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Qualitative Case Study Research in Education: A Systematic Review of Methodological Approaches and Analytical Practices

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Abstract

This study examines methodological approaches and analytical practices in qualitative case study research within educational contexts. The increasing diversity in the interpretation and implementation of case study research has created methodological inconsistencies, particularly in research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Therefore, this systematic review aims to identify methodological characteristics, classify case study approaches, and analyze analytical practices employed in qualitative educational case study research. This study employed a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework. Articles were retrieved from Scopus-indexed journals published between 2018 and 2023. The selected studies were analyzed based on research design, participant selection, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures. The findings reveal that qualitative case study research in education predominantly employs semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis as primary data sources. Thematic analysis, coding procedures, and triangulation techniques were frequently used to enhance data validity and interpretation. The review also identified variations in the classification and implementation of intrinsic, instrumental, explanatory, and exploratory case studies. These findings highlight the importance of methodological rigor and conceptual clarity in conducting qualitative case study research in educational settings.

Keywords: qualitative case study, educational research, systematic literature review, methodological approaches, analytical practices



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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pendekatan metodologis dan praktik analisis dalam penelitian studi kasus kualitatif pada konteks pendidikan. Semakin beragamnya interpretasi dan implementasi penelitian studi kasus menyebabkan munculnya inkonsistensi metodologis, terutama dalam desain penelitian, teknik pengumpulan data, dan prosedur analisis data. Oleh karena itu, tinjauan sistematis ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi karakteristik metodologis, mengklasifikasikan pendekatan studi kasus, serta menganalisis praktik analisis data yang digunakan dalam penelitian studi kasus kualitatif di bidang pendidikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode systematic literature review yang dipandu oleh kerangka PRISMA. Artikel diperoleh dari jurnal terindeks Scopus yang diterbitkan pada tahun 2018–2023. Studi yang terpilih dianalisis berdasarkan desain penelitian, pemilihan partisipan, teknik pengumpulan data, dan prosedur analisis data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penelitian studi kasus kualitatif di bidang pendidikan didominasi oleh penggunaan wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan analisis dokumen sebagai sumber data utama. Analisis tematik, prosedur pengodean, dan teknik triangulasi juga banyak digunakan untuk meningkatkan validitas dan interpretasi data. Selain itu, tinjauan ini mengidentifikasi adanya variasi dalam klasifikasi dan implementasi studi kasus intrinsik, instrumental, eksplanatori, dan eksploratori. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya rigor metodologis dan kejelasan konseptual dalam pelaksanaan penelitian studi kasus kualitatif pada konteks pendidikan.

Kata Kunci: studi kasus kualitatif; penelitian pendidikan; systematic literature review; pendekatan metodologis; praktik analisis data

INTRODUCTION

Case study research is one of the most widely used approaches in qualitative research, particularly in the field of education, because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex and contextual phenomena. Various scholars view case study research as an approach that allows researchers to explore phenomena holistically within real-life contexts through multiple perspectives. Case studies are used to understand the relationship between phenomena and context in depth, especially when the boundaries between them are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). In addition, this approach enables researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of particular events or situations through the exploration of multiple data sources and perspectives (Lapoule & Lynch, 2018; Noor, 2008). Therefore, case study research is considered an effective approach for uncovering the dynamics, processes, and meanings of phenomena in depth (Gustafsson, 2024).

The use of case study research design has expanded across various disciplines, including social sciences, education, business, law, and health. In educational research, case studies are widely used to examine learning practices, students' experiences, curriculum development, and institutional dynamics within specific contexts. The increasing use of case study research has encouraged the development of diverse methodological approaches employed by researchers in designing and conducting case study investigations. Recent studies also indicate that qualitative research in education continues to grow, particularly in the use of case study approaches to understand educational phenomena contextually and comprehensively (Harrison et al., 2017; Ridder, 2017).

Recent methodological discussions further suggest that qualitative case study research has gained significant attention because of its ability to capture contextual complexity, participants' experiences, and

social interactions in authentic educational settings. Case study approaches are increasingly employed to investigate digital learning environments, classroom interactions, curriculum implementation, and students' learning experiences through interpretive and context-sensitive perspectives (de Carvalho et al., 2026; Greenhalgh, 2025). Moreover, qualitative educational research has increasingly emphasized methodological rigor, transparency, and reflexivity in data collection and analytical procedures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings (Liang, 2019)

Methodologically, the development of case study research has been strongly influenced by the approaches proposed by Stake (1995), Yin (2003), and Merriam (2009). Stake views case study research as an interpretive approach that focuses on understanding the uniqueness of a case within its natural context. This approach emphasizes participants' experiences, meaning interpretation, and the complexity of the social context underlying a phenomenon. In contrast, Yin conceptualizes case study research as a systematic empirical strategy used to answer "how" and "why" questions in real-life situations. Yin emphasizes the importance of structured research design, the use of multiple data sources, and validation procedures to enhance research rigor. Meanwhile, Merriam positions case study research as a flexible approach that highlights the interrelationship between research questions, theoretical frameworks, participant selection, and data collection techniques in qualitative inquiry. These philosophical and methodological differences demonstrate that case study research has evolved through various paradigms and research practices.

The diversity of these approaches has led to variations in how case study research is implemented in educational settings. Case study research is considered flexible because it allows the use of various data collection techniques and

analytical strategies (Prihatsanti et al., 2018). However, this flexibility also creates methodological challenges, including the absence of standardized procedures for conducting case study research (Yin, 2003). Differences in definitions, theoretical orientations, and research procedures often result in inconsistencies in the selection of case study types, data collection techniques, and data analysis practices used by researchers (Stoecker, 1991). Recent studies further indicate that qualitative research still faces challenges in maintaining methodological rigor, transparency in analytical procedures, and systematic reporting of research findings (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

In practice, case study research requires strong methodological rigor to produce valid and in-depth findings. Yin (2003) explains that case study design includes several essential components, such as research questions, propositions, units of analysis, logical links between data and propositions, and criteria for interpreting findings. In addition, the use of multiple data sources, triangulation, research documentation, and database management plays an important role in enhancing the validity of case study research. The combined use of interviews, observations, documentation, and field notes enables researchers to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In educational research, thematic analysis has also become one of the most frequently used data analysis techniques because it is considered flexible and capable of generating in-depth interpretations of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Although case study research has been widely used in educational research, diverse interpretations regarding methodological approaches, case study classifications, and data analysis practices are still evident among researchers. These variations indicate that the implementation of qualitative case study

research still requires stronger conceptual clarity and methodological rigor, particularly in research design, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures. Therefore, this study aims to identify the methodological characteristics of qualitative case study research in education, classify the case study approaches employed by researchers, and analyze the data analysis practices applied in educational case study research through a systematic literature review.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to identify methodological characteristics, classify case study approaches, and analyze data analysis practices in qualitative case study research within educational contexts. The SLR method was selected because it provides a systematic, transparent, and structured understanding of the development of case study methodologies in educational research. The review process was conducted by adapting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guideline to ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and systematic reporting throughout the research process.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus and Taylor & Francis Online databases because both databases provide access to reputable peer-reviewed educational research articles indexed internationally. The search focused on articles published between 2018 and 2023 to capture recent methodological developments in qualitative case study research within educational settings. The search process employed several keywords, including "qualitative case study," "case study research," "educational research," "methodological approach," and "data analysis." These keywords were combined using Boolean operators such as AND and OR to refine and obtain articles relevant to the objectives of the study.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Article selection was conducted based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the reviewed studies. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Research Type	Empirical qualitative case study research	Literature review, conceptual articles
Research Context	Educational research	Non-educational research
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Proceedings, books, reports
Journal Indexing	Scopus-indexed journals	Non-indexed or predatory journals
Language	English	Non-English
Publication Year	2018–2023	Before 2018

Only empirical studies that clearly described methodological approaches, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures in qualitative case study research were included in the final synthesis.

Article Selection Process

The article selection process followed the PRISMA stages consisting of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, articles were retrieved from the selected databases using the predetermined keywords. A total of 100 articles were initially identified, consisting of 58 articles from Scopus and 42 articles from Taylor & Francis Online.

After duplicate removal, 80 articles remained and were screened based on titles and abstracts. Subsequently, 54 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the focus of the study. The remaining 26 articles were assessed through full-text review during the eligibility stage. At this stage, 16 articles were excluded because they did not employ qualitative case study approaches, were not conducted within educational contexts, or did not clearly explain methodological procedures and data analysis practices. Finally, 10 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the article selection process is presented in Figure 1.

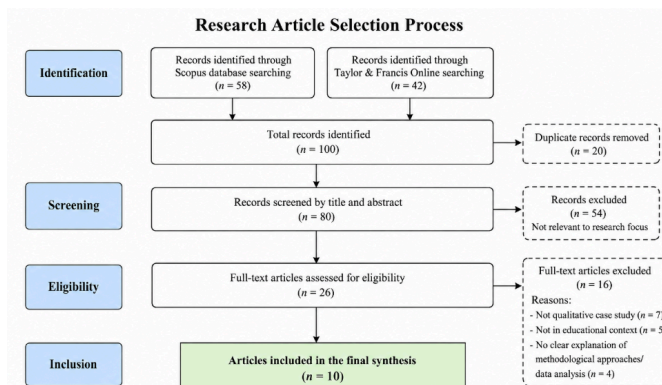


Figure 1. Research Article Selection Process

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted systematically by identifying several methodological aspects from each selected article, including research focus, case study approach, participant characteristics, data collection techniques, data analysis methods, and validation procedures. The extracted data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and variations in methodological approaches and analytical practices employed in qualitative case study research within educational settings.

The findings were synthesized narratively and descriptively to provide a comprehensive understanding of methodological trends and analytical practices in educational case study research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of the Reviewed Articles

The extracted data indicate that qualitative case study research in education predominantly focuses on learning practices, students' experiences, educational technology implementation, and contextual learning dynamics. Most studies employed a single case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of

educational phenomena within real-life contexts (Korukluoglu & Toy, 2022; Martin et al., 2021).

In addition, most studies involved relatively small numbers of participants and used purposive sampling techniques to obtain rich and in-depth data. This approach enabled researchers to explore participants' experiences, social interactions, and learning contexts more comprehensively.

Tabel 2. Methodological Characteristics of the Reviewed Articles

Methodological Aspect	Dominant Findings
Case Study Design	Single case study
Methodological Approach	Yin-oriented case study
Data Collection Technique	Semi-structured interview
Data Analysis Technique	Thematic analysis
Data Validation Technique	Data triangulation
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling

Methodological Approaches in Case Study Research

The synthesis findings revealed that most studies adopted Yin-oriented case study approaches characterized by systematic research design, the use of multiple data sources, and triangulation procedures to enhance research validity (Lin et al., 2019; Mabasa & Themane, 2021) Yin's approach was commonly employed to investigate educational phenomena in depth through "how" and "why" research questions within real-life contexts.

Meanwhile, several studies adopted Stake's interpretive approach, which emphasizes participants' experiences and the social context of the research (Senturk & Sari, 2018; Weaver & Swank, 2020). Studies using Stake's approach were primarily conducted to explore students' learning experiences and social interactions in educational settings. In addition, several studies demonstrated characteristics of Merriam's approach, particularly in terms of research flexibility and the relationship between research questions and data collection processes (Alebrahim & Yu ku, 2020).

These findings indicate that qualitative case study research in education has developed

through various methodological orientations depending on research objectives and contexts.

Table 3. Case Study Approaches Used in the Reviewed Articles

Approach	Characteristics	Supporting Articles
Yin-oriented case study	Systematic design using triangulation and multiple data sources	Mabasa & Themane (2021); Lin, Wi, Wang, & Yang, 2019)
Stake-oriented case study	Interpretive and contextual	Senturk & Sari (2018); Weaver & Swank (2020)
Merriam-oriented case study	Flexible and practice-oriented	Alebrahim & Yuku (2020)

Data Collection Techniques

The review findings indicate that semi-structured interviews were the most dominant data collection technique used in educational case study research. Interviews were mainly employed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the investigated phenomena in depth (Alebrahim & Yu ku, 2020; Korukluoglu & Toy, 2022; Wong et al., 2021).

In addition to interviews, observations and document analysis were also widely used to strengthen research validity through triangulation procedures (Mabasa & Themane, 2021; Tate et al., 2018). Some studies also employed field notes and learning artifacts to obtain more contextual understandings of educational phenomena (Martin et al., 2021). The use of multiple data collection techniques demonstrates that educational case study research strongly emphasizes data richness and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Table 4. Data Collection Techniques in Educational Case Study Research

Data Collection Technique	Main Function	Supporting Articles
Semi-structured interviews	Exploring participants' experiences and perspectives	Wong et al. (2021); Korukluoglu & Toy (2022)
Observation	Understanding contexts and social interactions	Weaver & Swank (2020); Martin et al. (2021)

Document analysis	Strengthening data validity	Mabasa & Themane (2021); Tate et al. (2018)
Field notes	Supporting contextual interpretation	Martin et al. (2021)

Data Analysis Practices

Thematic analysis was identified as the most dominant data analysis technique used in educational case study research (Belanmghari, 2022; Tate et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2021). This technique was applied through coding procedures, theme identification, data categorization, and meaning interpretation based on emerging patterns from qualitative data.

Besides thematic analysis, several studies employed content analysis to categorize data and understand social interaction patterns in educational contexts (Lin et al., 2019; Weaver & Swank, 2020). Other studies used open coding to develop initial categories from research data (Martin et al., 2021), while some adopted the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Mabasa & Themane, 2021).

Table 5. Data Analysis Techniques in Educational Case Study Research

Data Collection Technique	Characteristics	Supporting Articles
Thematic analysis	Identifying themes and data patterns	Wong et al. (2021); Belanmghari (2022)
Content analysis	Categorizing data content	Weaver & Swank (2020); Lin, Wi, Wang, & Yang, 2019)
Open coding	Developing initial categories	Martin et al. (2021)
Miles & Huberman analysis	Data reduction, display, and verification	Mabasa & Themane (2021)

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that qualitative case study research in education has developed through diverse methodological orientations. The dominance of Yin-oriented case study approaches suggests that educational

researchers tend to prefer systematic and structured research designs emphasizing methodological rigor, the use of multiple data sources, and triangulation procedures. This tendency is influenced by the need for educational research to produce credible and transparent findings in understanding complex and contextual phenomena. Several recent studies also explain that Yin’s approach is widely adopted because it provides more detailed procedural guidance for designing, conducting, and validating case study research in educational contexts (Harrison et al., 2017; Ridder, 2017).

The review findings also reveal that semi-structured interviews are the most dominant data collection technique used in educational case study research. The dominance of interviews indicates that researchers emphasize the exploration of participants’ experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in understanding educational phenomena in depth. Interviews are considered effective in generating rich and contextual data, particularly in studies focusing on learning experiences, classroom interactions, and educational practices. However, the heavy reliance on interviews may also increase subjectivity and researcher bias if not supported by data triangulation and transparent analytical procedures. Recent studies indicate that combining interviews with observations, document analysis, and field notes can strengthen data credibility and enhance contextual understanding in qualitative educational research (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

Another important finding is the dominance of thematic analysis as the primary data analysis technique in educational case study research. Thematic analysis is preferred because it is considered flexible and capable of

helping researchers systematically identify themes, patterns, and meanings from qualitative data. Educational researchers commonly use thematic analysis to understand participants' experiences, social dynamics, and learning processes within specific contexts. However, several reviewed articles did not provide detailed explanations regarding coding procedures, theme development, or analytical validation processes. The lack of transparency in analytical procedures may reduce methodological rigor and the credibility of research findings. Recent methodological studies also emphasize that transparency in coding processes, theme development, and analytical decision-making is essential for enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The review findings also demonstrate that most studies employed single case study designs rather than multiple-case or longitudinal case study approaches. The dominance of single case studies indicates that researchers tend to focus on in-depth exploration of specific educational phenomena within particular contexts. Although this design provides rich and contextual understanding, the use of single case studies may limit the transferability of findings to broader educational contexts. On the other hand, multiple-case and longitudinal case study designs remain relatively underutilized, despite their potential to generate more comprehensive understandings of educational dynamics across contexts and over time. Recent educational literature suggests that comparative and longitudinal case studies can strengthen analytical depth and theoretical contributions in qualitative educational

research (Adams et al., 2022; Defensor et al., 2024).

Another critical issue identified in this review concerns methodological transparency and validation procedures. Although triangulation was the most frequently used validation technique, only a limited number of studies provided detailed explanations regarding member checking, audit trails, inter-coder reliability, or researcher reflexivity practices. This finding suggests that methodological rigor in educational case study research still requires improvement, particularly in terms of transparency and credibility throughout the analytical process. Recent qualitative research literature emphasizes that rigor in case study research is not solely determined by the use of multiple data sources but also by the clarity of validation strategies and reflexive practices throughout the research process (Moon et al., 2016)

The findings of this study have several methodological implications for future educational case study research. First, researchers need to provide clearer justifications regarding the selection of case study approaches, particularly in distinguishing between Yin, Stake, and Merriam-oriented traditions. Second, future studies should improve analytical transparency by providing detailed explanations of coding procedures, theme development, and validation strategies. Third, educational researchers should begin to develop the use of multiple-case and longitudinal case study designs to strengthen analytical depth and theoretical contributions. Finally, methodological rigor in case study research should be strengthened through the integration of triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, and more systematic

reporting procedures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative case study research findings.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that qualitative case study research in education has developed through diverse methodological approaches. Yin-oriented case study approaches were identified as the most dominant because they emphasize systematic research design, the use of multiple data sources, and triangulation procedures to enhance research validity. Meanwhile, Stake's and Merriam's approaches were also identified in several studies that focused more on contextual interpretation, participants' experiences, and flexibility in research design.

The review also revealed that semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis were the most frequently used data collection techniques in educational case study research. The use of multiple data collection techniques reflects the strong emphasis on in-depth data exploration and contextual understanding of educational phenomena. In terms of data analysis, thematic analysis emerged as the most dominant analytical technique because it enables researchers to systematically identify patterns, themes, and meanings from qualitative data.

Although qualitative case study research offers methodological flexibility and rich contextual exploration, it still faces challenges in maintaining methodological rigor, particularly regarding transparency in analytical procedures, research validation, and systematic reporting of research findings. Therefore, qualitative case study research requires stronger conceptual clarity, methodological transparency, and more robust validation strategies to produce credible and academically rigorous findings.

This study contributes to mapping the methodological characteristics, case study approaches, data collection techniques, and data analysis practices employed in qualitative case study research in education. The findings are expected to provide references for educational researchers in designing and conducting more systematic, rigorous, and contextually grounded case study research.

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