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Exploring Lenses Used in Case Study Research in Literacy Over Time

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Abstract

This study is a case study analysis where book length case studies were aggregated for review. The review focused on the lenses that researchers used to analyze their data. The results indicated most case studies used a neutral lens where careful description of a literacy event was the goal. A few researchers moved to a critical lens of positioning theory to describe their results. Historical shifts and issues were shared that included a focus on participants and lenses and views of teachers.

Keywords

case study, literacy, lenses, historical

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Exploring Lenses Used in Case Study Research in Literacy Over Time

Diane Barone
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This study is a case study analysis where book length case studies were aggregated for review. The review focused on the lenses that researchers used to analyze their data. The results indicated most case studies used a neutral lens where careful description of a literacy event was the goal. A few researchers moved to a critical lens of positioning theory to describe their results. Historical shifts and issues were shared that included a focus on participants and lenses and views of teachers.

Keywords: case study, literacy, lenses, historical

Instead of viewing a child at a particular time and place, we can see the same child fulfilling institutional acceptable roles in one context and problematic roles in another; we see children flirting with positive student identities or claiming dominance on the playground. (Compton-Lilly, 2007, pp. 114-115)

Compton-Lilly (2007) highlights the complexity of case study research. She confirms that case study moves beyond just having a number representing a student's literacy growth. Case studies reveal the conundrums experienced by teachers as they support a child's learning. Because of the complexity of case study, researchers engage in the collection of a rich data set to answer their research questions.

Case studies allow a reader to share in the complicated understandings of literacy teaching and learning. They offer a view into teacher decision-making, the starts and pauses in student learning, and the connections between families and schools. In essence, case studies reveal the beauty and warts associated with literacy teaching and learning.

Qualitative approaches initially began in literacy studies in the United States (Erickson, 2013; Erickson, 2018; Merriam, 1988). Yin (2014) discussed how case studies offered advantages over other research designs as they provided insights into student learning. Dyson and Genishi (2005) concurred as they saw case study as "Weaving together the contextual threads so that a quilt of persuasive images – a coherent narrative – emerges" (pp. 112-113). Case study, in particular, has been important in literacy research to showcase children's development in literacy, instructional practices, and student diversity.

The importance of case study research has even continued when the federal government devalued all research that did not have a quantitative design. For example, Yin (2014) noted that even with the federal push for random assignment designs, there was an increase in the frequency of case study research as observed in Google Ngram Viewer (<http://books.google.com/ngrams>). Although there were still more studies using survey research, experimental designs, and random assignment, their frequency was decreasing as case study research was increasing.

The increase in case studies might be because they offer a unique view into literacy development and instruction as they are narrowly focused on children. Over time, they balance

more time-limited research studies and those designed quantitatively. However, they are most often read individually, and as a result, the collective historical importance of case studies within literacy is infrequently revealed.

Rather than just focusing on literacy, however, this study moves to considering how the data in each case study were analyzed. A look at the lenses that were chosen over time allows a window into their purposes and their interpretations, as well as how they have shifted in perspective (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Theoretical Grounding

Although case study is a frequently chosen design, an exact definition of case study is complicated to determine (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Stake (2008) defines a case study as an individual, bounded system for study. Yin (2014) identifies case study as empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in a real-world context. These definitions are rather straightforward; however, they focus predominantly on participants and context, rather than methodology.

Merriam (1988) defined four additional characteristics that are essential when defining this research design. They included “particularistic” in that the study is centered on a particular situation, program, event, phenomenon, or person; “descriptive” in that the researcher gathers rich description of the object of study; “heuristic” as the study enriches a reader’s understanding, and “inductive” as the data drives the understandings that emerge from the study. In summary, case study is defined as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 16).

In an effort to counter criticisms surrounding case study, expectations for quality case study research were clearly described. Tight (2017) suggested rigorous, carefully crafted studies included a focus on the particular and must consist of in-depth description, were holistic with a goal of understanding, represented the typical, exemplary, critical, or extreme case to counter issues of generalizability, and were clearly bounded so the research is feasible. Further, Kyburz-Graber (2004) concurred in that she identified that rigorous case study was demanding and required researchers to carefully analyze and present their multiple sources of data. However, these descriptions of case study research fail to identify the importance of the use of a theoretical lens. The data that is collected within a case study must be analyzed to move to interpretation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) suggest theories or theoretical lens offer researchers a way to construct their interpretations, where the theory provides insights about the phenomenon. Anfara and Mertz (2015) offer theories result in explanations about the collected and analyzed data set.

In summary, case study is a popular design for literacy researchers and each study is guided by a particular goal. Further, quality elements of rigorous case study are essential for researchers to consider when creating their study. Moreover, the use of a theoretical lens offers a guide for interpreting data.

Case Studies and Literacy

The work of Dyson and Genishi (2005) connects case study research and literacy. These scholars suggest case studies offer a view into the meaning that students and teachers create in particular contexts. They suggest researchers, during case study investigations, focus on certain aspects of classrooms and marginalize others. This narrowing of focus is critical as there are multiple layers of complexity within classroom settings such as social interaction, instructional approaches, and learning expectations. It is not possible to focus on all these elements simultaneously. When creating the representation of results, they write, “field notes, interview

transcripts, children's products, and curricular documents – all of which need to be woven together to construct 'the case.' That is, like other case study researchers, we are makers of quilts, aiming to assemble images that probe the nature of our phenomenon" (p. 90).

What is missing in these descriptions of case studies is a focus on the theoretical lens or the epistemological perspective a researcher used to interpret data (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). While case studies have been important for literacy researchers over time, I wondered how researchers chose to analyze their data. This study of literacy case studies explored the shifts in theoretical lenses or epistemological perspectives used for data interpretation. These shifts were important as they offered details about the construction of meaning within case studies over time.

Method

Lucas (1974) recognized the importance of reports that aggregated data from multiple studies. In essence, these reports built a body of research about a topic by synthesizing the results across multiple studies. Lucas expanded on this idea by identifying the case survey method where case studies were aggregated based on specific criteria. While I did not follow the exact method described by Lucas, I did synthesize findings among studies. Similar to Lucas, Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) conducted an integration study where they analyzed the findings of qualitative studies focused on HIV-positive women. These researchers identified sorting information from the studies was often difficult because "there is less certainty concerning what to record because the methodology of qualitative metasynthesis is still in the early stages of development" (p. 905).

In this study, the theoretical lens or epistemological perspective was viewed historically to identify how data were interpreted or analyzed. The challenge related to such an analysis was that the use of theoretical lens or epistemological perspectives have changed historically. While it is currently expected that a researcher explicitly identifies the theoretical lens used in his or her analysis; earlier researchers did not have this expectation. Similar to the analysis conducted by Sandelowski and Barroso (2003), findings were used to identify the epistemological perspective utilized by the researcher as this information was often not evident in the method section. The following criteria were used for a study's inclusion. First, case studies were selected to be representative of case study research that was conducted during particular time periods. In other words, when many researchers used similar epistemological perspectives, one study was used to represent the similar interpretations. Second, the studies were at least one year in length and published in book format. By limiting the corpus to book length case studies, more details about the cases were shared because of the removal of page length limitations. Further, the case studies were published by educational publishers that required peer review of the book. Third, the studies focused on key literacy aspects. Although language is considered to be a part of literacy, these studies were removed as their focus was most often on development and did not have multiple data sources. Fourth, the studies were published in English. Finally, the cases all centered on children from birth through elementary school.

A multilevel, recursive search was conducted to identify case study research studies. Multiple sources were used and included recommendations from researchers, library searches, academic publisher websites reviews, and citations in research articles and books. Once the entire corpus was revealed, literacy case studies were selected that represented the theoretical lens or epistemological interpretation trends of the time period. See Appendix B for all the studies that were included in the analysis.

Researcher Background

Case study methodology always intrigued me from my own studies to those I have read. While I value quantitative studies, I appreciate the nuanced details of student learning that appear in case study research. I teach qualitative research classes at my university and through these classes I collaborate with students as they create their own case studies. Through these collaborations, I have observed the difficulty and complexity of using a theoretical lens for data interpretation. Additionally, I have written about qualitative case studies (Barone, 2011) and presented on this methodology at conferences. Moreover, I am interested in how researchers use theoretical lenses to interpret their data as they offer a window into their epistemological beliefs held during specific historical times. While I have explored literacy case studies individually, I believe the importance of this work overtime is lost in these individual explorations. Therefore, a synthesis of the interpretive results was called for to better understand literacy case studies historically.

Data Collection

Once the case studies were identified, I read each book two times to determine details of the design, the theoretical lens or epistemological perspective used in data analysis, and outcomes. Following the reading of each book, a table was created to identify details of the study, highlight important outcomes, and share important quotes from the book. I wanted to maintain the voices of the researchers, so I relied on direct quotes, rather than a synthesis of each study. Their words often revealed how a lens was used in data interpretation, especially when the theoretical lens was not explicitly identified.

Data Analysis

Data began to be analyzed as each book was read and information was placed into a table. Each review was revisited during the second reading of the book to add additional detail. For example, for each book the author, title, and year of publication were identified, then the participants and design were reported. This information allowed the book to be viewed historically and identified the participants in the study. The design was important to consider for the lens was typically revealed here. It also shared details about research questions which also provided a window into the lens used for data analysis. If evident, connections to other research were noted as they indicated a particular theoretical perspective that the researcher was drawing upon for this study, and finally, important quotes were recorded so the voice of the researcher was retained. See Figure 1 for a brief example of this table information. This organization allowed for a historical analysis that focused on theoretical interpretations or the epistemological stance used in interpretation of the data set. The lenses were easily determined if researchers shared them explicitly in their method section. However, most often the lens that was used had to be extracted from the research question, the expert researchers that were identified, and from the results. Following this analysis, a critical review of the studies occurred showcasing historical shifts in how studies were framed. To ensure that this interpretation of the studies was trustworthy, another qualitative researcher read 10 of the books and conducted similar notetaking to determine consistency in findings.

Limitations

The limitations for this study centered on the selection of representative cases. There may have been studies that were missed that could have contributed to this study. However, to

counter this limitation, multiple searches were conducted to find book length case studies. Another limitation was the narrowing to book length case studies. This choice was important as the earliest case studies did not appear as articles and would have been dismissed by not focusing on books.

Results

The results section is organized around an historical view of the studies. Following this analysis, a view to the historical shifts in case studies and issues centered on the cases is presented.

A Historical View of Case Studies in Literacy

This review starts with the earliest studies from the fifties and seventies and continues to present day.

Earliest Studies: The Fifties to the Seventies

The earliest case studies were grounded in careful observation (Erickson, 2018). Further, the researchers created a detailed report of the phenomenon under study (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Their analyses were grounded in the data collected, and for the most part they were careful to describe and leave interpretation to the reader (Merriam, 1988).

The earliest case studies (Butler, 1975; White, 1956) centered on a daughter (White, 1956) and granddaughter who was disabled with a genetic disorder (Butler, 1975). These children and the researchers were White and considered middle class. Both studies lasted three years, and the researchers engaged in retrospective note taking following book-reading episodes to look at connections between books and personal experiences. Both researchers worked with Clay and were influenced by her careful observations of children during literacy events (Clay, 1979). The details of their journals were neutral in description. Moreover, in their reports, the voices of the children were rarely heard; rather, the only voice given space was that of the researcher.

White noted the importance of children reading books that reflected their home experiences. Similarly, Butler observed her granddaughter responding to books. She observed the importance of rereading books and personal connections to text. Moreover, Butler set the groundwork for further exploration of the importance of social settings in the learning of young children. She wrote, “The effects of the particular environment to which the child is exposed – exercise some effect on the rate at which he will pass through the essential stages from birth onwards” (p. 90). Her quote is interesting as it sounds like the results shared in quantitative reports.

Lightfoot (1978) moved to students and parents she was not familiar with. She modified her case study focus by studying how far apart families and schools were. Her study differed from others during this period of time, as she chose to critically analyze her data set. She wrote, “No matter how teachers might try to separate and isolate the classroom environment from the surrounding context of community life, the sociocultural and political perspectives of teachers (and children) pervade the atmosphere and shape the course of events” (p. 7). She continued by recommending teachers move beyond individual events, such as a mother out of work, to define the success of a child. She warned if teachers clung to idealized, middle class family expectations; they would not support the literacy learning of all students. Lightfoot was a trailblazer by considering family and school relationships where the family was marginalized. Although she did not identify the lens she used to interpret her data, she clearly chose to present

it with a critical stance (Schwandt & Gates, 2018) where she took teachers and researchers to task for not meeting students' needs. She wrote:

One of the critical challenges for researchers and practitioners, therefore, is to escape the definitional boundaries and recognize the adaptive and responsive structures that have emerged in our society. They must move beyond the moralizing blinders and pessimistic tradition of social science, beyond absent fathers and cognitively inadequate mothers, in search of a more comprehensive analysis of family-school relations. (p. 14)

In early case study research, the majority of researchers chose a neutral lens to analyze their data. They carefully described students' interactions with books. They might be described as traditionalists who lived in a positivist, foundational paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, Lightfoot (1978) critically analyzed her data to shed light on the perspectives held by teachers and researchers that distorted opportunities for children. She might be considered a part of the modernist age of qualitative research as she moved away from a positivist focus (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The Eighties

Case studies during the eighties started to explicitly focus on race, although that new focus did not necessarily result in changes in the lens chosen to analyze data. For instance, Paley (1981), in her continuing investigations of children in her kindergarten class, considered how students dramatized stories in response to read alouds. In Paley's observations, she described how superheroes were only used in stories and drama but never showed up in class discussions. Within this study, she narrowed her focus to Wally and his awareness of race. His skills were unique as he directly explored race. Her close focus of one student, Wally, continued her earlier explorations of races and how they played out within a classroom. Although Paley identified race and how it could be a topic students explored, she chose a neutral lens to share her findings. Her work was grounded in a more positivist paradigm where she described the culture of a classroom but did not move to a more interpretive stance.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) changed focus to consider Black children who were successful in first grade. They discovered children in families that spent time together did well in school. They observed children maintained the differences between home and school literacy. At home, children had opportunities to talk, read, and write, and in school, they completed schoolwork and used survival skills. As they wrote about successful students, they maintained a critical lens on school practices. For example, they wrote:

Children need to be able to create public and private text worlds with continued opportunities to use their expressive abilities to generate new meanings and maintain personal and shared interpretations of the social, technical, and aesthetic types and uses of literacy. It would be hard to dispute the assertion that, in most of our schools, few such opportunities currently exist. (p. 201)

Their work is best represented by the blurred genre phase of qualitative research as they provided description and then moved beyond to critique school practices and how they limited students' literacy worlds.

The last study to be considered for the 1980's research was done by Heath (1983). Her study explored language primarily in a variety of communities, but she also described literacy learning using both a neutral lens and a critical lens. For instance, in her use of the neutral lens,

she reported her observations of children as they participated in literacy events. Later, when reviewing her entire study, she shared critical perspectives of teachers and the ways they instructed children. Moreover, Heath teased out how home language and literacy expectations impacted literacy learning in school for children from different racial and economic backgrounds.

Further, she described the different expectations of parents about school. And she showed how teachers had to adjust the mechanics of their teaching and their deficit perceptions so that students could learn. She worked with teachers to change the literacy outcomes of students. While her work can be described as grounded in description, she also might be considered a researcher working in the blurred tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Her work was based on description; however, she moved to a critical lens to describe classroom expectations, and finally, she engaged in action where she worked with teachers to change their deficit perceptions of students.

Although researchers during the eighties began to describe children who were from varied racial and economic backgrounds, they still chose a neutral lens to describe their findings. For the most part, students' race and ethnicity were used as descriptive terms that were not specifically identified in the results. However, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) and Heath (1983) also described how teachers were limiting the literacy opportunities for children by considering their differences as deficit. Even when they did not use a critical lens, their research results showcased how teachers' perceptions of children affected their achievement outcomes.

The Nineties

During the nineties, case study research frequently returned to parents studying their own children. For example, Martens (1996) viewed her daughter's development as a reader and writer and observed there was often a disconnect between the literacy practices at home and those at school. She described literacy at home was meaningful, contextualized, and social while at school it was meaningless, decontextualized, and abstract with no connections to students' lives. Rather, than being descriptive of these disconnects that were showcased in the eighties, the case study researchers of the nineties moved to explicitness of these issues by using a critical lens.

Heath and Mangiola (1991) studied students who were linguistically and culturally diverse. They warned:

Common sense certainly tells us not to expect all individuals of one race or ethnicity to behave in the same way. Yet, we sometimes accept broad and sweeping generalizations about "Hispanics," expecting certain characteristics to apply to all brown-skinned individuals. (p. 16)

They argued that teachers should respect differences among students and acknowledge them as strengths. These researchers focused much of their research report on the importance of language. They argued against the focus on foundational literacy skills for students new to English. Rather, they suggested that students learn to communicate with one another and once they have "mastered these complex ways of using language do they come to focus on getting specific sounds, words, or sentence structures right" (p. 40). Through this explanation, they suggested that teachers were mistaken in the instruction they provided to English Learners.

Similarly, Ballenger (1999) focused on bilingual students and much of her study shared how her views changed about the Haitian children in her classrooms. Her critical lens shifted to her teaching, rather than to the teaching of others. She worked with preschoolers and initially

viewed the Haitian children with a deficit lens. She worked to understand the home lives of her students so that she could shift her views. She discovered that, in Haitian families, the activity of reading a story did not exist; rather, stories were told. Her research is similar to Heath's (1983) as she observed the important differences in homes that showed up in schools.

Continuing with this research focus, Allen, Michalove, and Shockley (1993) studied children who struggled, in particular Black children, and used a critical lens for their analysis. They learned creating a literate environment was not sufficient to support these children's literacy growth. They discovered direct support for children was essential and classrooms required routines and clear expectations to enhance students' learning.

Ladson-Billings (1994) altered her focus to teachers to reveal how they supported Black children. She included both Caucasian and Black teachers in her case that focused on Black children. She highlighted the important differences between equity and equality where she wrote, "Different children have different needs and addressing those different needs is the best way to deal with them equitably" (p. 22). Ladson-Billings took an encouraging approach by only considering successful teachers as measured by student success. She chose to discover and neutrally describe how successful teachers supported Black children.

Unlike Ladson-Billings, Bartoli (1995) chose a critical perspective where she investigated the unequal learning opportunities for children from high poverty backgrounds. She explicitly chose a critical lens. Once again, she observed the deficit beliefs about students of racial and low socioeconomic backgrounds, especially children of Black or Hispanic cultures, held by teachers. She observed teachers' lack of trust expressed about the children's families and the entrenched belief that their home was a barrier to student learning. Unlike much of the other research that was conducted in either rural or urban communities, Bartoli explored both. And while she thought she would discover differences in communities, she was surprised at how similar they were in their beliefs about children and their families.

Purcell-Gates (1995) considered children who were working class Caucasian and the issues they had being successful in school. Purcell-Gates showed how a child, Donny, could do school on a surface or procedural level. He could fill in worksheets, but he had difficulty reading or writing. Moreover, Donny's mother could not help him with reading or writing, a fact she shared with his teachers. Purcell-Gates expanded the definition surrounding an immigrant when she wrote, "These learners are in a real sense *immigrants* to the literate world, with as much to learn about the culture of literacy as about the language of print" (italics in original, p. 181). Her study was unique in that she critically analyzed the school curriculum and then she moved to action by tutoring Donny and his mother. Her work might be placed within the blurred genre, where multiple epistemological perspectives are included, as she described, critically analyzed, and moved to action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Barone (1999) also explored children living in poverty who were prenatally exposed to crack/cocaine. She wanted to know how these children developed in literacy with such a background. Her research was grounded in description supported by a neutral lens. She learned teachers with large numbers of children in their classrooms who were living in high poverty circumstances were most focused on discipline. Conversely, parents thought it was their job to send their children to school well behaved while the teacher would teach reading and writing. Her descriptions of teachers did not engage in critical discourse; rather, she described their practices and how students responded.

Two studies used gender within their central question. Davies (1993) studied fifth and sixth graders, and how they defined and interpreted gender in their reading and writing. His study was interesting as it was one of the first to talk about positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998) and how students positioned themselves and how they were positioned by peers. He noticed students used warlike metaphors when describing gender. For instance, boys wrote about sports that suggested male competence and strength. He argued binary metaphors

surrounding gender must be constantly deconstructed so students move beyond hegemonic interpretations.

Similarly, Gallas (1998) explored power, gender, and identity in primary classrooms. She studied children in her own classroom and described the complexity of such relationships. She depicted two student profiles that caused concern for learning. The first was “bad boys,” where boys pushed the boundaries of learning and behavioral expectations in the classroom. Unfortunately, this behavior isolated them from the classroom community, and their behavior intimidated other students. The second profile was girls who were quiet. They never talked and as a result they avoided all social discourse surrounding academic topics. Each of these patterns showed power on the part of students to be excluded from the mainstream learning occurring in the classroom and both hindered learning.

In describing her research process, she wrote:

Thus, to my mind, when a teacher considers what it means to truly inspect the cultural and political boundaries of the classroom through the research process, there are two notions that must be held constant: first, each classroom is a unique, living community; and second, each individual within that community represents an evolving consciousness. In other words, the research setting is indeterminate, unpredictable. (p. 146).

Her comment reified the importance of case study in that it provided deep understanding of a moment or a few moments in the life of a child or classroom. She also acknowledged the ever-evolving social networks and their power within a classroom setting. Interestingly, her work, similar to the majority of other case studies, used a neutral lens to describe its findings. The use of a neutral lens appeared to be a qualitative researcher’s way to be more objective in their research design and to counter claims of bias from quantitative researchers.

The case studies of the nineties carefully focused on culture, language, and the social nature of literacy. Gender and identity became important research foci. Unexpected in their designs were that the majority of researchers shared careful descriptions of their data using a neutral lens. However, a shift from a neutral perspective was noticed as several researchers moved to a critical lens when describing disparities in school expectations for children from minority status backgrounds. One study, Davies (1993), highlighted a new lens, positioning theory, to describe his data. These studies displayed the complicated way researchers interpreted their research and how they were finding neutral description problematic or too simplistic in their analysis. Now that qualitative research was being accepted in the humanities, researchers embraced more complex interpretations of their discoveries (Erickson, 2018).

Current Case Study Research

During this time, Hicks (2002) and Purcell-Gates (1995) studied children who were Caucasian and poor; thus, moving beyond a focus on Black children. Lewis (2001) investigated gender and social aspects of literacy, and Newkirk (2002) focused on boys. New departures in case studies occurred during this time as Compton-Lilly (2003, 2007, 2012, 2017) investigated the same children at multiple times during their schooling.

Similar to Purcell-Gates (1995), Hicks (2002) considered children who were working class Caucasian and the issues they had being successful in school. She studied children who were similar to Donny. The critical difference for these children was they were read to in their home. However, even with these literate home experiences, they were unsuccessful in school. Hicks revealed the intersection between gender and literacy. She observed when Laurie struggled with reading, she spent more time socializing. Her brother who did not have

masculine reading models spent his time with video games. Her work moved beyond the descriptions offered of literacy in many of the previous studies to include a focus on gender and class. She recommended:

Teachers draw on their own histories as they construct readings of children's experiences. They cannot step outside of those situated locations, any more than they could read a novel or story outside of the gender, racial, class, and cultural specificities of their lives. Teaching is in these ways a process of reading—of immersing oneself in the particulars of students' lived realities and of creating new histories of practice *with* students. (p. 154, italics in original)

While her results indicate a criticism of teachers' limited ability to move beyond their stereotypical understandings of gender, she relied on description to share these results. In her descriptions, she revealed the social constructivist nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). While she might have been more explicit in interpretations of the issues centered on this instruction, she presented a rich description and allowed readers to construct their own interpretations.

Changing focus, Lewis (2001) studied sixth graders and highlighted the social positioning aspects of reading (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998). She identified that readers constructed knowledge together through interaction, and readers brought these relationships to the texts with which they interacted. Further, she observed students who struggled with reading and how they learned to listen to teacher's recommendations about books. When the teacher said the book was long and was a challenge, they avoided it. Unlike these students, successful readers picked up the challenge and engaged with these books. Therefore, informally students grouped themselves by ability in the books they read independently. Finally, Lewis identified that even in peer-led reading groups, dominant students usurped power. She wrote:

In peer-led groups, students engaged in metadiscourse about the meaning of social and interpretive competence in the classroom. It was a time when multiple voices in the classroom came into contact with one another, leading to greater awareness of power, difference, and the control of meaning in the classroom. The heteroglossic nature of these peer-led groups brought to the surface the competing identities students needed to address within themselves and others, the multiple roles they played within the social networks of their classroom, their families, and their communities. (p. 177)

Her work used lenses of power (Bourdieu, 1991), positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998), and social constructivism (Saldaña, 2015).

Newkirk (2002) narrowed his study to an exploration centered on boys. Similar to other authors focused on gender, he noted the social construction of gender and how boys and girls behaved in certain ways (Saldaña, 2015). He discovered the use of violence in boys' writing and how it often distanced or disturbed teachers and other students. When boys were questioned about their use of violence, they were aware of gradations in the types of violence, but they thought including violence was necessary to their storylines. When questioned about possible negative effects of the use of violence, Newkirk discovered that the students did not know how to respond, as they did not believe the violent material would affect them or others. While teachers might be critical of the use of violence in student writing, Newkirk argued boys' writing included art, video culture, friendship groups, humor, love of sports, and references to content learned in other contexts, writing that was incredibly complex. Newkirk's research focused on gender differences in writing and while he might have chosen a feminist lens (Olesen, 2018), he utilized a neutral lens in sharing these results.

Compton-Lilly (2003, 2007, 2012, 2017) completed four studies where she considered the same students in her longitudinal case study. Similar to Lightfoot, she noted many teachers subscribed to a deficit view when working with urban children. In her first study, the children were in first grade, and her goal was to disrupt “mainstream discourses that position urban parents in particular ways and present alternative interpretations of the difficulties urban students face as they learn to read” (p. 24). She described how many students were embarrassed about their reading difficulties and were most afraid of not being promoted to second grade. In her writing, she shared the importance of a caring teacher who had high expectations and helped students achieve them. When she revisited the students in fourth grade, she identified students believed paying attention led to reading success. She observed parents were unclear about testing results shared by the school, and students were upset if they did not do well on mandated assessments. Finally, she wondered how a school, a child’s mother, and the child could define himself or herself as a competent reader when reading comprehension was poor as witnessed in standardized testing. Her studies relied on positioning theory in their analysis (Harré et al., 2009).

Finally, Genishi and Dyson (2009) provided a critical interpretation of the observations of literacy in numerous settings. They wrote, “In our current slice of time, we see distressingly few classrooms and curricula that allow children either the time or space to learn about or through language in a way that they choose or that enables them to utilize what they already know” (p. 7). They suggested literacy instruction for first grade students was transformed by the multiple assessments that required children to reach literacy benchmarks at defined times. They argued for observant teachers who nuanced literacy instruction based on the current knowledge of students. Similar to other case study researchers, they positioned teachers as deficit and took a critical stance in how literacy education is currently configured (Harré et al., 2009).

These studies represented a shift in traditional ideas surrounding case studies. Genishi and Dyson (2009) organized their studies to reflect a critical perspective. For instance, Genishi and Dyson (2009) criticized standardized testing and a deficit view surrounding language. They used their cases to build an argument against these practices. Within all the most current studies, there was a critical view of teaching and schooling and the way current expectations, such as testing, limited learning opportunities for students.

Historical Shifts and Issues

There were notable differences from the earliest case studies to those more current. Among those differences was a change in participants and a shift in the lens used to study individuals. For example, early case studies were focused on carefully sharing data descriptions, and later studies began to use critical lenses for data interpretation. Finally, the researchers were concerned about a deficit view of children, although they simultaneously positioned teachers as deficit.

Participants and Lenses

The earliest studies focused on children well known by the researchers. These studies (e.g., Butler, 1975; White, 1956) allowed for careful documentation of a child’s development with books and words and for the most part focused on middle class Caucasian children. They shared detailed stories of how children responded to books or to learn about words. They carefully stayed in the description mode and offered detailed accounts of children’s literacy development. Their research was centered in providing “accurate, realistic, and comprehensive

portrayal of the lifeways of those who were studied” (Erickson, 2018, p. 53). Erickson described that the audience for this research was typically for other researchers.

As studies moved away from the investigation of literacy with a child from the researcher’s home, broader views of literacy were considered. Studying less familiar children required researchers to partner with classroom teachers for their investigations. While their research would not be considered practitioner research (Erickson, 2018), they needed teachers to open their classes to them for their studies. For instance, Lightfoot (1978) considered the relationships between families and schools. Literacy moved to the background of exploration as Lightfoot shared the beliefs about parents, from parents, the beliefs of teachers, and about teachers from parents. Interestingly, her results described how involved mothers, or mothers closely connected to their child, were the most frustrating for teachers. Teachers wanted clear boundaries between their classroom worlds and home environments of their students.

As researchers studied other people’s children, they described their demographics as part of their method section. However, the racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds of the children were not evident in the results. In more current case studies, children’s backgrounds were clearly shared in the results. In particular, children of color or from low socioeconomic backgrounds were the focus of many studies and the ways teachers supported them in literacy instruction or did not support them were clear in the results.

While even current studies were still grounded in description, they veered from this path as they described relationships with teachers and children and parents and teachers. The researchers did not identify specific lenses for their interpretation, but implicitly their beliefs showed in the results as they described less competent teachers and their instruction. In these instances, the results became critical of these relationships and often targeted teachers as being unaware of how best to teach all children. In shifting to this more critical interpretation, teachers often were positioned as interfering with or hindering the literacy learning of children (Bartoli, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Finally, more current studies moved to considering gender, identity, and power as they described literacy. Literacy seemed to be common ground to describe these other important components surrounding literacy. In these more current studies, researchers used positioning theory and social constructivism to analyze their data (Harré et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Views of Teachers

While all the researchers criticized deficit views of children, they frequently viewed teachers in the same manner. For example, Purcell-Gates (1995) described how teachers failed to understand Donny’s mother lack of literacy and how that lack limited her academic support of her son. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) even described classrooms as “hostile worlds” for children from the inner city (p. 209). Perhaps, Bartoli (1995) shared the most vivid image of this deficit view when she wrote:

Where they (teachers) did not look was at the student’s potential, language ability, competence, maturity, and strengths. They also did not look at the real family of the children behind the school and community assumptions and preconceptions, a view that could come only from an established relationship built on trust, meaningful communication, and genuine concern. They did not look at the culture of the classroom with its white middle-class norms and values of individual completion, fitness for the mainstream, and narrowly defined competitiveness that allowed for very little diversity. Nor did they look closely at the fragmented and differentiated curriculum, its evaluation methods geared to maintaining the status quo and the devastating results of the labeling

and tracking procedures used by the school system. And finally, they did not look at their own history for the basis of their expectations and personal biases: they did not carefully examine their own community and cultural values and assumptions. (p. 92)

This view of teachers was prevalent in studies that occurred in classrooms with less familiar teachers.

A few studies looked at exemplary teachers so they would not have to describe deficit perspectives about teachers. For instance, Heath and Mangiola (1991) and Ladson-Billings (1994) studied teachers who were exemplary in matching curriculum to student needs. Ladson-Billings (1994) wrote about teachers who were successful at practicing a subversive pedagogy. These teachers were “critical of the way that the school system treats employees, students, parents, and activists in the community. However, they cannot let their critique reside solely in words. They must turn it into action by challenging the system” (p. 128). Her work supported teachers who fought against the status quo and she moved to research that nudged teachers to critical activism. The discussion around teachers’ shifting their perspectives about children resulted in a more positive view of teachers. When considering their suggestions, it appeared that researchers had no difficulty assuming a position of power as they nudged teachers to change (Harré et al., 2009).

Discussion

Many of the early literacy case studies were focused on rich descriptions of literacy events. Their goal was to carefully detail how a child responded to a book, for instance (Butler, 1975; White, 1956). It appeared that the studies were neutral as a way to be more like quantitative research (Erickson, 2018). However, while rich description of children’s literacy practices was evident in all of the studies, many studies were instrumental (Stake, 2008) in that they targeted social interaction as they studied literacy (Vygotsky, 1978). In these studies, literacy was the vehicle by which to understand another aspect of literacy. The cases as a whole revealed the dynamic nature of learning to read and write.

Surprisingly, the case studies, for the most part, stayed centered in the neutral, careful descriptions of children’s literacy. They reflected the researchers’ thorough account of children’s literacy participation. When researchers considered children from diverse backgrounds, they often maintained this neutral lens, once again relying on careful description. Similar to Merriam’s (1998) descriptions of case study, they were particularistic and descriptive – they provided the “holistic description and analysis” (p. 16) of literacy learning events. This result was only possible to discover through this analysis, as viewing one study at a time did not allow for a longitudinal understanding of the epistemological interpretations of the researchers. It also showcased how literacy researchers stayed tied to early descriptions of case study research that were centered on careful description.

Similar to Tight’s (2017) and Kyburz-Graber’s (2004) recommendations, the studies provided in-depth descriptions for understanding of events or children’s learning. When shifting to case studies in literacy, researchers followed Genishi and Dyson’s suggestions (2009) to use all data to in creating a case which was similar to creating a quilt where data is woven together for a coherent description of a phenomenon.

The careful analysis of case studies resulted in an appreciation of the fine-grained results that showcased the literacy learning, identity, and motivation of students as they learned to read and write. Further, the cases acknowledged the difficult circumstances of teachers in providing instruction for all students. They allowed readers to enter multiple homes and

classroom settings to better understand the complex process of learning to read, write, and think.

Finally, overall, across time, researchers stayed grounded in description. They entered critical interpretations cautiously. They reported issues of a mismatch of teachers' instructional practices and student learning for their critical perspectives. They explored students' identity and while sharing various positions adopted by students, their work was still focused on descriptions. From this investigation, it might be described that literacy researchers crafted their research in careful description. Schwandt and Gates (2018) suggested there were traditions within disciplines for case study research. It appeared that literacy researchers who employed case study methodology were concerned with getting the descriptions of classrooms and accurate. Therefore, they based their studies in more traditional case study methods where they relied on neutrality to share their results.

This careful observation should not be viewed in a negative way. Researchers were building rich data sets to thoroughly ground their interpretations and stayed within the expectations determined by their discipline of qualitative literacy research. Only later, as qualitative research became a more accepted methodology in the humanities, did qualitative literacy researchers utilize theoretical lenses such as critical or positioning theory to conceptualize their findings. Literacy researchers valued the insights discovered through careful observation of student learning and gradually shifted to interpretive lenses (Erickson, 2013; Erickson, 2018; Merriam, 1988). However, as described by Dyson and Genishi (2005), their descriptions became more complex as they utilized theoretical lenses to create more nuanced understandings of literacy.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

Sample of Data Collection

Author	Title and Year	Participants	Goal, Research question, lens	Important references	Quotes
Taylor, D. and Dorsey-Gaines, C.	1988 <i>Growing up literate: Learning from inner-city families</i> Portsmouth, NH	Black urban poor families	Goal: Literacy and literacy learning in relation to socio-political climate Design: Ethnographic case study inner-city families and their children who are perceived to be successful at learning to read and write Question p. xviii Observation home/school introduces student with photos Families (Shay Ave families) critical perspective helping families throughout 1. Tanya, Queenie, Gary 2. Pauline, Shauna, and family 3. Jerry, Jemma,	Influenced by Gardner, Harste, and Heath	“And yet the children’s work in school became an important part of family life. School literacy entered the home through the work that the teachers sent home for the parents to see and through the homework that the children were given to do every night.” (p. 92) “We found that the families spent time together, that there was a rhythm to their lives, and that they enjoyed each other’s company.” (p.191) “Thus, in the context of our interpretations, problems arise when we ignore the social processes of (con) textual tying and we

			<p>Tasmika, and Jamaine</p> <p>4. Ieshea, Teko, Hakim, Jarasad, and Sarita</p> <p>Results: Drawing, writing, and reading closely connected</p>	<p>take our traditional ways of thinking about literacy – the rigid hierarchies and taxonomies and predetermined sets of skills that we create - and place them in classrooms for children to learn. Again, literacy is not some list of dispassionate skills that we incent in the isolation of out experimentation, nor is it a series of events to be teased out of ethnographic data. Literacy cannot be quantified in numbers, nor is it directly related to the frequency of use. It cannot be taught through a decoding process, nor through a series of disconnected (if well-ordered) exercises. <i>We can pull language apart, but we cannot expect children to do the same</i> (Taylor & Strickland, 1986). Children need to be able to create public</p>
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					<p>and private text worlds with continual opportunities to use their expressive abilities to generate new meanings and maintain personal and shared interpretations of the social, technical, and aesthetic types and uses of literacy. It would be hard to dispute the assertion that, in most of our schools, few such opportunities currently exist.” (p. 201)</p> <p>“In the families that we visited, most of the children were able to maintain the shift between home and school and sustain both worlds. At home, their parents provided literate environments plus support for their children in school and balanced these aspects of family life with their strong desire for their</p>
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					<p>children to become independent survivors in a sometimes-hostile world. In school, the children learned that their survival demanded different skills, and that they were dependent upon their teachers. Their daily lives and their complex social and cognitive communicative abilities were not relevant to the definitions of school learning, which were limited by the exercises that were given and the tests that were set. Is it possible that Danny knew that when he dropped out of school before he had completed eighth grade?" (p. 209)</p>
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Appendix B

Case Studies from Earliest Studies to Most Current

White, D. (1956). <i>Books before 5</i> . Oxford University Press.
Durkin, D. (1966). <i>Children who read early</i> . Teachers College Press.
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Note. Studies in bold were the representative studies.

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