

# Reflections on the use of qualitative case study design in education policy research: contributing to the debate of Generalisation in research

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## Abstract

Researchers across the disciplines use different designs in the quest to authentically reflect the phenomena they investigate. One design claiming to capture the lived experiences of individuals in an appropriate way is qualitative-case study. This article focuses on generalisability of qualitative case study research findings by reflecting on educational policy research conducted in Ghana to explore the lived experiences of students, teachers and school managers in Ghanaian high schools, with an eye to the potential of positive behaviour management in that specific West African context. The claim made here is that generalisation from individual case studies is both possible and worth doing in so far as the theoretical underpinning is well grounded. This research seeks to justify the use of qualitative-case-study research in educational policy research. The distinctiveness of this methodological approach lies in its ability to generalise the findings.

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**Keywords:** Qualitative, case study, generalisation, theory, Ghana

## 1.0 Introduction

The qualitative case study which is the subject of reflection in this article was theory-oriented but very much rooted in the reality of contemporary Ghanaian High Schools. It was a product of on-the-ground doctoral research carried out by Ghanaian researcher working in Education at an English university. The research was conducted using interviews, documentary analysis and direct observation. Even though this case study was qualitative in approach, case study research can also be used for both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Chen & Oliver, 2018; Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Hanna, 2000); there is sometimes an erroneous impression that quantitative data cannot be collected and analysed using case study design (Chen & Oliver, 2018; see Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The phenomenon of interest in this case study research was Positive Behaviour Management in Ghanaian Schools (PBM). Ibrahim (2017) uses the concept of PBM to refer to “forms of behaviour management in school that seek to ensure that the rights, dignity and self-esteem of students are safeguarded” (p. 17). The key findings of this research indicate that emotional and physical abuses (e.g. caning, public humiliation, hostile eye contact, among others) are generally common, and are being encouraged by school teachers’ perception and policy prescription that school punishment should be painful and deterrent.

Using Foucault’s (1977) theoretical work on discipline and punishment, the findings show the nature of teacher disciplinary measures to be abusive and reprehensible on the grounds of being essentially anti-educational in spirit. On this basis, a recommendation was made for re-engineering of policy on behaviour management in Ghanaian Schools. To take such a culturally fundamental policy change seriously, policy-makers, policy-entrepreneurs, policy-engineers and classroom practitioners would require evidence that can be trusted. This paper argues that qualitative case study research can be taken seriously, providing what the authors like to term ‘authentic’ evidence by a methodological approach with rigorous, in-depth evidence-gathering mechanisms (see Chen & Oliver, 2018; Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The increasing interest regarding the usage of qualitative case study research in gathering evidence that is both trustworthy and true to its context, encompasses the issue of generalisation. In the Ghanaian study, the authors sought to address that very issue and thus generalising from this immediate study to a similar context in another situation is the focus of this discussion. The authors are fully aware of the other concepts espoused by researchers like ‘fittingness’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, 2002), ‘comparability’ and ‘translatability’ (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) and maintain that all these concepts are geared towards ensuring that findings from the immediate study are applicable to similar situations or context.

However, from a methodological standpoint, it is significant to mention that qualitative case study is not consistent with statistical sampling procedures which permits statistical generalisation (De Vaus, 2012; Englander, 2019). Theoretical generalisation is fundamental in this context. This article aims at supporting students and novice researchers in their understanding of generalisation in qualitative case research design. In the following, the problem statement is presented to situate the discussion in proper context.

## **2.0 Problem Statement**

Various presentations in some methodological articles and textbooks have raised issues regarding generalisability of qualitative case study (see Schofield, 1990 see also Fendler, 2006). Such presentations seek to suggest that case study research in general is not important in social sciences research and that findings derived from case study research cannot be generalised. The increase in the interest of generalisability of research findings encouraged some researchers like Noblit and Hare (1988), Lucas (1974), Yin and Heald (1975), Ragin (1987), Guba and Lincoln (1982, 2008) and Goetz and LeCompte (1984) to delve into generalisability of qualitative research studies. A particularly focussed discussion on generalisability of case study research literature is found in Yin (2014, 2018).

It is in the context of this debate that this paper provides a focussed reflection based on research regarding the use of qualitative-case-study research as a way of contributing to the debate of generalisability of research findings. The issue of generalisability of qualitative-case-study requires real consideration in the context of providing justification for this methodological approach on educational issues and policy-oriented research.

The methodology and findings of the research are detailed below. This is followed by a detailed discussion on the nature and use of qualitative case study.

## **3.0 Methodological positioning of this study**

This qualitative case-study was conducted in Ghanaian four state Senior High Schools. Semi-structured observation and interviews as well as document analysis were used. A sample of twenty-eight participants, which is made up of twenty members of staff (subject/classroom teachers, senior house masters and headteachers or assistant headteachers) and eight students from the four secondary schools. These people participated voluntarily in this study. In terms of analytical tools, the research employed Foucault’s concepts of Surveillance, Normalisation and Regulation which aided in the data analyses and the critical review of the policy documents.

The epistemological basis for the case study research was interpretive and qualitative in nature. As we were dealing with knowledge constructed by school policy and individuals in Ghanaian schools. Importantly, the structures we employed have to be qualitative. We were seeking to build an understanding of what really transpired in classroom interaction and in the school-wide setting regarding behaviour management, and to triangulate this with opinions of teachers on these issues.

The qualitative case-study allowed us to look deeply into the happenings in the learning environment and to develop our own in-depth understanding of issues in the classroom and the workings of the teachers.

## **4.0 Evidence Gathering Sources in this research**

The evidence from this case study came from three main sources. These are interviews, documentations and direct observations. Each of these sources were used to collect data which aided in the triangulation of the data. However, this is not to suggest that these are the only case study evidence gathering techniques. Others

include archival records, physical artifacts and participant observation (see Chen & Oliver, 2018; Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In the following we discuss the sources used in this case study research;

#### ***4.1 Interviews;***

Interview, which is one of the vital sources of evidence gathering in case study research (see Chen & Oliver, 2018; Yin, 2018), was one of the main evidence gathering means in this research. The study relied on semi-structured interviews. Bryman (2015:201) defines the semi-structured interview as the “context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions”. This formed the basis for the conduct of the interviews in this context. The questions were formulated on the basis of observations (which preceded the interviews), literature analysis and information gathered through the pilot research conducted before the collection of the main data. The use of open-ended questions in these semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express themselves freely and without the researchers’ interference.

#### ***4.2 Documentations;***

Analysis of documents was key in this research. We analysed the GES Unified Rules and Regulations (n.d.) (on behaviour control) to make a comparison between reality and policy rhetoric. It was deemed appropriate to gather more information from reliable documents to clearly elaborate on the findings obtained from the interviews. It was significant these policy documents were reviewed.

#### ***4.3 Direct observations;***

Direct observations were key in this research. This observation took place in the context of what Yin (2018:121) describes as ‘real-world setting of the case’. The observation in this research involved two observations of classroom teachers using the observation guide. Existing literature on behaviour management in schools (e.g. Ghana Education Service Unified Rules and Regulations (n.d.) aided the construction of the observation guide.

What happened in the classroom and outside the classroom was recorded. Several examples about behaviour management which relate to Foucault theoretical position were identified. For example, teachers’ opinions of what they are doing regarding student disciplinary issues. The observational evidence provided additional information on behaviour management of students in Ghanaian High Schools.

The above explanation of the use of different techniques of data collection signifies the fact that a good case study should not rely just on one source of evidence. In actuality, good case studies are dependent on a multiplicity of sources (see Yin, 2018; Chen & Oliver, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

#### ***4.4 Contextualising the Role of Observational Data***

Observations were critical in our study because they allowed us to correlate what we saw in the school with what has been narrated to us during the interviews by the school teachers and the students as well. Likewise, it offered us the opportunity to ask the learners and their teachers follow-up questions related to the observed issues.

As part of the analysis, the observed data was organised and classified into themes. This provided an opportunity for a more coherent thematic as well as content analysis of the data from the interviews and observations using Foucault’s (1977) theoretical orientation. Through this procedure, we were able to assess the degree of possible contradiction or corroboration between the interview questions and the observational data. In this direction, Yin (2014:220) indicates that “a case study evaluation should deliberately triangulate the evidence from these multiple sources, to conform and corroborate the findings”. A fundamental element of innovative case study research is that it relies on numerous data sources. Yin (2014:220) posits that “a case study evaluation should rely on multiple sources of evidence, which may include interviews, documents, field observations, etc.”

### **5 How Data Triangulation was achieved in this research**

Triangulation was achieved in the following means:

Triangulation of data sources/data triangulation (Yin, 2018; Bryman, 2015; Patton, 2015); this approach permits the usage of several supporting sources. One of the primary advantages of case study data collection technique is the multiple uses of different data sources (Yin, 2018). This was achieved in this research. The multiple sources corroborated the same findings in the context of the case study under reflection. In this research, semi-structured interviews were done with policy document analysis to make a comparison between earlier observations the researchers made in the schools and the answers provided by the respondents. This offered the researchers the chance to compare and contrast with the other methods to resolve some likely mistake that might have occurred in the course of the data collection (see Bryman, 2015).

In this sense, triangulation allowed us to look at the phenomenon from several perspectives and directions in an effort to have a better understanding of the issue under investigation (see Neuman, 2011). Also, it allowed the researchers to “take multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (Neuman, 2011:164). This type of triangulation is described by other researchers as triangulation of methods (Bryman, 2015) or triangulation of measure (Neuman 2011).

Bryman (2015:697) describes triangulation as “the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked”. In addition, Creswell (2013:251) indicates that “triangulation allows corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective”.

The other means of triangulation which were not used in this research include theoretical triangulation (Neuman, 2011)/Triangulation of theory/theory triangulation (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2015), investigator triangulation (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2015) and methodological triangulation (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2015).

## 6 Reasons for the Choice Qualitative-Case-Study Research

This research seeks to justify the use of qualitative methods in educational policy research. The distinctiveness of this methodological approach lies in its ability to generalise the findings. A rationale for the use of case study method in this education policy and practice-oriented research is provided below:

- I. **Theoretical Advancement:** The case study research provided an opportunity for extending the Foucauldian-inspired analysis of the concept of positive behaviour management and understanding the context of the phenomenon. The study design was used to broaden the notion of positive behaviour management in the context of Africa.
- II. The understanding of further discovery in the form of replicability (Yin, 2014) was very crucial in selecting the case study design. The replicability of a case study research is not founded on the units of analysis, but it is determined by quality theoretical reasoning (Bryman, 2015; De Vaus, 2001, 2012; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2018). The Foucauldian theoretical reasoning was used to deconstruct disciplinary measures deemed to have affected the rights, dignity and self-esteem of students.
- III. **Educational knowledge expansion:** The distinguishing features of case study made it an important design for contemporary research like ours on education policy and practice. Many researchers in education have used case study research to contribute to knowledge (see Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2014). In line with Yin (2014) the case study method was followed to conduct this ground-breaking piece of research work in Ghana. Several community studies using case study design, like the Whyte’s Street Corner Society (1943) (see Whyte, 1993) and Lynds’ Middletown (1929) studies, have made significant contributions to the development of sociology as an academic discipline. These researchers made extensive use of case study research to make an impact in society and advance their disciplines (see Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Also, Muijs (2012) in examining methodological change and pattern in school effectiveness research realised that more than 80% of qualitative research reported is on case study.
- IV. The qualitative case study design under reflection allowed **an intensive examination of the case under investigation** (see also Creswell, 2013; Bryman, 2015) and **integration of numerous**

*perspectives* (see Neuman 2011) from students, teachers and school management. Intensive examination of case and incorporation of different perspectives are put forward here as two critical components of good case study research. These elements made qualitative case study a suitable design for the research under reflection. The study under reflection sought to look at contemporary challenges surrounding the implementation of disciplinary processes in the classroom and school context. This afforded us the opportunity to take into consideration multiple perspectives.

- V. ***Examination of real-life context:*** Employing qualitative case study design for the study gave us the chance to examine ‘real-life’ (Creswell, 2013:96) issues or ‘real-world’ (Yin, 2014:17) understanding of the students, teachers, and school management regarding school disciplinary issues. Also, using a wide range of data sources such as observations, interviews, as well as documentary analysis, offered the researchers the opportunity to establish a deep comprehension of the issues (Creswell 2013). The aim was to assist us to establish what Creswell (2013:98) referred to as “in-depth understanding of the case”.

Rather than using, say, grounded theory for this study, the case study approach was thought to be more appropriate because we were unable to suppress awareness as in grounded theory, to relate to the explanation of Bryman (2015:580), “awareness of a relevant theory”, like this Foucauldian theoretical orientation which was able to deconstruct these abusive disciplinary actions in Ghana. One of the fundamental critiques of grounded theory is its inability to suspend awareness (Bryman 2015). We therefore used a case study research approach to avoid falling into this trap.

#### ***6.4 Clearing the misunderstanding leading to the distaste for case study research***

Some researchers have the dislike for case study research in general with the assertion that it is not rigorous enough to produce an outstanding research outcome. This paper seeks to argue that one of the reasons for the distaste of this methodology is the confusion with non-research case studies.

Non-research case study has been used in several instances to include teaching-practice case studies and in the fields of law, medicine, business studies, medical records, social work (see for example Llewellyn, 1948; Stein, 1952; Towl, 1969; Windsor & Greanias, 1983; Ellet, 2007) among others. All these case studies play a significant role, but they are non-research case studies. Experts who developed these types of case studies do not pretend to follow any research method. The purpose of these kinds of case studies is to create a platform for student discourse, critique, critical thinking, and deliberation on some crucial professional matters to deepen their understanding (see Windsor & Greanias, 1983; Ellet, 2007, Yin, 2018). As a result of this, many individuals might have unfortunately drawn their perceptions of case study research based on popular write-ups that do not profess to have adopted any detailed research methodology. Despite this kind of experience many educational researchers are now drawn to case study research because of its unique methodological approach.

Cases can consist of multiple components (De Vaus, 2001). For example, a school as a ‘case’ includes the school board, headteachers, teaching staff, students, parents, and non-teaching staff like administrators or cleaners (see Yin, 2014; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

#### **7.0 Determining the quality of case study research design**

Four tests are often used in social science research to determine the quality of most empirical studies (Bryman, 2015; Yin, 2018). These four tests are Construct Validity, Internal Validity, External Validity and Reliability. Internal validity is not applicable in this context as its applicability is restricted to explanatory case study (see Yin, 2018) which this case study is not one. In the following the other three tests and how they were achieved in this case study research are presented;

***Construct Validity:*** We consider that this case study achieved construct validity. Construct validity is achieved with the usage of multiple sources of evidence, the establishment of chain of evidence and the process of allowing the research participants to scrutinize the draft case study report (see Yin, 2018). The use of several sources of data in this case provided an avenue for data triangulation. In this direction, the ‘overall quality’ of a case study is determined by the multiple sources of information (Yin, 2018:126; see

also Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Data triangulation strengthens the construct validity of case study (see Yin, 2018).

Also, the chain of evidence was clearly established: The evidentiary process in this case study started with the establishment of the case study research context, the availability of theory and the search for key contributors to this topic through a review of existing literature. These processes led to the development of research questions, data collection, data analysis and the write-up. Finally, the research respondents had the opportunity to review the transcripts emanating from the interviews and the draft case study report except those who declined to do the review.

**External Validity:** This kind of test deals with the generalisability of the findings (lessons learnt). In this case study research and any other case study the focus is on analytic generalisation (see Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This case study research, like the other case study research, presented an opportunity for us to shed empirical light on certain theoretical assumptions, in this context Foucault's theoretical concept.

Analytical generalisation could seek among others to corroborate, reject, advance theoretical reasoning and new concept development arising out of the completion of the case study research (see Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The study under reflection claimed generalisation about the abuse disciplinary measures across this geographical setting.

**Reliability:** It is significant to mention that this qualitative case study research followed a rigorous methodological path to carry out the research. This procedure that was followed, was properly documented as this promotes reliability (see Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Any audit service doing reliability check could follow the same procedure and obtain similar results.

In conclusion, in judging the quality of this case study three tests were considered; Construct Validity, external Validity and Reliability. Some of them occurred at the design stage and others at the stage of data collection and analysis.

## **8.0 Unmasking the Concept of Generalisation in qualitative case study Research**

The contextual generalizability in this research relates to using theory to analyse some parts of educational policy and practice that fail to confirm to globally acceptable human rights as enshrined in the globally approved UN conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). The condition prevalent for this generalization was the use of Foucauldian theoretical underpinning. This provides a sound background for evidence-based policy (EBP). The evidence-based policy is anchored on the idea that policy decisions and issues should be grounded on or informed by a rigorous methodological path in research.

Theoretical dimension is essential in qualitative case study research (see Yin, 2018; De Vaus, 2001; Bryman, 2015). Owing to the significance of this aspect of case study research, the theoretical dimension used in this case study research, which is the subject of reflection, was Foucault's (1977) theoretical framework. De Vaus (2001: 221) indicates that "case study research in social sciences must have a theoretical dimension. Without a theoretical dimension a case study will be of little value for wider generalisation-one of the goals of social sciences research".

This study made it possible to generate evidence supporting the claim that corporal punishment is abusive hence the need for positive behaviour management. The perceptions of the teachers promoted by policy implications were found to have stronger effects on implementation. This research demonstrated that a useful contribution was made. Educational policy is articulated based on empirical evidence which this research has provided.

Foucault's (1977) theoretical framework in this context aided in theoretical generalisation. Generalizing from a study to a theory instead of a population is known as theoretical generalization (see De Vaus, 2001; Yin, 2018; Englander, 2019). This is the focus of the case-study research under reflection.

This experience renders our reasoning more useful than the inductive approach to condemning generalisability issues in research as Fendler (2006) seeks to portray. Also, the inductive approach to signing a song against generalisability in research is flawed as it seeks to put both qualitative and quantitative research together in the same basket. This is like comparing apples and oranges.

The main concern for qualitative case study researchers is the standard of the theoretical justification associated with the studies. In this instance the data should be able to support the theoretical arguments (see Englander, 2019). This kind of generalisation is called ‘theoretical generalisation’ by Mitchell (1983) and ‘analytic generalisation’ by Yin (2018). In this understanding of theoretical and analytical generalisation, the qualitative case study research which is the focal point of this reflection utilised Foucault's theoretical framework to analyze and understand the study findings.

Through an analysis of the literature, this theoretical perspective was identified at the onset of the study. It allowed the researchers to dissect elements of school policy and disciplinary actions that do not really support positive behaviour management (PBM) and at the same time affect globally approved UN conventions that aim to promote individuals’ rights, and dignity which are the significant elements of PBM (Hayes et al., 2011; Grundy & Blandford, 2006; Raths, 1964).

Findings in this specific context show that physical and emotional abuses are widespread in Ghanaian High Schools. This is promoted by policy prescriptions and teacher perceptions that punishment must be painful, deterrent and reformatory. Also, they highlighted adverse effects of emotional and physical abuse, a high number of student suspensions, and an outdated disciplinary code at the school. The study under reflection suggests a different strategy for controlling student behaviour that should be incorporated into professional practice, policy reforms, modifications to teacher training programmes, the promotion of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and general policy reforms. It is crucial in this context to generalize from a study to a theory rather than to a population (statistical generalization). What makes these findings well-grounded is the quality of theoretical reasoning.

## **Conclusion**

Recent increase in debate regarding generalisability of research findings promoted the need for reflections on the qualitative case study conducted in Ghana. This paper argues that the quality of theoretical reasoning permits the generalisability of the findings of research. This theoretical reasoning hinges on three related tests which determine the quality of the qualitative case study. These are Construct Validity, external Validity and Reliability.

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