

Instructors Guide: Using Case Studies to Teach Early Childhood Policy (ECP) Concepts

What are case studies?

A case study is a gathering of contextual information about an event, situation, or experience of individuals and small groups, through interviews, expert knowledge, and an in-depth look at documents to better understand the topic.

What is early childhood policy (ECP)?

An emerging field centered on creating and implementing coordinated, effective, and equitable policies, practices, and infrastructure that support all children from birth — through 8 years old.

Why are using case studies beneficial?

- Case studies provide real-world examples and contexts that illustrate nuances of ECP that may not otherwise be obvious from general learning about an event. More than an academic exercise, cases place the policy analysis in actual policy environments, with real people and consequences.
- Case studies allow students the opportunity to get the details and better understand complex scenarios that frequently occur but may not otherwise be taught. Case learning allows students to be actively involved in their learning, as opposed to lectures, which are a passive way to take in information.

Types of cases and ways to use them:

- **Decision-forcing cases:** these are cases where the narrative stops at a critical turning point or decision point. This kind of case allows for a discussion or assignment, where students can be prompted to investigate further how the case unfolded or analyze the pros and cons of possible outcomes.
- **Analysis cases:** these are cases that have students focus on answering questions and analyzing the presented situation. An analysis case provides all the details and can generate discussion by creating an environment for students to engage in a structured debate about the road taken versus alternative solutions and pathways.
- **Interrupted cases:** these are cases that are presented in a progressive format. Students are provided pieces of the case that they work on and discuss before moving on to the next part. Professors might also provide the outline of a story and use the case to prompt further exploration of detailed information to gather a complete story. Interrupted cases most resemble project-based learning.

Instructor preparation:

- Be strategic about how you use cases. For instance, you can introduce one case at the beginning of the quarter or semester that touches on multiple course objectives. Then you can refer to it to add complex perspectives as students further develop policy concepts and policy analysis skills. Alternatively, you can introduce multiple cases specific to a subset of course objectives within the quarter or semester.
- Set aside time at the beginning of the course (semester, quarter, etc.) to explain how you would like students to approach a case study and prepare for in-class discussions about each case. This may include:
 - Providing ample time for students to read, discuss, and explore the ideas in the case.
 - Highlighting features of case studies that you would like students to pay particular attention to.
 - Establishing norms for case study discussions (norms may vary depending on the type of case study being used).
- Establishing a procedure or protocol for how you would like students to reflect on case study discussions and apply new insight to other course teachings. With course learning goals and objectives in mind, consider what key discussion points you want to ensure are discussed in each class. Be prepared to guide students to these discussions through active listening and thoughtful, probing questions.
- Consider facilitation strategies that will encourage case conversations to be student-centered, with students more often directly addressing each other rather than you.
- Pair cases with material that is methodological or theoretical to highlight course topics and goals in a way that is relatable, relevant, and meaningful to students' learning.
- Consider assigning students to case groups where they discuss the case assigned before class and reflect on it after class.

Questions to ask students of any case study:

- What topic is being explored in the case study? Why is it being examined?
- What central issue does the case raise?
- Are there alternative solutions or pathways that should have been considered?
- What would you do if you were in this situation? Why?

For more specific questions to ask, please see the study questions at the end of each case study developed by Cultivate Learning.

Other relevant resources:

- Teaching with Cases- Faculty Tip Sheet (Harvard Kennedy School)
- Common Case Teaching Challenges and Possible Solutions (Harvard Kennedy School)
- Using Case Studies to Teach (BU Center for Teaching and Learning)
- The HBS Case Method Defined – YouTube Link