

Multicase Methods and Generalization¹

Two realities exist simultaneously and separately within every human activity. One is the reality of personal experience. One is the reality of collective relationship. What happens collectively is seldom the aggregation of personal experience, and what happens individually is much more than the disaggregation of collective relationships. We can come to understand the case, and thus comprehend a little more the general, but not much. We can apply the general to individual case, but with much opportunity for error. Transformation of knowledge from individual to aggregate and back is fraught with fraughtfulness

We who evaluate human activity regularly encounter these two realities, choosing usually to emphasize one over the other. We take a single evaluand, a case unique in some respects, and choose to emphasize the merit of that particular case or to generalize as to the merit across other cases like it.

If evaluators choose to gather experiential data more than measurements, they call their evaluations qualitative, but they still may emphasize either the particular or the general. If evaluation findings are drawn primarily from the aggregate of many categorical observations, we call the evaluations quantitative, but the evaluator still may emphasize either the particular or the general. If evaluators set conceptualize formal standards for judging the quality of the evaluand, we operate closer to the mechanisms of social science, but we still may emphasize either the particular or the general. Evaluators use mixed methods, but most of us are consistent in leaning toward standards-based evaluation or responsive evaluation. We have our favorite approaches but we have a commitment to seek the merit of both the individual and the collective.

In this paper, I present a method of cross-case analysis a collection of case studies into understanding of what is common and trenchant across the cases. But, technology aside, I will discuss generally the theoretical place of particularistics and generalizations in our evaluation work.

Taking two cases. Let us start with the particulars of two case studies from distant countries, both of early childhood education innovation, one in Ukraine and one in Slovakia. These two studies are part of a research plan to examine the teaching and teacher education work of the Step by Step program in 29 countries. Since as early as 1994, Step by Step Foundations have operated in each country, most of them in eastern Europe, but also central Asia, the Baltics, and even Haiti. Their pre-school pedagogy has been child-centered and inclusive, with strong involvement of parents and institutional partners including ministries of education.

The project of 29 case studies was done to better understand the international program. I call such a research focus a "quintain." The quintain is what is being looked for across the cases.

Each country was invited to carry out a case study showing its particular and general Step by Step activity, with acknowledgement of its accomplishments and needs for further improvement. The full case reports from Ukraine, Slovakia, and also Romania, are included in my book, identified on your handout sheet.

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The Slovakia case study team chose a Roma settlement as its case. (We sometimes think of the Roma as wandering gypsies, but this settlement was over a hundred years old.) Working out from this one location, teacher training and other Step by Step work would be illustrated. In the past, the children of Karice, the settlement, were not being admitted to the regular village school, having poor readiness for first grade, weaknesses in conceptual development, and speaking Romani but not the Slovak language of the regular schools. So all were being sent to special education schools. The Step by Step professionals in Bratislava decided to teach these mothers and other family members to be pre-school teachers at home. The mothers lacked the knowledge and skills that they were to teach their children--so one day a week, the mothers and their children would spend the day with a teacher at the Pastoral Center or the Community Center, learning vocabulary and kindergarten concepts, such as shapes, colors, and movements. Then during the remaining days of the week, the mothers would teach these same things, over and over, at home, nourished by a brief visit from a mentor. So the case study was to tell the experience of these Roma families, their teachers, and others in the support system across the country. The case as foreground, the collective as background.

The Slovakia plan for data gathering is shown in Figure 1 (page 2) of your handout. The large circle represents the case: the home-based schooling in Karice. The top three sectors are the three main observation sites. The background circles indicate the contexts for the case. In instructions to the research teams, considerable emphasis was given to contexts, as is common in case research where it is believed that any of the unique characteristics of the situation may be vital to understanding the case. A few issue questions for structuring some of the data gathering are shown in the bottom box to the left, but care is taken not to let these questions overly narrow the story of the case. Some of the other information needed is indicated at the bottom to the right. Back inside the circle are indications of interviews anticipated, documents to review, and an embedded case or two. In the Slovak case, the special education teacher and the national director were mini-cases studied within the study, each getting two or three pages in the forty page report.

For multicase analysis, a second worksheet form to be used by the case analyst is shown in Figure 2 (page 3). This briefing is made by the multicase research director or a person who will read and summarize all the case reports. The unique characteristics dominate this summary but it is acknowledged in the lines below "Uniqueness" that there are several top-down designated themes, those expected to be important in the multiple case study analysis.

Lets consider the themes for these 29 Step by Step cases. The organizers of the Step by Step case study project were Sarah Klaus and Hugh McLean in the Budapest office. They invited each country team to pick its own case and to vivify the ways the Step by Step develops locally, but also to gather some information on each of six themes. These themes are shown as questions in the bottom half of Worksheet 2 of your handout (Figure 3, page 4). Stated more briefly, the cross-site themes were:

- Children's outcomes
- Family and community engagement
- Equal opportunities for each child to develop his or her potentials
- Teacher training
- Enabling networks and partnerships
- Program sustainability

For brevity's sake, only two of these themes are shown back in Figure 2, not all six. A full analysis would include all the themes chosen to structure the cross-case analysis. Worksheet 3 is intended not only to facilitate that analysis, being careful to retain some of the uniqueness of cases expected to be useful in writing the final cross-case report.

