"Letters from a Headmaster"

Towards a Science of the Singular

Essays about Case Study in Educational Research and Evaluation

Edited by Helen Simons   1980

12. The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act - otherwise known
    as the Buckley Amendment after its sponsor, Senator James L.
    Buckley of New York - introduced in the United States in 1974,
    raises a whole number of issues related to confidentiality of
    data, access and release of research information. The Act
    outlines requirements which govern the access to student
    records by parents, students and other persons. One of the
    implications of this Act and associated legislation is that
    researchers are required to obtain parental or student (if
    emancipated) consent to collect personally identifiable
    research data. The legal implications of this Act for
    educational researchers is explored in a paper by David G.
    Carter, "The Buckley Amendment And Beyond: Legal Implications
    for Researchers", presented to the A.E.R.A. Annual Convention,
    San Francisco, California, April, 1976.

13. One of the advantages often espoused for case study is that its
    methods and approaches are accessible to practitioners -
    teachers and advisers for instance. See Walker, R. "Classroom
    Research: A view from SAFARI". In SAFARI, Innovation,
    Evaluation, Research and the Problems of Control, Some
    Interim Papers, Centre for Applied Research in Education,
    University of East Anglia, 1974, pp. 20-25.

    Some reflections and doubts on this position expressed by
    advocates of case study may be found in SAFARI. Theory in
    Practice, Papers Two, (ed. N. Norris) Centre for Applied
    Research in Education, University of East Anglia, 1977.

14. See Note 6.

15. Extract from the report of the conference prepared for the
    sponsors by the convenors, Barry MacDonald and Rob Walker,
    March, 1976.

LETTERS FROM A HEADMASTER

Editor's Introduction

MacDonald, one of the first advocates of case study in
educational evaluation in Britain sets the scene appropriately with
a   case study illustrating some of the complex ethical
and political issues facing schools which are case studied.
On first sight his paper may seem like an anomaly alongside
several devoted primarily to theoretical issues. But in
fact, by using part of an actual case study, he begins to
illustrate several of the justification issues raised later
by Kemmis and the essential dialectical nature of the case
study process stated by several authors in this volume.
By challenging the autocratic position research has taken in
relation to the researched he also highlights the socio-
political nature of case study research, suggesting that some
of the issues be resolved by a shift in the researcher's
theoretical stance.

The paper begins by commenting on the position in the early
seventies when evaluation was just emerging as a new form of
inquiry. Since then, he argues, the climate has changed
considerably. More schools have been case studied and,given
the increasing public interest in schools, more are likely
to be case studied. In such a climate, neither the researched
nor the researcher can afford to ignore the ethical issues
at the heart of social research, particularly where case study
is the form of research. By adopting the form of letters
from a headmaster and suggesting that a written agreement
be established between the case study worker and the researched
he draws attention to the need to be explicit about the
conditions of the study and the rights of all parties from
the outset.

In addressing these issues, and in advocating the need for
more participant control over the form and content of
information about themselves which becomes public, the paper
is an extension of the democratic position he has advocated
towards research for several years now (MacDonald, 1974).

LETTERS FROM A HEADMASTER

Barry MacDonald

A long, long time ago, before the Yellow Paper[1] and the
Great Debate[2], before Kay[3] and Fookes[4] and Bennett[5] and
Taylor[6], before the siege economy and the siege school,
I can recall a period when headmasters dozed peacefully
through Panorama[7] and William Tyndale[8] was just another
school in the borough of Islington. In those days (the
early 1970s), when the educational research community, and
especially the growing band of curriculum evaluators, was
becoming interested in the processes of schooling, case study
was rather easy to arrange. Most schools could be had for the
asking by any bona fide researcher who promised not to make a
nuisance of himself.

At the time I was responsible for a programme of case studies,
part of a larger evaluation of the impact of a national
curriculum project. Over a period of four years some twenty
schools participated in this programme, which involved
questionnaires, pupil testing, interviews and access to
records of various kinds. The procedure we employed to coopt
the schools was straightforward and, with one exception which
I shall return to later, effective in securing access to
their work on our conditions. (I am not suggesting that
these conditions were particularly unreasonable, merely that
they were unilaterally determined, offered as a package and
accepted). The procedure consisted of a letter to the Local
Authority requesting permission to approach the school,
followed by a letter or phone-call to the headmaster
requesting case study facilities and suggesting a preliminary
meeting between one or more of the evaluators and the head-

master (and/or members of his staff), at which we would answer
any concerns they had about our work. No one declined the
invitation, and the preliminary meetings generated 'gentlemen's'
agreements about how the work was to be carried out. The
schools took for granted our research/evaluation skills, and
their expressed concerns related mostly to the amount of their
time and energies the study would demand.

The reader would be wrong to assume that these schools were
eager to publicise a success story in curriculum innovation.
By and large, they were experiencing severe problems in
attempting to implement an ambitious programme and might well
have preferred continuing obscurity to the spotlight of
evaluative scrutiny. But they questioned neither our right
to study their work nor our ability to do so in accordance
with the mysterious canons of our craft. It is a measure of
their docility to the evaluation process that all of them
allowed us to interview pupils in private and to build up a
bank of pupil reaction to the project and to the school,
data to which the staff had no right of access whatever.

Outlets for the case data thus accumulated ranged from
illustrative anecdotes in evaluation overviews of the project's
experience to published accounts of the work in particular
institutions. Relationships between the evaluation team and
most of these schools were generally cordial, the occasional
disagreement about the focus or conduct of the studies being
readily resolved. Only in one or two cases did the relation-
ship deteriorate to a point where questions about the purposes,
validity and desirability of the case study process itself
assumed the status of a challenge to us to justify what we
were doing. It is not my intention to exhume that
experience here, but rather to make the point that it is

typical of such situations that the search for clarification
and justification does not begin until an impasse has been
reached. And by this time the case study may be near
completion if not complete and the case study worker committed
to it either intellectually or because his resources are
running short.

In the absence of any written agreement regarding the process,
substance or outcomes of the research, the subjects of the
study find themselves seriously disadvantaged in pursuing
their grievances with its creator. When the 'understanding'
on which the study has proceeded turns out to be misunder-
standings, when the 'expectations' they have entertained and
the 'assumptions' they have made prove to be at variance with
the activities or intentions of the investigation, there is
little they can do other than appeal to the investigator or
threaten to disavow the study, an action likely to have the
same effect as the denial of rumour. Once the data has been
collected the balance of power has tilted conclusively in
favour of the investigator, who may dispose of it virtually
as he sees fit.

There is nothing new in this, of course. The relationship
between the researcher and his informants has always been of
this order, and has hitherto been considered non-problematic.
But then research in education has predominantly dealt in
data that is non-consequential for its subjects in any direct
or personal sense. Case study research, on the contrary, is
about identifiable individuals and events, and is always
likely to have consequences for those it portrays.[9] In my
view, this evaluative propensity of the case study exposes
the social and ethical inadequacy of a tradition of research
control that assumes the necessity of an autocratic relation-
ship between investigator and investigated. The 'expert'
disposes, and the subject can lump it.

I have earlier introduced the concept of a written agreement
between school and case study worker, and this is a notion I
now want to explore further, to see whether it offers a
procedure through which reasonable safeguards for the
participants and adequate conditions for the research may
be secured. As a case study advocate, it seems appropriate
that I should approach this possibility initially through
consideration of a particular case which occurred in the context
of the programme described earlier.

One headmaster took issue with the evaluation unit about the
nature and value of the proposed case study of his school,
and this led to an exchange of correspondence, (not all of
it preserved unfortunately) which may be worth reproducing
as an example of how an institution might set about the task
of deciding whether to cooperate with an externally mounted
enquiry and, if so, under what conditions. The case is not
offered as a model, or exemplar, but as a way of identifying
some of the issues that need to be addressed in the process
of clarifying and justifying a case study proposal.

The story[10] begins with an internal memorandum from the files
of the evaluation unit. It reads as follows:

> 12th July
>
> I rang the Head at 2.30 p.m. to ask him if he would be
> interested and if I could come up to have a chat with him
> about it before the end of the term.
>
> I said that:
>
> a) We had been studying some schools this year and
> were now in the process of trying to work out our study
> for next year.
>
> b) We had asked the Project Team if they had any
> suggestions about new schools and their name had come
> up. I was ringing to see if in general they would
> be interested or opposed to such a study and if

interested if I could come up and have a chat with them in more detail about what it might involve. The Head said:

a) That in principle he wasn't opposed to it but he could not speak for the rest of the team.

b) That he should point out that they were very critical of evaluation.

c) That it would be impossible to visit before the end of the year. I explained that it would have been helpful since we wanted to try and finalise some arrangements before the end of the term so we could begin early next year. He understood this but still said that a visit would be possible and asked if we could talk further on the 'phone then.

I briefly outlined the purpose of a case study and what we might hope to do in the school fitting in of course with the organisation and plans of the team and school.

He told me something of their organisation for next year.

He then asked about the evaluation team, areas of interest and possible time commitment. Was it to be over a whole year, who would visit and when? I explained the function of each of us and said two possibly three might like to visit for a few days once a term.

At this point he seemed fairly agreeable but said that he would like time to talk it over and must check with the team. The leader might like to ring me to discuss details further. He suggested that I ring back this time next Monday to see what the outcome of their discussion was. We left it that I would ring on Monday, 19th July, and if they agreed I would prepare an outline design for visiting to send in the holidays and we would arrange a visit early in the first term of next year.

19th July

Rang the school. The Head has spoken to the head of the team and he to the others who had agreed to our visiting but not before the end of term.

Arranged for day visit Monday, 6th September, 2.00 p.m. Proposal of study to be sent in the holidays.

But the promised proposal was not to materialise. Read on:

9th August

Dear Headmaster,

I am writing to confirm the arrangement that we made by
telephone at the end of last term for Mr. MacDonald
and me to visit in the second week of September to
discuss plans for a study of your work with the Project
with you and your staff. If it is convenient for you we
would like to make this a three and a half day visit
from 2.00 p.m. on Monday, the 6th September, as we
suggested, to and including the 9th September.

Ideally, what we would like to do during this time is
to observe where possible as many of the project groups
in action and talk to as many of the staff involved
as possible, either at lunch time, recess, after
school hours, or whenever is most convenient for
them. We would also like to interview each of them
in private. Would there be a room available where
we could do this?

As well as interviewing the teachers we would also like
to have the opportunity to interview some of the pupils
whenever they could be made available, either individually
or in groups of two or three. We would be pleased if it
were possible for a number of the pupils to be from
different teacher groups so that we could gain some idea
of the range of pupils'experience with the Project.

On the first day, again if it is feasible within your
timetable, we would like to talk to all the Project
teachers as a group as soon as it could be arranged,
in order to explain the purpose of our visit. We
would like to follow this up with individual teacher
interviews over the three days and then, on the fourth
day, meet them as a group again in order to feedback
and discuss with them the perceptions that we have
gained over the few days.

At some stage during the week we would also like to have
the opportunity for one of us to have an extended
interview with you. If this is difficult for you during
the day, perhaps it would be possible for you to have
dinner with us one eveing?

Finally, if there are any events taking place in the
school, during these three and a half days, such as a
parents' meeting or an open day, we would be pleased
if you would let us know about these so that we would
not conflict with any of your arrangements.

I do hope that these requests do not seem too
daunting. We do realise how difficult it is to
spare people for interview during a busy school day
and that all of these may not be possible. But we
will be quite happy to fit in with whatever times
and arrangements are most suitable for you and the
school team.

I mentioned to you on the telephone that I would send
you a proposal for a continuous study over the year.
On thinking this over I find that it is rather
difficult to do this meaningfully without some
prior understanding of the particular conditions,
organisation and commitments that you and the Project
team have in the school. I therefore thought it
preferable to leave this one, if you are agreeable,
until our visit when we can discuss and plan a study
more realistically in consultation with you and the
team.

Would you like to let me know if the above suggestions
and dates for the September visit seem feasible? If
you, or any member of the team, have any queries about
them at all, or have further questions that you would
like to raise before we come, please ring or write and
we can discuss them further.

I look forward to hearing from you and meeting you on
the 6th September.

With best wishes,

                    Yours sincerely,

The stillbirth of the proposal appeared to go unnoticed.

1st September

Dear Case-Study Worker,

Thank you for your letter of August 9th confirming the
arrangements for your visit to this school from 6th
to 9th September.

A programme meeting all your requests is being
arranged.

Rather than an extended interview with me, I should like
you to have this discussion with my deputy who is in
charge of the Project - though of course I shall be
glad to have a short talk with you on the specific
problems confronting a Head who is introducing the
Project into a school.

I look foward to meeting you and Mr. MacDonald.

Yours sincerely,

The visit duly took place, the study got underway, the Head came to dinner. A month later the following letter came from the Headmaster:

11th October

Dear Case-Study Worker,

In connection with your recent visit to the School, I have been asked by the Project team to pose the following questions:

1. Could you offer some constructive criticism in writing, at this stage, irrespective of the fact that your evaluation here is not yet complete?

2. To what use ultimately will your findings be put?

3. How do you guarantee that the observations of staff and pupils are kept confidential?

4. Do you take account of the fact that your presence at discussion sessions will cause some inhibition?

5. What research has gone into your questionnaire?

6. Do you agree that your next visit to this school would be more beneficial to all if you based it on preliminary feedback to us from your first visit?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

While we were pondering this letter and deciding how to reply another letter, this time from an adviser in the Local Authority where the School was located, was passed to me by the member of the national development team to whom it had been addressed. It read:

13th October

A week or so ago two of your colleagues visited to do
an evaluation of the Project at . . . school, and
last week another evaluator visited these offices to
talk to me about the way the Project was initiated in
the Authority and my general attitude towards it. As
you know, there will be a report to Committee at the
end of the trial period of three years to examine the
value of the Project in our schools, and I would be most
grateful if you could let me have the findings,
particularly of those who visited the school.

If you could let me have this report as soon as possible
I should be most grateful.

                    Yours sincerely,

On the 20th October I replied:

    Dear Adviser,

    . . . has passed to me your letter of the 13th October
    for reply.

    I can't in fact let you have the findings of our visit
    to the School because our enquiries are confidential
    and not for publication in other than an anonymised
    form. We are attempting a research study of this
    School in order to further our understanding of the
    ways in which the Project unfolds in different
    settings. In return for access to the school, we
    agree to treat as confidential the information we
    obtain and to make reports only to the school at this
    stage. As a matter of fact, the Head has written to
    me asking for such a report, and I am preparing it now.

    Might I suggest that you contact him for the information
    you need? I know that your relationships with the
    School are very friendly but it would be quite
    improper for me to breach faith with the School staff
    on whose co-operation and trust I am totally dependent.

    Mr. . . . whose responsibility is to study the response
    of LEAs to the diffusion of the Project, will be writing
    to you shortly about that aspect of the evaluation.

    I hope this clarifies the position. I'm sorry if it
    seems unhelpful, but there really is no other basis on
    which we can effectively case-study individual schools.

                    Yours sincerely,

A week later I responded to the Headmaster's letter in the
following manner:

Dear Headmaster,

Thank you for your letter to . . . which has been passed
to me. The delay in replying is due to the fact that
. . . has just returned from a round of school visits.
I will try to answer all your questions in the course
of this letter.

In our evaluation work we are trying to answer two
questions:

1. What are the different ways in which individual
schools use the Project and what patterns of effects
emerge from different uses?

2. What are the critical variables which determine
these patterns of use and effects?

3. In . . . as in any other case-study school, we are
trying to answer two questions. Although we have,
inevitably, personal views about the desirability or
otherwise of the Project, these are personal and no
part of our professional concerns. Professionally
we do not care whether a school is using the Project
in the "right" way, or whether it's a "success" or a
"failure". We do want to know what the school is
doing, why, and with what consequences. After all,
our value judgements are of no importance, except to
ourselves.

I thought it worth stressing this point, since it may
sometimes appear, when we interview people, that we
are criticising their actions. We are not, but it is
difficult to distinguish between a critical line of
questioning and one which is designed to explore attitudes,
perceptions and other causes of behaviour.

When we have completed our study of . . . and written it
up, we will have a document which outlines the history
and development of the Project in the school and which
will also contain information about the LEA and
community context, the organisational structure of the
institution, and the pattern of functional and affective
relationships which have influenced events. Much of this
information will have been obtained in conditions of
"confidentiality" and therefore its use in any identifiable
form is subject to veto by those concerned. It is by no
means certain that we would want to publish our findings,
and unlikely that we would want to do so in full case-

study form, since we are at the moment preparing for
publication three such studies, and it does not seem
profitable to repeat such a format. You may be
interested to know that, in the case of those three
schools, the documents are submitted to the schools
in draft form for comment on their fairness and
accuracy. Our policy (and it seems to me that any
other policy would be counter-productive) is to seek
the agreement of the staff concerned about the validity
of the study and to incorporate in the final version
any additions or modifications which would gain such
agreement. The studies are, of course, anonymised so
that the schools can only be identified by themselves.

I hope that you will feel to some extent reassured by
these comments on the points of confidentiality and
use of the findings. Could I now turn to your other
questions.

Question 4. Yes, we are acutely aware of the
inhibiting effect of our presence on some discussion
groups, although we have sometimes been informed that
our presence stimulates groups. It depends on the
circumstances and the stage of enquiry. Sometimes
pupils think their teacher is being "inspected" and
perform unusually well. It may also happen, where a
group has reached a stage of disinterest or apathy
towards the work, the presence of an observer can
revive them temporarily. But certainly at the
beginning of a school session when many pupils are still
inhibited by the novel situation and lack of confidence,
the observer can be like an albatross round the teacher's neck.

Question 5. The individual teacher questionnaires are
designed on the basis of a number of hypotheses advanced
by teachers and others during the Project's trials.
The teacher variable is one which many people have
thought to be critical. Thus it has been suggested
that:

> "Women are more suitable than men".
> "Older teachers are too set in their ways to change".
> "University graudates would be best because the
> work is intellectually demanding."
> "Teachers fairly new to the school will do best
> because they do not identify with the school's
> traditions".
> "Teachers who have had other work experience will
> be more acceptable to the pupils".
> "Teachers will teach best those themes they are
> personally interested in".

"Teachers will teach worst those themes they are
personally interested in".
"Senior personnel will do well, because they will
give the Project status in the eyes of the pupils".
Senior personnel will have an authoritarian image
in the eyes of the pupils, who will not feel free
to discuss".
Senior personnel will be unable to devote enough
time to the Project".

We can't come up with definitive answers to these
propositions, but we can keep them in mind when studying
the work of teachers.

With regard to questions 1 and 5, criticism of the school's
work is not something we would willingly undertake. All
schools make use of the Project according to their
individual needs, circumstances, and convictions.
There is a very important sense in which the Project cannot
be 'misused' by schools but only used in different ways.

You may, however, be interested in knowing what we perceive
to be distinctive elements in the use of the Project in
. . .

1. Only one person was "trained" in the use of the
Project. We would expect to find, in other team members,
some misunderstanding of the Project and variations in
the way the teacher's role is interpreted. We think this
is the case. We have asked for recordings of school team
meetings so as to explore this further.

2. The role of the school as the centre of LEA diffusion
and training is unusual and is likely to have consequences.
We think that such a role puts pressure on the school to
be a "model" of successful practice, and this will make
it difficult for you to be open and experimental. We
have no experience that this is in fact the case, but
we have only begun our study.

3. The team was drawn from an unusually wide range of
subject bases within the school. We think this is
significant in terms of disturbance effects, and would
expect in your case that the Project is in consequence
not perceived as threatening by non-Project staff,
since it does not have a departmental base.

4. The extent to which teachers feel secure enough to
permit true openness in their discussion groups is
often related to problems of discipline and control in
the school as a whole. Certainly on the surface . . .
appears to be unusually free from a custodial atmosphere,
but there is some evidence to suggest either that control

problems existed in the recent past or are anticipated
in the near future. We think that a better understanding
of the school ethos will help us to interpret teacher/
pupil relationships more accurately.

5.   The school is using the Project with high-status
pupils. This is unusual, and should mean that the work
itself has more status in the eyes of pupils and staff
than is the case where it is used only with fourth year
leavers.

6.   The team is very large and it will be difficult to
sustain as a team for that reason. We expect
fragmentation to take place. On the other hand we
have noted the high level of "professionalism" that
seems to be characteristic of the staff, and believe
that this will counteract tendencies to fragmentation.

7.   This point is connected with point 1. We are struck
by the apparent ease with which the programme has been
implemented. We are accustomed to encountering evidence
of strain and tension due to the difficulty of adapting
to a new approach which makes novel demands upon
organisation, teacher, and pupil. Does this mean that
there is no gap between your previous teaching and
Project work? Does this mean that you have in practice
modified the Project so as to close the gap? Or have
you made a genuine change without great difficulty?

These comments may not be what you had in mind when
you wrote to us, but all I can do at this stage is to
suggest what kinds of things we are thinking about in
relation to the Project in . . .

I hope you can help us to think more deeply about them.

                    Yours sincerely,

But that was not the end of it:

   26th November

   Dear Mr. MacDonald,

   Thank you for your letter of October 28th; we all
   appreciate the care you have clearly taken to frame a
   full reply.

The team have considered its contents and make the
following points. They find some of the vocabulary
peculiar to your discipline unnecessarily difficult:
they doubt whether an evaluation unit is capable of
evaluating objectively, or in fact, whether there is
such a thing as objectivity. They do not agree that
'our value judgements if they exist as such, are of no
importance except to ourselves': they are still in
doubt about a guarantee of confidentiality: they do
not think it possible for evaluators to write a
historical account of the Project since they were not
present during year 1: they see the exploration of the
statements in the paragraph entitled Question 5 on page
2 as an investigation of self evident truths: they feel
the statement of point 7 on page 4 shows lack of knowledge
of the stresses or strains of year 1 of the Project.

The team would be willing to entertain another evaluation
visit.

                        Yours sincerely,

I replied as immediately as the Post Office would allow:

Dear Headmaster,

Thank you for your comments. They are sharp and helpful.
I am sorry about the vocabulary, which I agree is some-
times unnecessarily difficult. I am sure it stems from
too much reading of American literature in the field
which tends to be rather technical. I am working on it.

Yes, objectivity is not attainable, although it can use-
f.lly be aspired to, and therefore it is very important
that all people involved make careful judgements and
do not leave the task of evaluation to the so-called
specialists. Clearly there is no danger of this happening
in . . . I am happy to say.

I do not quite understand the point about it not
being possible for evaluators to write a historical
account of the Project since they were not present
during year one. Surely a historical account is the
only account they can write in that case.

I agree with the point about the statements being "self-
evident truths" . They may still have an order of
importance.

Your last point is, of course, absolutely true, and
I am delighted that the School team are willing to
put up with another visit. I hope to contact you
about this quite soon.

This correspondence has been valuable to me, and I
hope that the School's evaluation of the evaluators
will be continued. Please convey my thanks to your
staff.

<div align="center">Yours sincerely,</div>

We now move on to phase two of the correspondence:

10th January

Dear Headmaster,

. . . and I would like to make a second visit to the
School this term and see how things are going and to
resume in a face to face situation the kind of debate
that we recently conducted by correspondence. We
envisage a visit of perhaps three days if you could
slot this in some time towards the end of February.

Providing you have no objection to a visit could you
let me know which week would be least inconvenient
to you? Once that has been established, we can plan
a structure of our activities in detail.

Kind regards,

<div align="center">Yours sincerely,</div>

25th January

Dear Mr. MacDonald,

Thank you for your letter of 10th January.

We would be pleased to welcome you again to the School
and can agree to the following dates - Tuesday, Wednesday
and Thursday, 29th February and 1st and 2nd of March.

However, we would like to receive in advance of your
arrival (so that we can consider how best to plan our
meetings to meet your needs) answers to the following
points.

1. What does "to see how things are going" mean?
What specifically are you looking for or planning
to look at on this occasion?

2. How do you intend 'to communicate' to us all the
results of your searchings?

3. By what criteria do you intend to evaluate the
information you seek on this occasion?

You will recall that on your last visit, I did not take
advantage of the opportunity to talk to you. I would
like to do so this time if you agree. I am willing
to discuss anything you wish and for my part would like
to range over several matters, some closely, some more
distantly related to the project, the exploration of
which would greatly help me with future planning. Among
these are the following:-

1. The problem of including . . . a 'subject' not
previously known to pupils among a list from which
pupils must choose at 4th year - sort of 'publicity'
problem.

2. Whether the project should become a General Studies
choice rather than a compulsory matter as in the
previous year.

The possibility/desirability of using the teaching/
learning style of the Project or some adaptation of
it with younger pupils of age 11-13.

4. The implications of the recent School Council rulings
on the Project.

It may be that as evaluators you feel some diffidence
about discussing these several points. I hope that
is not the case but if so perhaps you would be kind
enough to bring with you comments from other
colleagues on the Project.

I look forward to hearing from you and to meeting you.

                        Yours sincerely,

7th February

Dear Headmaster,

Thank you for your offer, in your letter of the 25th
January, of two full days at the school – February
29th and March 1st . . . and I will come up to
. . . on the Monday evening and will be at the school
first thing on Tuesday morning.

Let me answer the three questions posed in your letter
quite briefly, if I may, and postpone fuller answers
until our visit which we hope will provide opportunities
to discuss at some length the many issues formulated
in correspondence.

1.   "To see how things are going" is a general statement
of intent.   Specific objectives include the following:

a)   To collect teacher and pupil judgements about the
merits and demerits of the Project at this stage.

b)   To make judgements ourselves on classroom
observation and interviews, about how the Project is
being used by the staff and responded to by pupils.

c)   To find out more about the administrative/organisational
implications of the project for the school.

d)   To explore the consequences for the Project of the
departure of the team leader.

These are fairly specific.   We want also to explore
some of the hypotheses raised in my letter to you of
the 28th October.

2.   The fruits of our enquiry can be communicated to you
in the form of a report.   You have doubts about the value
of some aspects of our work and we respect these doubts.
We should like you to give us guidance about what kind
of feedback would be most useful to you.

3.   This question is difficult to answer as stated.
So much depends on what you mean by evaluation.   If
you mean what kind of conceptual framework do we use
to order or express our understanding of the Project in
schools, then the answer must be that we are not
committed to a single perspective.   We use concepts
from sociology, anthropology, psychology and economics.

Even from merchandising ('image', 'soft and hard sell', 'packaging' etc.) as and when they appear to fit the nature of the information. No one discipline alone provides an adequate scheme for the study of educational practice.

But then if you mean how do we decide what information is useful then we know to some extent from experience the kinds of questions people ask about the work of the Project in schools, and we try to obtain the relevant information. The Project seems to fit well in some schools and badly in others. This fact is well established, and potential users want to have information about the schools that will help them make a sound decision about what is likely to happen in their own situation if they take the Project on.

It may be that neither of these meanings are intended in your question. If not, can we discuss this when we visit?

I hope these documents, plus our previous correspondence, will help you to plan a programme for us. We would, however, like specifically to request permission to observe the following group sessions and to interview three pupils from each group . . .

I would certainly welcome the opportunity to talk to you, Headmaster, about the particular points you mention, and about more general issues. Please build that into our programme.

Our thanks to you and your staff for your continuing interest.

Yours sincerely,

This letter made no mention of another communication I had received from the Headmaster, dated January 26th, the day after his last letter. This contained a lengthy statement, which I have since either mislaid or returned to him, setting out his views about the role of the school in curriculum innovation. My recall is too hazy to justify an attempted reconstruction of the statement, but the gist of the argument may be inferred from this response:

Date indecipherable

Dear Headmaster,

Thank you for your letter of the 25th January. As I
have said in my reply to the 'school letter' I welcome
the chance to talk to you during the visit.

Your letter raises so many issues, and your arguments
are so impressively marshalled, that I feel quite
relieved at being able to postpone my answers until
February 29th. I need time to think about the points
I disagree with, and time to integrate those I accept.
I would, however, just like to dismiss any notion
that our basic positions are in conflict. This does
not appear to be the case.

You want more investment at the point of solution.
So do I. You want rid of 'evaluators'. So do I.
Each school must have its own innovative and evaluative
machinery if we are not to have a succession of
standardised and static curricula. But at the moment
the trend is the other way. Innovation is a fast
growing industry developing a superstructure outside
the schools. Yours is a cry in the wilderness. Our
work is going some way towards showing the limitations
of centralised agencies in meeting the needs of individual
schools. In a paper I wrote last year I stated as a
major hypothesis:

> "No two schools are sufficiently alike in the
> circumstances that prescriptions of curricular
> action can adequately supplant the judgement of
> the people in them."

That is the hypothesis I am testing through case study.
Isn't that more or less what you have said? The
difference is that we are trying to give your view a
solid research base. I do not, as you suggest, expect
a great deal of generalisations to emerge from case-
study. But you have to search for general truths
before you can state with confidence that they do not
exist. Is this, do you think, a source of misunder-
standing between us?

I look forward to seeing you.

                    Yours sincerely,

The last letter from the correspondence file, written after
the second visit to the school, suggests that a rapprochement
was reached. There is no record of further correspondence.

17th March

Dear Headmaster,

We would like to thank you very much for giving us
such a warm welcome when we visited the school.

Once again we found our visit to be very useful and
were glad to have the opportunity to talk to so many
of the staff and pupils. Would you please convey our
thanks to all those members of staff who gave up their
time to speak to us and ensured that our visit was
worthwhile.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

That was all of six years ago - before the outbreak of
economic panic lent impetus to educational managerialism,
output budgeting and demands for quality control through
accountability. In the interim, the circumstances in which
schools prosecute their interactions with the world about
them have been transformed. Now every man, it seems, seeks
evaluative access to the schools, HMIs as watchdogs of
national standards, advisers as guardians of local standards,
Taylor-blessed managers and governors, parent associations
emboldened by belated recognition of consumer rights, and of
course a growing number of academic researchers and evaluators
drawn to the case study approach to educational practice. The
contrast is quite marked. Six years ago, an administrator from
the city in which our case study was located could still claim
that the Authority was a 'pure channel' of resources to its
schools. Six years later, on September 15th, 1977 headmasters
read in their morning newspaper the recommendation of the

Fookes Sub-Committee that head teachers should only have
limited tenure subject to regular evaluation by an independent
agency.[11] Six years ago, too, the publication of a school
study was a rare event (neither Hargreaves in 1967[12] nor
Lacey in 1970[13] could cite previous British studies), whereas
in the last few years researchers, journalists and broadcasters
have together produced a large number of such studies, most
of them controversial, their collective effect being to
intensify public criticism of the schools and to make schools
generally more alive to their vulnerability with respect to
this particular form of enquiry. School studies by Roy Nash
(1973)[14] whose hostile commentary on the teaching staff was
not seen by them until they read the book, and by Rachel
Sharp and Anthony Green (1975)[15] who lied to the staff about
the focus of their study and published it in the teeth of
protests by the school and its Local Authority, have certainly
alerted teachers to the real possibility of abuse by the research
community. And the experience of the Faraday School in London
and several Sheffield comprehensives before them at the hands
of the 'respected' BBC Panorama team has demonstrated that
the logistics and ethics of tele-journalism may be incompatible
with even a minimal set of safeguards for their subjects.

What's the answer? Mount the barricades and slam shut the
doors of the school? Publish and be damned? Or negotiate
at the outset a contract which offers both parties to the study
reasonable conditions of cooperation? It is this latter
possibility I wish to hold out, and to make some progress
towards. Let us return to the Headmaster of the quoted
correspondence, now six years older, who has had time to
reflect upon that experience of case study and (I understand)
a subsequent experience of case study emanating from another
source. Let us imagine that this Headmaster has now been
approached once again for access to the school, and let us

try to construct the kind of letter he might write in reply.
I would like to think it might run as follows:[16]

    Dear Case-Study Worker,

    Let me begin by saying how pleased I was to receive your
    request for access to the school. My staff and I share
    your concern about the traditional secretiveness of the
    schools, and we have been discussing ways and means of
    making our work more accessible to public and professional
    judgement. It will take us some time, however, to evolve
    our own self-evaluation and self-report procedures, and
    perhaps your methods, principles and skills will guide
    our rather faltering steps. In any case, our own efforts
    will never fully satisfy all the legitimate needs for
    information about schools, and it would be unreasonable
    of us to block your way.

    Obviously, the first step is for us to get better
    acquainted, and to this end I suggest a preliminary
    visit to the school to enable you to meet the staff and
    explain to us as precisely as you can what is involved.
    We have formulated a list of questions which we'd like
    to use as a structure for the meeting; they could
    constitute the basis of contract between us for the
    purposes of the study. As you will see, some of the
    questions, particularly the early ones, could be dealt
    with in advance of the meeting by sending us the
    relevant documents.

    I do hope you are not put off by our queries; we wish
    to avoid both obstructiveness and naivete. You will know
    better than we that the outcome of such a study as you
    propose is an expression not just of the case, but of the
    case and the researcher taken together.

    Now the issues. For convenience I have grouped them under
    appropriate headings.

    1.   The Context of the Study

    We mean your context rather than ours. How is the research
    being financed? If it is based upon a research proposal,
    commission or contract, please send us a copy in advance
    of the meeting. We should like to know if the
    sponsorship of the study entails on your part any
    promise of commitments that we should bear in mind.

Case studies in our experience are usually an element
in a research programme; if so, that makes us programme
participants, and we need to know what we're getting into.
Time scales and resources are also relevant to our
decisions, particularly if they impose constraints
on the feasibility of ongoing feedback and consultation
during the study.

You've said little about yourself or your previous
experience. We shall meet soon of course and have a
chance to judge whether we can get along with each
other. In the meantime we would appreciate some
details of your training, an example of your previous
work in case study, and a couple of character references,
including one from a participant in your last piece of
research. If, on the other hand, this is your first
venture, in case study, then the request should be
put to your supervisor. If the case study is
contributing towards a degree for which you have
registered, we would like details of this.

We have three major concerns that prompt these
requests. The first is that we want to know all
the goals of the study and of the research programme
to which it contributes. Not that these are inviolable;
we recognise that goals may change in response to unforseen
opportunities but we would hope to keep track of such
changes and to be kept informed about them. Secondly,
we would want to be sure that any agreement reached
with you is binding upon any colleagues of yours who
have access to the data you require, and upon your
successor or replacement should you leave before the
study has been completed. Lastly, our concern to know
as much as possible about you reflects no more than a
recognition that there is an inescapable element of
trust in persons involved in this kind of study,
agreements notwithstanding. Agreements can be dishonoured,
and the sanctions available to us are weak when set
against the possible rewards to the investigator, it
seems.

2. The Study Process

Under this heading I have brought together our queries
about the nature of the process of case study and
the part we expect to play in it. What does access mean,
exactly? Access to staff, pupils, myself, classrooms,
staffrooms, school files and records, governors, parents?
Which of these, how often, and on what criteria of
selection? How, in other words, are the boundaries of
the case to be drawn? And what conventions or principles
of information control do you intend to employ? Do you

accept, for instance, that individuals have the right to place restrictions on the information they give you or enable you to acquire and, if so, to what extent? Specifically, will individuals have the opportunity to monitor the use within the school of information from or about them? What kinds of data about us or the school would you regard as ineligible for collection or dissemination? And how do you intend to collect information - will you take notes as you observe and interview, will you use tape-recorders, do you envisage videotape or film being used to document the schools activities?

Now a broader question, which may help us to anticipate both the kind of experience the case study will be for us and its possible benefits. What is the role of the school personnel in this study? Are we simply the subjects of the study, are we co-investigators with equal status as interpreters of the scene, are we a primary or secondary atudience for the products? What's in it for us in short? The issue of feedback is relevant here. What form will this take both for individuals and for the school as a whole? Will there be progress reports, and if so, how often, and for whom ? Will access to the accumulating study be open to all, denied to all, or differentiated to reflect hierarchies of power, responsibility or vulnerability within the boundaries of the study?

3. Outcomes of the Study

First, publications; will they be anonymised and if so, how? Is an interim as well as a final report contemplated, and do you hope for commercial publication of one or both of these? Are you likely to want to use case study data in your teaching, in published articles, newspapers, reports or conference presentations? Once we have some idea about the range of outlets you may wish to use, as well as the products you are committed to deliver, we can discuss our respective degrees of control over the form and content of the presentations, and what procedures we might employ to ensure that our opportunities to exercise that control are safeguarded. For instance, with regard to, say, the final report, who will have the chance to view this, and what right will they have to comment on, alter, or suppress the report or parts thereof, on the grounds of accuracy, truth, discretion, taste, relevance, fairness or balance? In any published account, what is the status of our interpretations and evaluations vis a vis yours?

Speaking of interpretations, we note that you omitted
to say in your letter whether your background was in
psychology, sociology, politics, economics, history,
or whatever. We would like to know which of the many
ways of construing the social world you will bring to
our school and which of the conceptual tools or
explanatory frame works offered by these disciplines
you are predisposed towards. Perhaps, I'm simply asking
what you think we're a case of.

This list of questions is getting a bit long, but not
tediously so, I hope. What about your own experience
of schools and your general attitude towards them.
After all, Rhodes Royson and Caroline Benn would be
unlikely to reach similar conclusions about the strengths
and weaknesses of this institution. If you were willing
to unpack your biases, so to speak, it would enable us
to monitor and detect developing imbalances in your study
which we might help to correct.

This school has been through two previous experiences
of being studied by outsiders. Some of the questions
set in this letter are questions we have asked on these
prior occasions, while others are questions we subsequently
wished we had asked. It seems to us that research people
in practice take a range of positions on many of these
issues, perhaps especially on issues that affect the
control of the data and the importance of the researcher's
perceptions and conclusions. The researcher variable
has important implications for the participating school,
and I am sure you will want to clarify for us the scale
and nature of the risks and benefits to which we may be
exposed. We would like to work towards a written
agreement, a contract between yourself and us to be
lodged with a third party (another item to be negotiated)
who would constitute a court of appeal in the event of
any conflict between us reaching the point of impasse.

The agreement could constitute an appendix of any
published study, perhaps.

I don't think you will find us unreasonable. We do
not expect you, at this stage, to be able to answer
every question we have raised in a definitive fashion.
Nor do we expect to appease every pang of anxiety we
have at the cost of worthwhile research. A fair agree-
ment will involve risks on both sides. It must offer
both a reasonable opportunity for the study to be
carried out and completed within the time scale and

resources available, and a real opportunity for the
subjects of the study to exercise the rights accorded
by its terms.

One last point. You won't mind, will you, if we tape
record the forthcoming meeting? We have a lot to
learn.

Yours sincerely,

Notes and References

1. The'Yellow Paper' or 'Yellow Book' as it became variously
know, was a confidential memorandum prepared for the Prime
Minister by the Department of Education and Science, in
October 1976. Widely leaked to the press, it was critical
of school standards and recommended a stronger role for the
central ministry in the design of the curriculum.

2. The Prime Minister, in the week following the'revelation'
of the Yellow Paper, took the opportunity of a speech at
Ruskin College Oxford to launch what has since been known as
the Great Debate about the educational state of the nation.
The debate, about whether academic standards in schools are
as high as they were, or as high as they need to be if the
nation is to become industrially competitive in the
international market, and what should be done to improve the
performance of the schools, has been going on in one form or
another ever since, and, at the time of writing, still shows
no signs of drawing to either a close or a conclusion.

3. Brian Kay, Her Majesty's Inspector, appointed in 1974
to run the new Assessment of Performance Unit created by the
Department of Education and Science to monitor national
standards across the curriculum.

4. Miss Janet Fookes, chairman of the all-party education
sub-committee of the Common Expenditure Committee. Since 1975
this sub-committee has been investigating policy making in the
Department of Education and Science, and making a range of
recommendations with a view to improving the educational
service.

5. Neville Bennett, author of 'Teaching Styles and Pupil
Progress' (Open Books, 1976) which appears to demonstrate
that formal teaching methods were superior to informal
methods in promoting scholastic attainment at the primary
school level. His book received almost unprecedented
publicity for a research report.

6. Tom Taylor, chairman of a committee set up in January, 1975 by the Secretary of State for Education and Science to consider the management and government of schools in England and Wales. Its report, 'A New Partnership for our Schools' (HMSO, 1977) recommended new governing bodies comprising a quadrilateral partnership in equal numbers of LEA, staff, parents, and community representatives, and new powers for the governors in the design and development of the curriculum.

7. Panorama, a weekly television current affairs programme whose contributions to the Great Debate have included two controversial broadcasts featuring portrayals of secondary schools.

8. William Tyndale Junior and Infants Schools, subject of a public outcry and a Public Inquiry conducted by Robin Auld, Q.C. which lasted for more than three months (1975/76) and resulted in the sacking of the headmaster and several of the staff. See the Auld Report, published by the Inner London Education Authority in 1976.

9. See MacDonald, B. "The Portrayal of Persons as Evaluation Data" in Norris, N. (ed) SAFARI Papers Two: Theory in Practice, Norwich, Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, 1977.

10. In the correspondence that follows some minor changes have been made to effect anonymity.

11. Tenth Report from the Expenditure Committee (Education, Arts and Home Office Sub-Committee). The Attainments of the School-leaver. House of Commons Paper 525 - 1, H.M. Stationery Office, 1977.

12. Hargreaves, D.H. "Social Relations in a Secondary School" Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.

13. Lacey, C. "Hightown Grammar" Manchester University Press, 1970.

14. Nash, R. "Classroom Observed", Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

15. Sharp, R. and Green, A. "Education and Social Control: a study in Progressive Primary Education", Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.

16.   This fictitious letter is based upon a working memorandum prepared by Peter Wilby and the author during the 1975 Cambridge Conference, 'Methods of Case Study in Education Research and Evaluation'.

RETHINKING CASE STUDY: NOTES FROM THE SECOND CAMBRIDGE CONFERENCE

Editor's Introduction

This paper by Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins is a condensed
account of some of the major issues in case study research.
It was first written to provide a summary reminder of the
issues which conference members thought were significant
for case study but not all of which were discussed fully
at the conference. (Several of the participants explored
some of the issues further after the conference and their
contributions are reflected in subsequent chapters.)

Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins acknowledge case study's debt
to past practice in the title of their paper. While noting
the growing use of case study in education in recent years
they suggest that its potential has not been fully exploited
and that there is still a need to legitimize the study of
the 'case' more strongly.

After outlining the different types of case study and the kinds
of generalizations it is possible to draw from them, one of
the central points they emphasize is that, whatever the
purpose or content of the study, the case worker must treat
the boundaries of the case and the issues it raises as
problematic matters that cannot "safely" be predicted.

The second section of their paper concentrates on the practical
problems of case work and raises a series of questions connected
with the circumstances of the case, the conduct of the study
and the consequences of the research, that the case study
worker should address in planning a study. In stressing also