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CHAPTER 2

Turtles, Tortoises, Ethnographies, and Case Study

NUANCES OF DIFFERENCE AND DESIGN

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Like turtles and tortoises, on the surface case studies and ethnographies look very much the same. Turtles and tortoises both have a protective shell, four short legs, pointed tails, and rounded heads, as well as the amazing capacity to fold their limbs inside their shells. However, when we look closely, turtles and tortoises are very different. Turtles spend most of their lives in the water, have webbed feet, and are agile swimmers. Tortoises live their lives on land and have powerful claws to negotiate rough terrain. While their bodies may appear the same, they are uniquely suited to different purposes. Case studies and ethnographies are the same; they look similar, share many characteristics, and attend to people within social spaces (White, Drew, & Hay, 2009). However, when we look closely, important and fundamental differences become apparent.

CASE STUDIES AND ETHNOGRAPHIES: STUNNING SIMILARITIES

In general, contemporary case studies and ethnographies use similar types of data, attend to details, use thick description, focus on people's experiences, entail subjectivities on the part of researchers, use similar analytic processes, and report their findings in similar ways. These characteristics can make case studies and ethnographies difficult to differentiate. Below, I describe the notable number of characteristics shared by many case studies and ethnographies.

- Perhaps the most obvious similarity between case studies and ethnographies involves the types of data collected. Both case studies and ethnographies can involve assemblages of observations, interviews, field notes, documents, and artifacts.

- While the term *thick description* was coined by Geertz (1973), an ethnographer, both case studies and ethnographies entail thick description of phenomena. For case study researchers, this involves using multiple data sources to thoroughly describe and understand a *case*. For ethnographers, this entails careful observation to trace, track, and describe interactions and meaning making within social spaces.

- Both case studies and ethnographies attend to "cultural practices" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008). As recurring events that operate as social patterns, cultural practices are located within social and institutional contexts and produce the meanings that accompany experience. Analysis of cultural practices, for both case study researchers and ethnographers, reveals how everyday events implicate and involve people's values, aesthetics, preferences, norms, and expectations.

- Both case studies and ethnographies focus on meaning construction. By attending to details of discourse, behavior, interaction, and context, researchers come to understand how people construct meaning and make sense of themselves and their experiences. Case study researchers and ethnographers construct "interpretations of other people's interpretations" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 18) to reflect and describe people's worlds.

- Neither case study researchers nor ethnographers can claim to be unbiased or neutral; all qualitative researchers play active roles in research, and their backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences inevitably affect what they observe, hear, feel, understand, and describe. Both case studies and ethnographies are inherently subjective and interpretative, and are never comprehensive.

- While both case study researchers and ethnographers generally enter research spaces with general interests and questions, initial time spent in research settings involves observations and noticings that help them to transform general questions about phenomena into specific questions that can be adequately addressed (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008; Stake, 1995).

- Both case studies and ethnographies situate ongoing activities and experiences within larger contexts defined and affected by historical, institutional, political, cultural, and societal influences. Relevant context is identified during the research processes as researchers attend to contextualizing

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factors that participants name and/or that define their experiences. Thus, the lines between micro and macro, and between contexts and phenomena, are always subjective and blurry. Case study researchers and ethnographers strive to recognize, consider, and explain relevant macro forces as they interpret phenomena.

- While case study researchers (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Smith, 1979; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002) often argue that case studies can be characterized by the bounded nature of the phenomena under study, ethnographies also entail boundaries. As Heath and Street (2008) explain, ethnographers "set spatial and temporal boundaries when seeking the answer to questions" (p. 19). Thus, both case studies and ethnographies are bounded; however, their boundaries are drawn to encompass different types of entities.

- For both case study researchers and ethnographers, analysis of data is "inductive, grounded in particular pieces of data that are sorted and inter-related in order to understand the dimensions and dynamics of some phenomenon as it is enacted by intentional social actors in some time and place" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 82). This analysis can involve sorting and categorizing data, and developing the vocabulary needed to tell a story suggested by data. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) report, categories, patterns, lists, linked events, recurring practices, and shared perspectives voiced by participants lead to trails of "thematic threads, meaningful events, and powerful factors, that allow us [researchers] entry into the multiple realities and dynamic processes that constitute the everyday drama of language use in educational sites" (p. 111).

- Both case studies and ethnographies can occur in classrooms and schools (Erickson, 1984); case studies are likely to focus on particular issues or the experiences and perspectives of particular individuals, while ethnographies tend to focus on processes and practices within defined spaces—including the roles, activities, and meaning making that occur.

- Both case studies and ethnographies can be employed to explore the experiences of social groups that been historically underserved by schools. Thoughtful and sensitive research efforts can reveal and reflect on histories, ideological tensions, and power struggles that define people's lived experiences.

- The reporting of literacy case studies and ethnographies often assumes a form of "storytelling" (Dyson, 2013; Heath & Street, 2008; Stake, 1995). Vignettes, rich descriptions of places and people, and narrative-like storylines characterize the presentation of ethnographies and case study research.

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- Both literacy case studies and ethnographies not only may attend to written representations of language, but may also reference multimodal literacies that include images, musical scores, computer languages, gestures, dramatic performances, charts, or signed languages for hearing-impaired people; thus, literacy is inherently connected to various communicative practices.

- Both case study and ethnography have been criticized as not being generalizable. Stake (1978) challenges this claim, arguing that case studies mimic the understandings that people gain "through direct and vicarious experience" (p. 5), and that researchers' words and illustrations emulate "natural experience acquired in ordinary personal involvement" (p. 5). Naturalistic generalizations invoke researchers' curiosity and assume personal, sensory, and narrative forms. Thus, naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995) result from the "full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts" (p. 6). As Dyson and Genishi (2005) explain, qualitative analyses have "contributed to and complicated generalizations about language and literacy teaching" (p. 113) weaving together ideas and creating "quilts" of understanding. They argue for the importance of naturalistic generalization as readers generalize "in private, personal ways, modifying, extending, or adding to their generalized understandings of how the world works" (p. 115). Understandings of a particular phenomenon or context allow researchers and educators to compare the particulars of various situated experiences to extend, complicate or modify existing knowledge.

When explicitly listed as they are above, the similarities between case studies and ethnographies are stunning; they explain the consternation that emergent scholars may feel as they attempt to distinguish these two methodologies (White et al., 2009).

Below, I explicitly name differences in foci and practices that distinguish case studies and ethnographies. Just as children learn to recognize turtles' and tortoises' bodies as suited to either living in water or on land, scholars are able to distinguish between case studies and ethnographies, once they are alerted to relevant differences. In what follows, I explore some of these critical differences. Some result from disparate histories, which have defined the emergence of these methodologies. Thus, I open each section with a discussion of the histories associated with each methodology.

WHAT MAKES A CASE STUDY A CASE STUDY?

Case studies and ethnographies have different historical roots. Case study research can be traced to the historical emergence of medicine, psychology, biology, and law, and has served as a primary method of learning for

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generations of physical, biological, and social scientists (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, the cases described in these historical reports are very different from how qualitative case studies are currently conducted.

Biologists, doctors, and physicists learn through the careful observation of particular cases. For example, Anderson and Meier-Hedde (2001) describe how rich case reports of people who struggled with reading led to the development of various theories and interventions for people we now describe as having dyslexia. These cases often focused on individuals who had suffered some form of physical brain injury and involved close observation and tracking of individuals. As Flyvbjerg (2006) reports, observation and documentation of cases have always been critical to scientific endeavors; unfortunately, too often this "*force of example*" (p. 228, original emphasis) is underestimated and described as unscientific.

Across history, disciplines, and epistemological premises, varied methodological practices use the word *case* as they focus on particular entities, individuals, and phenomena; however, these methodologies can be very different from contemporary qualitative case studies as defined by Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2002). For example, Merseth (1991) provides an historical account of the early history of case-based instruction in the field of law. He locates its emergence at the Harvard Law School during the 1870s. The goal was for faculty to use the analysis and discussion of particular legal cases to apply legal precedents to new situations. Merseth discusses the implementation of similar instructional practices at the Harvard School of Business and advocates for case-based instruction as a viable educational practice for educators.

Certainly, there are examples of educators creating opportunities for case-based instruction. For example, Harry, Klingner, and Cramer (2007) present cases of minority students who have been placed in special education classrooms to engage preservice teachers and others in conversations about the disproportionality of special education placement for students from historically underserved communities. Jones, Clarke, and Enriquez (2010) present case studies of children in literacy classrooms to explore possibilities for instructional problem solving to address the particular challenges faced by young readers and writers. Similarly, Comber and Kamler (2005) present cases that reveal the resourceful and student-centered work of literacy teachers as they craft "turn-around pedagogies" (p. 1) that successfully serve children. The cases presented in these books share an epistemological commitment to using cases to support the learning of practicing and preservice teachers.

Another methodology that can be confused with case study is single-subject experimental design. Like many case studies, single-subject experiments focus on individuals; however, this method involves carefully delineated methods to examine the effects of an experimental treatment on participants: "In a single-subject experiment the investigator deliberately manipulates one or more independent variables. Single-subject experiments

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are designed to generate functional and causal statements, whereas case studies are designed to provide insight by describing phenomena" (Neuman, Chapter 16, this volume, p. 346) Single-subject experiments are explicitly designed to establish a causal relationship between interventions and outcomes. Thus, this method involves the manipulation of one or more variables and the tracking of change over time. While contemporary case studies, particularly longitudinal case studies, may also attend to change over time, their focus is on what happens across time in naturalistic settings. Yin (1981) defined the case study as a research strategy that is distinguished by its "attempts to examine (a) a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 59).

Contemporary case studies are premised on the researcher's "interest in the local particulars of some abstract social phenomena" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, pp. 2–3). They focus on a particular *social unit*—"a person, a group, a place or activity, or some combination of those units" (p. 3). This unit operates as an *example*—"case of something, of some phenomenon" (p. 3). As Stake (1995) explains, the goal is to capture the complexity of a specific case, perhaps the meaning making of an individual, the enactment of a particular practice, or activities that occur within a particular classroom. Dyson and Genishi (2005) argue that case studies are "constructed not found as researchers make decisions about how to angle their vision on places over-flowing with potential stories of human experience" (p. 2). Because any phenomenon of interest looks, sounds, and feels different depending on the social and cultural context in which it occurs, the case itself is not the phenomenon, but a contextualized instance of a phenomenon.

Contemporary case studies can also be very different from each other. For example, Merriam (1998), Stake (1995), and Yin (2002) present different visions of the nature of case studies (Yazan, 2015). Yin (2002) proposes a relatively positivistic view of case studies, referencing objectivity, validity, and traditional notions of generalizability. Merriam and Stake share a constructivist orientation that honors experiences constructed through social interactions; they strive to understand how people make sense and operate within their worlds. The generalizations I make about qualitative case study methodologies in this chapter are most closely aligned with the qualitative practices, analytic procedures, and epistemological stances described by Merriam and Stake.

Thus, case study research inevitably engages the "messy complexity of human experience" (p. 3) as phenomena are enacted, experienced, and encountered in multiple, complex, eternally emerging, and socially constructed contexts. The researcher's goal is to understand what a phenomenon of interest means as it is enacted within a particular social context (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

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Stake (1995) has identified three types of case studies. *Intrinsic case studies* and *instrumental case studies* are defined by the interests and intents of the case study researchers. An intrinsic case study is designed and implemented to allow a researcher to learn about a particular case—perhaps a person, a classroom, or a school. Generally, the researcher has identified a salient reason for choosing a particular case and believes that focusing on this case will lead to important insights and understandings. In contrast, instrumental case studies are designed and implemented in order to examine and explore a particular issue or situation. While instrumental case studies may involve particular people, classrooms, or schools, the researchers focus is on an identified phenomenon—perhaps the experiences of novice teachers, gifted children, or emerging bilingual students. Distinguishing between these two types of case studies is contingent on subtle differences in focus.

The third type of case study identified by Stake (1995) is the *collective case study*. Collective case studies can be either intrinsic or instrumental. An intrinsic collective case study looks across carefully chosen cases that describe and interpret the experiences of individual people, classrooms, and schools to contribute to findings that involve contrasts between these unique, individual experiences. An instrumental collective case study explores a particular issue as it plays out and affects people in various contexts. The goal is to contribute to a richer understanding of the issue and its affects.

Flyvbjerg (2006) distinguishes among *extreme/deviant cases, maximum variation cases, critical cases*, and *paradigmatic cases*:

- Extreme/deviant cases focus on unusual or problematic cases that complicate existing knowledge.
- Maximum variation cases attend to cases that have been carefully selected to account for high levels of variation. These cases may vary in accordance with student age, classroom organizational structure, or available resources.
- Critical cases seek information that supports or challenges existing knowledge. Critical case logic can either challenge or support existing understandings as they relate to a particular case.
- Paradigmatic cases establish a particular lens, metaphor, or understanding that can be applied to related cases.

These variations of case study research highlight the significance of case selection and the empirical rationale for choosing particular cases.

Flyvbjerg (2006) argues for significant learning from case studies. He notes that case studies produce "the type of content-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule based beginners to virtuous experts" (p. 221). In other words,

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case studies can situate, nuance, and complicate the experiences of students and their teachers. Flyvbjerg argues that "experts operate on the basis of intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise. Context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity" (p. 222), and "case knowledge is central to human learning" (p. 222). He notes that case study learning is not about proving causality or establishing claims. Instead, careful case study research results in learning something about the phenomena of study, within a particular context, and as understood by a particular researcher.

Case study researchers can assume many roles; they can observe from a distance, operate as trusted allies, or serve as action researchers studying their own practice. Although acting as a participant observer is an option for case study researchers, the roles played by case study researchers tend to be more varied than the roles generally assumed by ethnographers, who often act as participant observers.

WHAT MAKES AN ETHNOGRAPHY AN ETHNOGRAPHY?

While case study researchers highlight phenomena or people, ethnographers focus on processes and practices within defined contexts. Case study researchers are more interested in understanding how a "phenomenon matters from the perspectives of participants" (p. 81). Modern ethnography has clear historical roots in anthropology (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). Around the beginning of the 20th century, anthropologists, particularly those working in South America and Asia, studied people's everyday social lives and practices.

Heath and Street (2008) identified two complementary and historical traditions, originating respectively in Britain and in North America, that inform modern ethnography. In Britain during World War I, Bronislaw Malinowski, a social anthropologist working in the Trobriand Islands, found himself breaking with traditional anthropological approaches (surveys, accounts from travelers) and conducting extended ethnographic fieldwork while locating his findings within larger economic, political, and social contexts. Malinowski's methods led to the preparation of new generations of social anthropologists and ethnographers committed to long-term projects in which they spent months and years embedded in local cultures, learning local languages, and documenting cultural practices.

During the early 20th century in the United States, North American scholars became aware of the pressing need to attend to the knowledge, languages, and cultural practices of indigenous communities (Heath & Street, 2008). Franz Boas at Columbia University was a leader among this group of anthropologists who "recognized that indigenous populations possessed critical knowledge of their regions as well as a historical understanding of human migration" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 114). These

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interests expanded internationally as U.S. governmental agencies began to recognize the roles anthropologists and linguists could play in learning about the "range of social, ideological and cultural differences" (p. 115) in the world. While questions continue to emerge about whether and to what degree people can understand and describe other cultures, and what methodological and analytical practices might be ethical and helpful to local communities, these practices have served as the basis for contemporary ethnography, including ethnographies conducted in local communities and organizations.

Across the 20th century, ethnographers increasingly collected firsthand data and used those data to describe and explain social and cultural characteristics of communities and organizations. These practices were also applied to contemporary Western settings, including urban neighborhoods, religious and ethnic communities, and schools (Yon, 2003). Educational anthropology evolved from 1925 through 1955, leading to the publication of ethnographies that focused on classrooms and schools during the 1950s and 1960s (Yon, 2003). From anthropology, ethnographers have adopted and adapted a commitment to in-depth and often long-term study of social or cultural groups, a focus on everyday life and cultural practices, and the use of ethnographic tools (i.e., interviews, document analysis, observation, video/audio recording) (Green & Bloome, 1997). Participant observation in classrooms enabled researchers to observe children in naturalistic studies to document official and nonofficial goals of schools, hidden or unrecognized curricular effects, and the ways larger social changes affected schooling and participants' experiences of school.

Although not all educational ethnographies are classroom ethnographies, Heath and Street (2008) note that since the 1990s, classrooms have increasingly served as ethnographic sites. They remind us that classrooms are heavily influenced by forces beyond classroom walls, which typically determine the pace of instruction, instructional goals, schedules, and instructional methods and materials.

Atkinson and Hammersley (1998) note that there is no firm consensus on the definition of *ethnography,* but they do identify several substantial features, including an emphasis on the nature of social phenomena, the collection of "unstructured" data (p. 248), the investigation of a small number of cases, and the "explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions" (p. 248). Heath and Street (2008) define ethnography as "a theory building and theory dependent enterprise. Ethnographers construct, test, and amplify theoretical perspectives through systemic observing, recording, and analyzing of human behavior in specifiable spaces and interactions for the co-occurrence of language, literacy, and multimodalities for any situation or context selected as field site(s)" (p. 38). Heath and Street argue that culture should be recognized as "a verb rather than a noun" (p. 7). They describe culture as "unbounded, kaleidoscopic, and dynamic" (p. 7), referencing the eternally emergent and always multi-faceted nature

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of culture. Culture involves "ever-shifting active processes of meaning-making" (p. 7) and focuses on what happens in particular spaces, contexts, classrooms, communities, or affinity groups.

Heath and Street (2008) argue that ethnographers dive "head-first into *culture*" (p. 3, original emphasis). They attend to how people produce symbolic structures that accompany being, while honoring both the vast variability in the ways people "create, sustain, and adapt their modalities, including oral and written language" (p. 3). For example, ethnographers who study language and literacy may explore individual efforts to become experts in particular areas, identity making within groups, or meaning making within institutions of formal learning. For Heath and Street, ethnography entails tracking, describing, and enumerating the multimodal and semiotic processes within social spaces. These semiotic processes inevitably involve social interactions, social contexts, and cultural norms.

A tenet of ethnography is the construct of *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), mentioned earlier in this chapter. Thick description highlights the interpretation and pursuit of cultural meaning and understanding. Traditionally, and again drawing on anthropology, ethnographies entail spending sustained periods of time in a field (often several years). However, in recent years, some researchers have argued that ethnographic studies can be designed to compensate for shorter time frames (Heath & Street, 2008). These adaptations include the following:

- Briefer but more intensive data collection, paired with the careful identification of a singular and specific theme.
- Longer time frames and the selective identification of particular foci and events that enable the researcher to move in and out of the research space.
- Focusing on particular recurrent events or naturally occurring phases to monitor change over time.

Unlike case studies, which generally focus on individuals or issues, ethnography focuses on social networks (i.e., families, classrooms, schools). As Erickson (1984) has explained, an ethnography "not only treats a social unit of any size as a whole but . . . portrays events, at least in part, from the points of view of the actors involved in the events" (p. 52). Erickson notes that ethnographers combine their own firsthand experiences with the perspectives and insights of participants to produce informed descriptions of essential and partial aspects of a society. Such descriptions can lead to systematic definitions of the social whole that often challenge naïve explanations and deficit assumptions.

Drawing on Malinowski, Erickson (1984) describes educational ethnographies as focusing on schools as organizations that entail economies, myths, folk philosophies, and rituals. Thus, schools and classrooms can be treated as communities and analyzed in terms of the people involved—their

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statuses, roles, rights, and obligations. Economically, these communities entail contracts and exchanges; for instance, students defer to teachers in exchange for good treatment and access to knowledge. Myths, folk philosophies, and rituals determine what is taught, the cultural lens that is privileged, and the routines and rituals that guide successful participation. As Erickson notes, "ethnography, because of its holism and because of its cross-cultural perspective, provides an inquiry process by which we can ask open-ended questions that will result in new insights about schooling in American society" (p. 65).

A particularly salient dimension of ethnography is the role of the researcher. In many ethnographies and to various degrees, the researcher assumes the stance of a participant observer. This participant observer "intrudes into the situation to invite participants to record *their* observations" (Stenhouse, 1987, p. 34). Stenhouse contrasts this stance with that of researchers who rely only on interviews. He argues that the "interviewer is a collector of specimens for later examination" while the "participant observer cannot 'collect' his observations—he *makes them* in a much more thorough sense than the interviewer need, because he interprets in the field" (p. 35; emphasis added). At the same time, participant observers work to be both involved and engaged, while simultaneously remaining silent and communicating only in locally appropriate ways (see Dyson, 2013). As Atkinson and Hammersley (1998) argue, it is possible to claim that all social research involves participant observation, as all qualitative researchers participate to some degree in social spaces; however, ethnographers tend to claim a particularly active role in research contexts and with participants. In short, the ethnographer is the primary research instrument. Drawing on their anthropological roots, ethnographers aspire toward careful observation, attention to detail, and nuanced listening in order to make connections and see patterns within complex social spaces.

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CASE STUDIES AND ETHNOGRAPHIES: A FEW REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLES

While space limits prevent a comprehensive discussion of the many wonderful case studies and ethnographies that address literacy, on the following pages I describe a small set of research projects that begin to capture how case study and ethnography have been used to study literacy. Choosing these studies was a challenge. I sought studies that would be recognizable to readers and clearly represented case study and ethnography.

As readers might suspect, I revisited an earlier edition of this book to see what was previously written and which studies were cited. The second edition of *Literacy Research Methodologies* (Duke & Mallette, 2011) included separate chapters on case study and ethnography. Interestingly, when I examined those chapters, I noticed that some studies were discussed

in both the case study chapter and the ethnography chapter. For example, *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write: Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures* (Dyson, 2003), *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Heath, 1983), and *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy* (Purcell-Gates, 1997) were discussed as examples of both case study and ethnography. This is not surprising, given their many shared characteristics discussed above. As described below in reference to another of Dyson's books, *Rewriting the Basics: Literacy Learning in Children's Cultures* (2013), researchers often draw on both case study and ethnography methodologies; these studies might best be described as *ethnographic case studies.*

A Few Case Studies

During the second half of the 20th century, a growing body of powerful literacy case studies appeared. These studies tracked the literacy development of individual children (Bissex, 1980; Butler, 1975; Calkins, 1983; White, 1956). For example, Bissex (1980) tracked her son's literacy development across several years to explore his emergent interactions with text and his increasing ability to connect oral language with print. These early case studies revealed the emergent nature of early literacy learning and have inspired generations of educators to attend to the literacy practices and abilities that children bring from home to formal literacy-learning experiences at school.

Whereas Bissex's primary emphasis was on an individual child, Taylor (1983) shifted her lens to examine what happened in families. Thus, rather than a targeted focus on children, Taylor attended to families and to the roles played by parents and their own literate histories. In a later coauthored study, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) applied case study methods to examine literacy learning in low-income African American families whose children were successful in school. This study challenged assumptions about literacy practices in African American homes and revealed the resourcefulness and ingenuity of parents who often faced difficult situations with few resources.

My own work was heavily influenced by these case studies. As a graduate student in the 1990s, I read these texts. For my dissertation, I conducted a 1-year collective case study of 10 students from my first-grade classroom (Compton-Lilly, 2003). Although it was not my intention at the time, I ended up extending those case studies across a decade and following the children into grade 11 (Compton-Lilly, 2007, 2012, 2017). While the cases originally focused on literacy practices in children's homes, over time the stories told by families expanded to include the children's experiences of school, their literacy practices, and their identity construction. The families featured in these books, like those described by Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), challenged assumptions often made about poor African American

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families and revealed the knowledge, resources, and resilience of the families.

Each of these case studies provides a lens on literacy that helps educators to understand how literacy is learned, the roles it plays in people's lives, and the ways people experience literacy. These micro-level accounts, while contextualized by larger practices and policies, focus on people and their lived experiences or issues that have defined literacy learning and practices.

A Few Ethnographies

Although case studies can focus on larger social units (classrooms, schools, communities), a group focus often results in hybridity, as attention in social spaces is often drawn to interactions and social meanings in social spaces (Dyson, 2003; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1997). Below, I explore three ethnographies that situate literacy learning and literacy practices in communities and classrooms.

Street (1984) used ethnography to examine literacy practices and learning in an Iranian village. He identified how literacies related to Koranic schooling influenced the emergence of commercial literacies. As he described these literacy flows, he made critical distinctions between autonomous and ideological models of literacy, challenging narrow and conventional views of literacy and literacy learning. Thus, Street's interest was in what happened within particular social spaces, the actors within those spaces, the roles they assumed, and the meanings that were made.

Focusing on perhaps a more familiar community, Barton and Hamilton (2012) explored the local literacies operating in Lancaster, England during the 1990s. They documented people's day-to-day literacy practices, with an emphasis on how focal individuals accessed and used local media. Less interested in the practices and perspectives of particular people, they highlighted the role of literacy in families and during leisure activities. Like Street, they were interested in what was happening with literacy in a particular community. What were the spaces within which literacy occurred, who were the actors within those spaces, what roles did they assume, and what meanings were made?

Finally, Lewis (2001) brought us into classrooms to explore classroom interactions and practices related to literacy. Specifically, Lewis spent a year in fifth- and sixth-grade classrooms observing children as they engaged in four literacy practices: read-aloud, peer-led discussions, teacher-led literature discussions, and independent reading. Her focus was on "how these practices were shaped by discourses and rituals within the classroom and by social codes and dominant cultural norms beyond the classroom" (p. 4). Thus, Lewis explicitly focused on what happened in classrooms and how meanings were made and shared.

Whereas the biology of turtles and tortoises prevents interbreeding, theories that espouse and support the social construction of knowledge

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suggest that hybridity is always possible and probably unavoidable. Thus, while discernible differences continue to define the two methodologies, many researchers have consciously and thoughtfully adopted and adapted methods and practices across this methodological divide. The result has been that in practice, differences between case study and ethnography must be conceptualized on a continuum rather than as distinct breaches (see Figure 2.1). Some case studies are notably ethnographic: Case study researchers might retain their attention to individual meaning making and experience, while adopting participant observer roles and attending to the social construction of meaning. Alternatively, ethnographers, through their

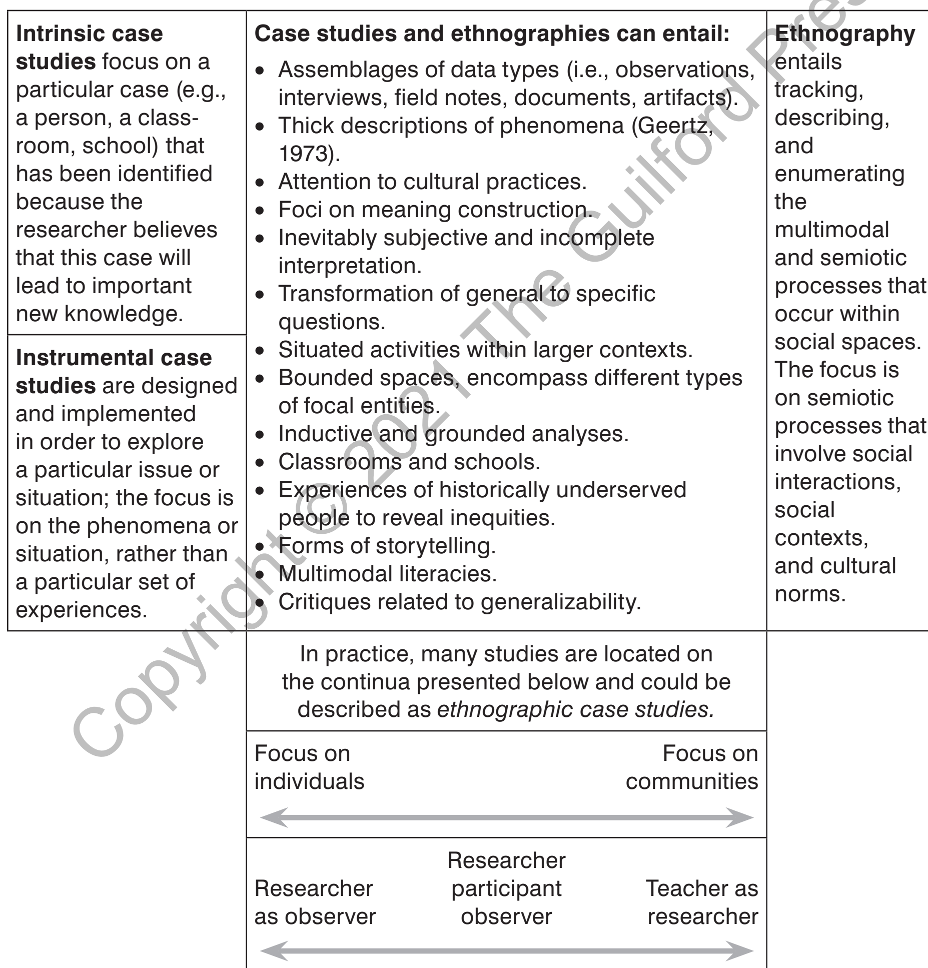

FIGURE 2.1. A hybrid continuum: Case studies and ethnographies.

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attention to focal participants, may embed case studies into their ethnographic accounts.

In this chapter, I differentiate between case studies and ethnographies—two methodological practices with many similarities. As readers who share a commitment to the social construction of knowledge and practice might expect, in practice the methods and epistemological frameworks that define modern case studies and ethnographies often merge. Case study researchers routinely read ethnographies, and ethnographers routinely read case studies. We attend the same conferences, write for the same journals, and cite each other's work. We share qualitative and often sociocultural and critical commitments, and are dedicated to understanding literacy practices and educational phenomena within naturalistic settings.

As a result of this cross-pollination, researchers have located themselves in various spaces on the case study–ethnography continuum. This hybrid result is often described as an *ethnographic case study*. Below, I describe what I believe is an exemplary ethnographic case study: *Rewriting the Basics* by Anne Haas Dyson (2013). Following my discussion of this study, I highlight criteria that defines quality for both case studies and ethnographies.

REWRITING THE BASICS (DYSON, 2013): AN EXEMPLARY ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

Although there are many brilliant and compelling ethnographic case studies, when I think about literacy research, I am constantly drawn to the work of Anne Haas Dyson. As a first-grade teacher and graduate student who grappled with the readings assigned in my doctoral classes, I often found myself questioning the relevance of what we were required to read. I missed the voices of children; I also worried that the research I was reading was far removed from my work as a teacher, and that I might not rally the stamina needed to finish my doctorate. I vividly remember being assigned to read *Writing Superheroes* (Dyson, 1997) and finally thinking, "Wow, this makes sense! There is power in writing about children and their literacy learning." I remember being able to see myself as a qualitative researcher, writing about children and families, and telling their stories. I recognized the power in that approach. Thus, I return to the work of Dyson as an example of an exemplary ethnographic case study.

I focus on one of Dyson's more recent books, *Rewriting the Basics* (2013), as an excellent example of an ethnographic case study. Part of my selection process entailed confirming that this book qualifies as an ethnographic case study. In particular, I wondered how Dyson characterizes her own work. I knew that along with Celia Genishi, she had literally "written the book" on case studies (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Thus, I consulted the

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book's index and searched for the terms *case study* and *ethnography*. I encountered two surprises. First, while the index includes no references to ethnography, the indexed references to *case study* brought me to a methodological appendix that opens with the words, "As an ethnographer . . ." (p. 180). This focus on ethnography is reiterated on pages 183 and 184, where Dyson describes her "ethnographic analysis/es." Intrigued, I perused the text and noted that Chapter 1 is titled "The 'Basics' and Society's Children: *Cases* of Classroom Writing" (p. 1; emphasis added).

These clues confirmed my thinking. First, yes, Dyson characterizes her work as drawing on both ethnography and case study methodologies. Second, these insights affirm the premise presented in this chapter: that hybrid models are possible and promising for exploring literacy learning and literacy practices. In short, Dyson focuses on what happens within social spaces—classrooms—alongside careful and thoughtful analyses of individual children, their experiences, and their literacy practices.

One of the strengths of this ethnographic case study is the clear articulation of the project's focus. In her methodological appendix (pp. 180–184), Dyson clearly articulates her focus and her interest in both social contexts and the children's sense making: "My overriding concern was to understand the ideological—indeed, the ethical—underpinnings of 'basics' in the official composing curricula, as materially given and interactionally enacted. Moreover, I aimed to understand how children, made sense of what was curricularly on offer in their own times and spaces" (p. 180).

Dyson provides a clear description of how this focus leads to the ideas presented in the book. After collecting official documents and curricula that defined learning in two classrooms, she identifies events and analyzes those events in terms of their focus, their place within larger routines, their thematic content, and the modalities involved. Dyson becomes particularly intrigued by the "fix-it events" (p. 183) in each classroom. She defines *fix-it events* as times when basic skills were invoked through correction by the teachers or students. Across the two classrooms, students fixed grammar; addressed content; adhered to writing conventions; and made choices about words, organization, and aesthetics. The fix-its defined what counted as "fair," "good," or "nice" (p. 183). Thus, Dyson thoroughly describes her methodological and analytic processes; she makes her process visible so that readers have a clear sense of what she did, and thus can discern the trustworthiness of her study.

Interestingly, toward the end of this appendix, Dyson provides a rare degree of transparency about her process. She identifies and lists possible themes that she does not discuss in this book: "descriptions of the kinds of play in which the children engaged," "new kinds of emerging play," and variation in the "focal children's use of semantic tools" (p. 184). She then describes starting with "thin tales" about writing, reading compelling theories, pouring over her data, and sketching out new types of analyses. Finally,

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the "plot thickened," the "characters emerged" (p. 184), and the book was written. This transparency about her process, and her honesty about the unplanned and unpredictable nature of her analysis, are reassuring to all of us who find ourselves with stacks of data and no clear path forward.

Across this ethnographic case study, Dyson demonstrates reflexivity, not only about her research process, but also about her role as a researcher. She admits that she intentionally selected classrooms where teachers demonstrated respect for children and would welcome her nontraditional presence. She acknowledges her "critical stance toward the highly regulated teaching situations" (p. 180). While attempting to be as innocuous as possible—listening, watching, audiotaping, copying children's work, and taking notes—she identifies how her presence probably affected the children and the teachers. Dyson makes no claims of objectivity and noninterference, but clearly describes the steps she took to minimize her influence on the children and their writing.

While Dyson's methodological descriptions and reflexive stance support the trustworthiness of the study, they do not capture the ultimate power of Dyson's work. Part of the contribution is her beautiful and compelling writing. Her thick descriptions of classrooms and apt articulations of children's voices transport readers into these classrooms, and specifically into buzzing writing workshops. We vicariously sit beside the children as they negotiate doing writing right, and we witness how they experience fix-it requests.

Each chapter opens with an anecdote that draws readers into a writing workshop. We accompany Dyson on her drive to the school, enter the classrooms with her, and are introduced to the teachers and children. We then encounter the official *basics* in kindergarten and first grade, including letters, their sounds, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and the spacing of words across a page. However, Dyson observes more than simple skill instruction. She complicates the basics by "examining the values and beliefs—the ideologies—they embody about proper language and proper children" (p. xi).

This interface among children, the basics, and accompanying fix-it strategies in writing workshops is not established by telling readers what happened. We are truly shown. We witness what Dyson witnessed through her careful observation and relentless recording of children's words, actions, and written texts. As we read the book and consider the children's experiences, Dyson creates a compelling case that reveals how attention to the basics has "drowned out talk of how children learn and, most relevant to this book, who they are, that is, their humanity" (p. 6). Significantly, Dyson does not dismiss the importance of official basics; instead, she argues for a "transformation [that] would stretch 'the basics,' because it would make relevant children's use of basic communicative actions" (p. 165). She insists on the humanity of children.

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CLOSING AND CRITERIA

Although exemplary ethnographic case studies share many criteria, I highlight the following:

- A clear articulation of the project's ultimate focus.
- Attention to dimensions of education that matter for children.
- Rich and detailed descriptions of settings, participants, and methods.
- Thoughtful presentations of the voices and experiences of participants.
- Recognition of the complexity of social spaces and the people who occupy them.
- Acknowledgment of how power, in all its forms, affects children's lives and learning.
- Transparency and honesty in regard to the researcher's own practices and positionality.
- Excellent writing.
- Attention to the humanity of people as they live and learn in educational spaces.

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Like turtles and tortoises, case studies and ethnographies can appear very similar (White et al., 2009). They use similar types of data, attend to details and entail thick description, focus on people's experiences, are subjective, use similar analytic processes, and report their findings in similar ways.

However, as Small (2009) notes, methods of scientific inquiry "are languages to the extent that they constitute systems of thought with terms and ways of framing problems that are specific to their systems" (p. 10). Thus, it is not the types of data, the level of detail, or the amount of subjectivity that distinguishes case studies from ethnographies. Instead, we recognize the systems of thought that accompany these methodologies and frame phenomena in ways that highlight either social processes or social mechanisms, perspectives or systems of meaning, individuals or networks, the particularistic or the interactive, individual experiences or lives within groups, and individual or cultural knowledge. Thus, the systems of thought that the researcher attends to are what make the difference. The good news is that, unlike turtles and tortoises, researchers can choose from both systems by locating themselves on a powerful continuum that offers a myriad of possibilities.

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