case studies of schools be undertaken and four case records be produced. No exemplary studies are available of case records of the kind proposed here: that is, organizations of field data as edited primary sources for the researcher rather than the reader. The studies here proposed will be exemplary of the results of the aspiration towards such records, not models for imitation. They will raise, but not claim wholly to solve the problems of this kind of work.

With this in mind we propose to harden off towards ideal types two contrasting approaches to case study. These we call "oral history" or interview-based case study and "ethnography" or participant-observation case study. We shall undertake two case studies in each style though these will not be standardized in approach, but will represent the individual worker's interpretation of styles broadly defined in meetings of the four project members.

We do not want to pre-empt the results of the discussion at those meetings at this stage, but are able to present a tabular representation of the ideal types from which the discussion will begin.

Fig. 1 First Draft of a Typology of Oral History and Ethnographic Case Studies

	ORAL HISTORY	ETHNOGRAPHY
Main mode of data collection	Interview	Observation (including speech behaviour)
Data base	conscious world of participants	conscious world of researcher (includes inference about unconscious world of participants)
Principle of overriding	interview overrides observation	observation overrides interview
Field worker/situation interaction	towards non-reactive	towards natural reactivity
Criteria of criticism	comparison of testimony and witness of participants	comparison of observations of participants with some interpretation of testimony or witness

The Case Study Worker's Contribution to the School he Studies in the Present Proposal

A case-study worker, in asking for access to study a school, usually and properly offers a service to the school in return. Most often in our past experience this service has been to contribute a written-up case study to the school. Often there has been difficulty in clearing these for wider circulation and publication.

There are many obstacles to be negotiated in the way of a solution to the problem of reconciling the needs of the individual school (which would pull towards consultancy) and the needs of the community of schools (which would pull towards research). Since these obstacles are in the minds of people, interpersonal compromises will have to be made and the ultimate solution cannot be anticipated. However, something useful can be said at this stage.

Let us begin by considering how the situation might look if there were at the moment a national microfiche archive containing anonymized case records of, say, sixty comprehensive schools. Then anyone engaged in the case study of a school for whatever purpose would be able to edit his data from interview or participant observation into an anonymized case record, and lodge it in the archive with the assurance that any person wanting to relate data to people would have a difficult job on his hands, and one increasing in difficulty as time goes by. Under such conditions the researcher might reasonably negotiate a contract with the school before his work began which made quite clear the undertaking to produce a case record, and bound the school as well as himself in the contract to do so. The safeguards within that contract would be negotiated. Each person interviewed in an interview-based study might be given the right to strike passages of his discourse off the record. Some particularly difficult records lodged in the archive might be closed to access for a number of years. With the build-up of confidence procedures would become plainer and insecurities and difficulties fewer.

Against that background probably the ideal is that the case worker would not produce the case record in other than microfiche form and that he would not present it to the school or help the school to identify itself in the archive materials. His obligation to the school might be, for example, to produce a case study or a case report or to offer a consultancy. In so far as the school

asks for a portrayal of itself, that portrayal will quote the record and thus identify it. But if the school asks for a different form of consultancy - eg a diagnosis of problems or an advice about the implementation of a development plan, then the record need not be cited, and with care the anonymity of the record need not be broken. The distinction is between an historical portrayal in which the judgement of the individuals in that school is fed by a portrait of the situation when the researcher was among them and a diagnosis offered in the expectation that the judgement of members will be fed by the discussions which follow from the diagnosis. Some schools will opt for portrayal at the risk of the record being identified: others will opt for consultancy, and work through a response to the researcher's judgement. It would, of course, be wrong to attempt to narrow the possible options.

Now, the problem is that the archive does not exist and that the studies undertaken before there is a stock of case records in archive are more vulnerable to identification. In the present project four case records will be produced, and they are meant to feed a conference as well as the archive, the assumption being that there is a possibility of the participants in that conference being stimulated to produce sufficient case records to make an archive a real proposition within three years.

We must find four schools which are sympathetic to the enterprise, provide them with this proposal and supporting papers and attempt to negotiate:

- 1) that we produce a printed case record in 50 numbered copies for use by participants at the conference at the end of the project;
- 2) that we reproduce the same case record on microfiche in 20 copies for demonstration at the conference and for storage and inclusion in a national archive should one be set up.

It would be possible (though from our point of view not desirable)

that the 50-copy printing should all be destroyed after the conference, where the concern is not with the substantive cases but with the principles and practice of producing case records.

Within this framework it would be possible for each researcher to negotiate his service to the school on the same basis as that set out above. In any case study the record would be cited but it could be a record existing (for the present) only in 20 copies all in the possession of the research team pending the setting up of an archive.

Detailed Studies

Already, as a result of discussions during the drafting of this proposal, it has become apparent that there may be a case for detailed studies which will attempt to illuminate particular issues or problems. For example, we see the possibility of video-taping short examples of different styles of interviewing and of producing in parallel a participant observer's general description of a school and a general picture of the school culled from interviews with teachers, pupils, other staff and parents. No doubt other possibilities will present themselves and within the secretarial resources provided by the grant these will be followed up.

Similarly, the utility for school case records of photographic studies; and their anonymization by translation into line drawing (cp Walker, R. & Adelman, C. *A Guide to Classroom Observation*, London: Methuen, 1975) will be explored.

The Format of the Case Records in the Present Proposal

The case records emerging from the present project will have two functions. They will be materials for discussion in conference; and they will be exemplars of microfiche records. Because of

their conference use they will have to be printed as well as microfiched. The process we shall adopt will be as follows: a clean master copy will be produced and from it both a multilith offset litho master and a microfiche master will be produced. From the multilith master a limited and numbered edition of 50 printed copies will be reproduced. 20 microfiche copies will be produced from the microfiche master.

The British Standard for microfiche masters calls for *sans serif* type. Although it is recognized that an archive probably cannot be kept wholly consistent in format, it is proposed to explore the possibility of a standard as a desideratum. We shall adopt experimentally and evaluate the following categories on a code of four IBM typefaces.

Verbatim interview

Written field notes taken on site or within 48 hours

Dictated field notes taken on site or within 48 hours

All other matter

The Structure of the Final Conference

The final conference at Easter 1979 will last for four full days. The 40 to 50 participants will be in attendance because they are interested in the problem of undertaking case study of schools with the aim of producing case records.

At least a month before the conference the exemplary case studies produced by this project will be sent to each participant. They will be marked confidential and a letter will remind recipients of the importance of protecting the rights of the schools concerned. At least a week before the conference the participants will receive an issues paper produced by the project team on the basis of the experience of the project.

The task of the conference will be to consider the utility

of the case records produced, to review the issues raised by the experience of producing them and to make recommendations towards a convention for the conduct of case study leading to the production of case records.

Although the options of conference planning are not something we should wish to pre-empt, we expect that it will work in small groups for discussion, in plenary session and in small working groups to accomplish particular tasks. It is hoped to publish a document on case study and case records as a result of the conference, and also to report on the conference to colleagues at the British Educational Research Association Conference in September, 1979.

Both the document and the BERA report are intended to disseminate the work of the project and to ensure that the boundaries of participation imposed by practical constraints are not seen as boundaries of possession of the tradition.

The principal investigator is drafting a programme proposal to the SSRC for a collaborative effort across several universities to establish a well-ordered archive of contemporary case records and also an international proposal which would replicate the present four-study project in such a way as to provide an opportunity to allow each participant country to evaluate the potential for its own national archive and to make possible a case-based international survey of problems of comprehensive secondary education. The present proposal, while it makes these initiatives possible, does not depend for its usefulness on their support. Indeed, it is hoped that it will stimulate other and parallel responses both from participants in the final conference and from people who encounter the project's work either at BERA or through publication. The intention is that the present project provide a springboard or trampoline energising an effort rather than founding a monument.

Indexing

Should a national Contemporary Educational Records Archive come into existence, it would have to be indexed (probably on a computer basis) so that researchers pursuing topics such as mixed ability teaching or deputy headship could locate the relevant material (which they would, of course, have to interpret with regard to context).

The present project would aim to make progress towards this by producing through the services of an indexer in consultation with experts in the library and indexing fields a draft towards a system of indexing heads for school case records.

Cost analysis

Although we have done a considerable amount of case-study work in the past, we still find some difficulty in estimating the need for secretarial support. In the present proposal there is a degree of flexibility introduced by the potential for detailed but limited studies which could be conducted according to secretarial resources. But we hope to produce guidelines which will help in the budgetting of future case-record projects. In particular, we hope to be able to provide comparative information on the use of a dictaphone transcriber as opposed to a normal cassette recorder by a secretary doing tape transcription and also the average transcription time required for one hour of taped data and the variations round that average.