

# Qualitative Research Trends in Graduate Theses in Educational Sciences: A Study from Türkiye

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study provided a comprehensive and longitudinal examination of the expansion and institutionalization of qualitative research methodologies within graduate theses in educational sciences in Türkiye, spanning the years 2000 to 2024.

**Method:** Utilizing a systematic analysis of the YÖKTEZ national theses database, the paper traced epistemological, methodological, and institutional shifts that have positioned qualitative inquiry as a central mode of knowledge production. Through a three-phase periodization and an in-depth account of research designs—including case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and action research—this study identified critical patterns, disruptions, and continuities.

**Findings:** The findings revealed not only exponential growth in the adoption of qualitative methods but also evolving understandings of methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, and ethical engagement. Despite increasing recognition, qualitative research often encounters hurdles in publication due to traditional biases favoring quantitative methodologies.

**Implication:** The discussion underscored the importance of fostering an academic environment that values and supports qualitative approaches. Thus, this article called for a paradigm-sensitive and epistemologically reflexive approach to graduate-level research, situating the trajectory of qualitative inquiry within the larger research trends and pedagogy of higher education in Türkiye.

## Keywords

qualitative research, research paradigms, educational sciences, graduate theses

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## Introduction

The role of qualitative research in educational sciences has gained increased legitimacy globally, particularly in contexts where traditional positivist frameworks have long dominated academic inquiry. This paradigmatic shift in Türkiye is not merely an internal academic evolution but reflects broader global debates concerning the epistemological positioning of educational science itself. As Yıldırım (2023) critically underscores, the historical divide between the Anglo-American and Continental European traditions has profoundly shaped the ontological and methodological foundations of educational research. The Anglo-American orientation, rooted in an applied and interdisciplinary understanding of education, predominantly relied on borrowing theories from psychology, sociology, and philosophy, often positioning education as a field without an independent theoretical core. This has led to a legacy where positivist methodologies were privileged, framing research in terms of generalizable principles and standardized practices. This theoretical distinction plays a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy and development of qualitative methodologies. Hsiung (2012), who claims that the globalization of qualitative research has often reinforced the dominance of Anglo-American epistemologies in peripheral contexts, made a similar argument. This dynamic has contributed to the replication of Western theories and methods in countries like Türkiye, rather than fostering the development of indigenous qualitative frameworks attuned to local realities.

The historical divide between the Anglo-American and Continental European traditions in qualitative research reflects distinct epistemological pathways shaped by geopolitical and cultural contexts. As Alasuutari (2004) argues, the globalization of qualitative research often entrenches the dominance of Anglo-American epistemologies, pressuring scholars from peripheral regions to conform to these paradigms. Similarly, Atkinson (2005) emphasizes that despite the nominal pluralism within qualitative methods, Anglo-American models continue to define methodological standards globally. In contrast, Iberoamerican scholars, encompassing both Latin American and Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) traditions, have fostered alternative epistemologies that resist such dominance. Bolívar and Domingo (2006) detail how in Iberoamerica, qualitative research has transitioned from amplifying marginalized voices to constructing epistemological frameworks that honor plural and multiethnic histories, challenging monolithic knowledge production. In Italy, Bruni and Gobo (2005) illustrate the late but significant institutionalization of qualitative research within a sociological domain historically governed by positivism and idealism. Concurrently, Cisneros Puebla (2000) highlights the Mexican context, where qualitative research shifted from abstract theories of poverty to capturing the poor's own narratives, deeply rooted in collective memory and cultural identity. These diverse traditions exemplify ongoing efforts to pluralize qualitative inquiry and decentralize the Anglo-American epistemic hegemony.

This historical divergence finds unique resonance in Türkiye's educational research landscape, where the epistemological influences of both Anglo-American and Continental traditions have left a hybrid imprint on academic inquiry. In contrast, the Continental European tradition conceptualizes education as both a scientific and normative discipline, with intrinsic theoretical frameworks grounded in pedagogy and didactics. This tradition fosters a research ethos that privileges context-sensitive, theory-building qualitative inquiry aimed at understanding educational phenomena in their social, moral, and cultural complexity. Importantly, Yıldırım (2023) notes that the Turkish educational research landscape, while institutionally shaped by the Anglo-American model, exhibits a hybrid character. The gradual incorporation of

qualitative methodologies in Türkiye mirrors this hybridity—situated between the application-driven, positivist legacy and an emergent, albeit limited, adoption of theoretically grounded, interpretivist paradigms.

Thus, the growing prominence of qualitative research in Türkiye's graduate education can be interpreted as both a methodological maturation and an epistemic reorientation. It represents a critical juncture where researchers are increasingly seeking to produce localized theories that respond to Türkiye's unique socio-cultural educational challenges, rather than merely applying borrowed frameworks. The paradigmatic shift towards qualitative research has not only manifested in the proliferation of graduate theses but also in the evolving perceptions and competencies of graduate students themselves. For instance, Tavsancıl et al. (2010) found that between 2000 and 2008, more than 80% of master's theses in Turkish educational sciences employed quantitative methodologies, with a heavy reliance on descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA. This quantitative dominance underscores the significant epistemological shift observed in subsequent decades, wherein qualitative and mixed methods research have gained remarkable traction in graduate education in Türkiye. The shift was also observed in Ezer and Aksüt's study (2021). Their phenomenological study of social studies education graduate students reveal that students predominantly associate qualitative research with sensitivity to natural settings, in-depth exploration of social phenomena, and the capacity to reveal subjective perceptions and experiences. This suggests a growing recognition among emerging scholars that qualitative inquiry is indispensable for understanding complex educational realities beyond what quantitative metrics can capture. Such perceptions reinforce the critical need to embed qualitative methodologies more robustly within graduate education curricula.

As Yıldırım (2023) aptly argues, this transition opens possibilities for constructing "micro theories" attuned to local realities, resonating with the Continental emphasis on theory elaboration through empirical research. However, the full potential of this shift remains contingent upon institutional commitments to deepen theoretical training, diversify methodological repertoires, and cultivate an academic culture that values epistemological reflexivity over mere methodological compliance. Although the dominance of positivist traditions persisted well into the early 2000s (Karadağ 2009), the increasing prominence of interpretivist and constructivist paradigms has enabled educational researchers to explore lived experiences, social contexts, institutional practices, and policy formations through more nuanced and contextualized lenses (Saban et. al., 2017; Rüzgar and Sözcü 2023). Despite early institutional resistance and infrastructural gaps, qualitative methodologies have become a key part of graduate education in educational sciences.

Globally, this transformation has emerged in response to the growing recognition of education as a complex, dynamic, and morally infused social process (Ponce, Gómez-Galán and Pagán-Maldonado, 2022). Following decades of marginalization and political scrutiny—most notably the exclusion of qualitative research from U.S. federal funding after the 2002 National Research Council (NRC) report—qualitative research has reasserted itself as a scientifically legitimate methodology capable of illuminating cultural, ethical, and systemic dimensions of education (Denzin 2009; Erickson 1985). Scholars have argued that the flexibility and context-sensitivity of qualitative methods offer unique insight into issues of equity, voice, and institutional critique, especially in educational contexts shaped by power asymmetries and policy pressures.

Within higher education specifically, Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) highlight that qualitative research occupies a central role in advancing critical knowledge production and reflexive practice. The ability of qualitative inquiry to address diverse forms of learning, identity construction, and policy negotiation makes it an indispensable methodological approach in graduate research. Bogdan and Biklen (1998), pioneers of educational qualitative research, emphasize that qualitative inquiry is not only a methodological choice but also a theoretical and ethical commitment to studying education as it is lived and experienced by individuals within natural settings.

This alignment between ethical engagement and methodological integrity is further echoed by Hatch (2022), who asserts that qualitative research in education must always be deeply rooted in the researcher's interpretive stance and guided by a reflexive awareness of context, power, and representation. Likewise, Lunnay et al. (2023) underscore the transformative potential of qualitative inquiry in not only examining but also unsettling dominant educational structures through attention to lived experiences and plural epistemologies. They argue that qualitative methods—when grounded in critical theory, social justice, and participatory principles—enable researchers to challenge the often invisible assumptions embedded in formal educational policy and practice.

However, this expansion has not been without challenges. Karadağ's (2009) analysis of doctoral theses in educational sciences revealed methodological weaknesses in research design, coherence, and analytic rigor, suggesting that growth in the number of qualitative theses has not always been matched by growth in their methodological quality. Similarly, Rüzgar and Sözcü (2023), in their study of phenomenological research, found that many studies labeled as phenomenological lacked the necessary epistemological and methodological features, such as prolonged engagement and experience-centered design. Ponce et al. (2022) further caution against the uncritical adoption of qualitative designs without sufficient paradigmatic grounding, warning of what they term "paradigmatic dispersion. They provide a compelling critique of the ideological tensions surrounding qualitative research in educational policy-making spaces. Drawing from examples in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, they illustrate how qualitative research has been alternately marginalized and re-legitimized in response to shifting political currents. Their work situates qualitative research not merely as a set of techniques but as a contested epistemological territory that demands defense, articulation, and strategic adaptation.

In sum, the evolving landscape of qualitative research in educational sciences reflects both global epistemological shifts and localized responses to the limitations of positivist traditions. Türkiye's trajectory, situated between the Anglo-American and Continental European paradigms, exemplifies a broader struggle to reconcile methodological rigor with context-sensitive inquiry. The integration of qualitative methodologies into graduate education not only signals a diversification of research practices but also underscores an emerging commitment to theorizing from within unique socio-cultural and educational realities. Yet, as the literature suggests, sustaining this momentum requires deliberate efforts to enhance methodological literacy, foster critical reflexivity, and institutionalize support for epistemic diversity. Moving forward, the challenge lies in cultivating a research culture that not only embraces qualitative methods as a technical choice but also as a pathway for generating transformative, contextually grounded, and socially responsive knowledge in education.

Although qualitative research has gained power globally, in Türkiye, its adoption in educational sciences remains fragmented and underexplored. The historical dominance of positivist paradigms has limited the methodological diversity in graduate theses, raising concerns about the depth and authenticity of qualitative research practices. This study addresses the gap by systematically analyzing the emergence and characteristics of qualitative methodologies in graduate theses between 2000 and 2024. This problem is rooted in the broader philosophical and epistemological constraints that shape methodological preferences in Turkish academia, which are elaborated in the following theoretical framework.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Qualitative research in educational sciences is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms that prioritize subjectivity, contextual understanding, and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Merriam 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2011). These paradigms reject the notion of a single, objective reality and instead argue that social phenomena must be studied in their natural settings, where meaning emerges through experience and interaction. As Hatch (2022) emphasizes, qualitative researchers engage in the world interpretively, always situated within particular historical, political, and institutional contexts. Their work seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, often with an emphasis on giving voice to those at the margins of traditional educational discourse.

Lunnay et al. (2023) argue that qualitative inquiry represents not only a methodological orientation but also an epistemological commitment grounded in interpretivist traditions. Their volume emphasizes how qualitative research facilitates the exploration of diverse educational experiences by foregrounding plural knowledges, intersectional identities, and the complexities of institutional contexts. From this perspective, qualitative inquiry is inherently relational, reflexive, and sensitive to the ways in which educational meanings are co-constructed within specific social, cultural, and historical settings. The primary aim is to deepen understanding of educational realities by engaging with participants' lived experiences, while maintaining a reflective stance on the researcher's own positionality and interpretive processes.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) also underline the interpretive nature of qualitative research, noting its emphasis on rich description, participant perspectives, and emergent design. Their foundational work stresses that the qualitative researcher becomes the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, engaging in sustained contact with research participants and immersing themselves in the field. This approach demands openness, flexibility, and attentiveness to nuance and contradiction. Similarly, Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) argue that qualitative research in higher education contributes significantly to critical thinking, democratic participation, and epistemic inclusivity in the context of knowledge societies.

Building on these foundational perspectives about the interpretive and socially responsive nature of qualitative research, the present study identifies five major qualitative traditions that structure graduate research in Türkiye's educational sciences. Each of these traditions offers distinct yet complementary ways to investigate educational phenomena in depth. First, the Case Study approach (Yin, 2014) enables an in-depth, contextually rich analysis of bounded systems such as institutions, programs, or specific educational interventions. It is particularly valuable



in situations where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are fluid and dynamic. Second, Phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) focuses on understanding the essence of lived experiences from the perspectives of those who undergo them. This tradition emphasizes the temporal, embodied, and emotional dimensions of learning and teaching, seeking to uncover the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences. Third, Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is employed for inductive theory development directly rooted in empirical data. By employing constant comparison and open coding techniques, this approach generates middle-range theories that emerge from observable patterns and processes within the data. Fourth, Ethnography (Geertz, 1973) provides a deep cultural understanding of educational practices and ideologies through prolonged immersion and the practice of thick description. Drawing from symbolic interactionism and cultural anthropology, ethnography illuminates the intricate cultural contexts within which education unfolds. Finally, Action Research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) is characterized by its participatory and practice-oriented nature. This tradition seeks to transform educational practices through collaborative inquiry, cyclical reflection, and critical praxis. As Ponce et al. (2022) assert, such models are essential for democratizing research and empowering educators within their own contexts.

Collectively, these qualitative traditions offer not merely a set of techniques but comprehensive epistemic frameworks that shape how educational knowledge is generated, validated, and applied. Moreover, as Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) emphasize, qualitative methods should be situated within broader societal, pedagogical, and philosophical debates concerning the nature of knowledge and the question of who holds the authority to produce it. Such an integrative perspective ensures that qualitative inquiry remains both methodologically rigorous and socially responsive.

In Türkiye, where positivist traditions have historically defined scientific rigor, these qualitative paradigms offer a counter-hegemonic stance. They enable researchers to interrogate local educational phenomena through culturally resonant and ethically responsive methods (Karadağ 2009; Rüzgar and Sözcü 2023). Consequently, the theoretical and conceptual foundation of this study is designed not only to trace the usage of qualitative approaches but also to assess their transformative potential in the context of graduate research.

Building on this conceptual premise, analyzing graduate theses becomes essential for two main reasons. First, theses represent a critical site where emerging scholars engage with and negotiate methodological paradigms, reflecting broader shifts in academic thought and practice. By examining how qualitative approaches are employed, we gain insights into the extent to which these paradigms have permeated graduate education in Türkiye's educational sciences. Second, such an analysis provides empirical grounding to evaluate whether qualitative methodologies are used merely as procedural alternatives or if they serve as transformative tools that challenge dominant positivist traditions. Therefore, systematically mapping the characteristics of qualitative research in graduate theses offers a meaningful lens to understand both methodological trends and the epistemological evolution within the field.

### **Aim of study**

Regarding the recent developments in the adoption of qualitative research methods in educational sciences in Türkiye, this study seeks to interrogate how qualitative research has

been adopted, developed, and justified in graduate-level theses in Türkiye between 2000 and 2024. It does so by exploring the following research questions:

- How is the emergence of qualitative research in the graduate theses in educational sciences?
- What are the growth trends in qualitative research evolved over the decades?
- What are the developments and challenges in qualitative research trends over the decades?

By situating this investigation within a broader framework of educational theory and research methodology, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on the localization, legitimization, and institutionalization of qualitative research in non-Western contexts, while emphasizing the pedagogical and epistemological responsibilities of graduate education in cultivating methodological integrity.

## Methodology

This study employs a systematic, document-based content analysis of graduate theses in educational sciences retrieved from the YÖKTEZ national database ([tez.yok.gov.tr](http://tez.yok.gov.tr)). YÖKTEZ is an official repository maintained by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) in Türkiye, providing open access to all approved master's and doctoral theses submitted to Turkish universities across disciplines. It serves as the most comprehensive and authoritative source for academic theses in the country, ensuring both data richness and institutional validity for the present study. The database not only archives completed theses but also provides standardized metadata, including research methods, keywords, and disciplinary classifications, which facilitates systematic academic review.

The dataset includes master's and doctoral theses completed between 2000 and 2024 that explicitly employed qualitative research designs within the field of educational sciences. The study adopts a three-phase periodization (2000–2005, 2006–2010, and 2021–2024) to capture potential shifts in design choices, methodological clarity, and topic selection over time. This periodization was informed by preliminary observations of the dataset, which indicated notable transformations in qualitative research practices corresponding with key policy reforms in higher education, the global rise of qualitative inquiry post-2010, and the methodological reorientations observed in the post-pandemic period.

Purposive sampling was used to identify theses that explicitly utilized qualitative research methodologies. The inclusion criteria were: (1) theses submitted between 2000 and 2024, (2) affiliation with faculties of education, and (3) explicit indication of a qualitative research design in the methodology section. Both master's and doctoral theses were included to ensure a comprehensive overview of graduate research practices. The rationale for purposive sampling lies in its alignment with the study's aim to critically examine methodological and epistemological trends in qualitative research practices over time. This approach enabled the selection of information-rich cases that illustrate the evolving landscape of qualitative inquiry in graduate-level educational research.

As Patton (2015) emphasizes, purposive sampling is particularly suited for qualitative inquiries where the goal is not statistical generalization but the in-depth exploration of specific characteristics or patterns within a defined population. In this context, selecting theses that explicitly adopt qualitative methodologies provides a focused lens through which evolving research designs, practices, and epistemologies in Turkish educational sciences can be examined. This approach is further supported by Palinkas et al. (2015), who argue that purposive sampling is valuable when the researcher seeks to gain insight from cases that are particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest—in this case, qualitative research in educational sciences.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis employed a qualitative descriptive approach by systematically grouping and categorizing open-access graduate theses based on explicit methodological indicators. The qualitative data were analyzed through a descriptive analysis approach, focusing on categorizing and summarizing the methodological characteristics of the theses without further abstraction or theorization. This process is consistent with the principles of qualitative description as articulated by Sandelowski (2000), where data are presented in an organized and accessible manner, close to the original content. Instead of conducting an in-depth interpretative analysis, the focus was on identifying and counting the explicitly stated research designs, data collection techniques, and data analysis methods as presented in the methodology sections of the theses. Frequency counts were generated to establish patterns and distributions across the selected time periods. These elements were then systematically categorized and tabulated, providing a structured summary of the prevalent methodological choices in qualitative research within educational sciences in Türkiye. The analysis remained at a descriptive level, avoiding further theorization or abstraction beyond what was directly reported by the thesis authors.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data analysis was conducted manually without the use of qualitative data analysis software. This decision was based on the structured nature of the dataset and the categorical framework established prior to analysis, which enabled systematic classification without computational assistance.

Data were analysed in the following the steps:

- *Data Retrieval* Accessed and downloaded open-access graduate theses from YÖKTEZ database (2000-2024).
- *Initial Screening* Reviewed methodology sections to filter theses explicitly stating qualitative research designs.
- *Categorization* Classified theses based on research design (e.g., case study, phenomenology), data collection techniques, data analysis techniques, thematic focus and disciplinary subfields.
- *Counting and Tabulation* Counted frequency of categories per period and organized data into tables.



- *Descriptive Summary* Summarized trends across time periods without abstraction or theorization.

Coding was done using the following criteria:

**Table 1.**

*Coding Criteria for the Classification of Graduate Theses*

Criterion	Operational Definition
<b>Research Design</b>	Coded if the thesis explicitly states designs like case study, phenomenology, etc.
<b>Data Collection Techniques</b>	Coded based on reported methods (interview, observation, document analysis, etc.)
<b>Data Analysis Techniques</b>	Techniques such as thematic analysis, content analysis, coding were recorded if mentioned.
<b>Thematic Focus</b>	Topics of research were grouped into thematic areas (e.g., teacher education, curriculum).
<b>Disciplinary Subfield</b>	Classified according to the educational science domain (e.g., educational management).

### ***Trustworthiness, Validity, and Ethical Considerations***

To ensure trustworthiness in the analysis, the data were processed through systematic categorization and transparent coding criteria. Although no computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used, each thesis was reviewed multiple times to minimize potential coding errors and enhance consistency. The coding framework was predefined based on established methodological categories (research designs, data collection and analysis techniques, thematic focus, disciplinary subfields), ensuring a structured and replicable process.

Regarding validity, the study maintained descriptive validity by staying close to the explicit methodological declarations within the theses, avoiding interpretation beyond what was reported by the authors. Interpretative validity was supported by cross-referencing coding decisions with the original content, ensuring that classifications genuinely reflected the data.

For ethical considerations, the study exclusively used open-access data retrieved from the YÖKTEZ database, which is publicly available for academic use. No personal or sensitive information was collected or disclosed. The research process adhered to academic integrity principles, including transparency in data handling and acknowledgement of all data sources.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section covers the presentation of the findings in line with the research questions.

#### ***Emergence of Qualitative Research in the Graduate Theses in Educational Sciences***

Data analysis showed that qualitative research methods were used intensively after the 2000's while there were single studies, one study each year, earlier than the year 2000. From 1985 to 2000, during the 15 years, there were only 6 theses in educational sciences that used qualitative research methods. The most frequent methods were interview and observation, while gathering

data with questionnaires was also an important technique for qualitative data collection (Table 1).

**Table 2.**

*Emergence of qualitative research in the theses of educational sciences (1985-2000).*

Year	Degree	Method/Technique
Earlier to 1985	--	--
1985	M	Observation
1995	M	Interview + observation
1999	M	Interview + observation + questionnaire
1999	M	Interview
1999	DR	Interview + questionnaire
2000	DR	Interview + observation + documents + questionnaire

The data in the Table 1 reveal that the integration of qualitative research methods into graduate theses in educational sciences in Türkiye began tentatively and evolved slowly between the early 1980s and 2000. It should be noted that due to the limited number of available theses from this period, these observations do not intend to make broad generalizations but rather provide indicative trends based on the accessible data. First, prior to 1985, there is no available record of theses employing identifiable qualitative research methodologies. This absence may reflect either the dominance of positivist paradigms or limitations in archival completeness. Second, the earliest identifiable qualitative study from 1985 employed observation alone—a typical starting point for qualitative inquiry in education. By 1995, there is evidence of triangulated methods, such as combining interviews and observations, indicating an emergent awareness of the importance of methodological richness. The topics ranged from music education and curriculum implementation to intercultural identity formation and metaphorical perceptions of school. This thematic diversity suggests that early researchers were interested in both micro-level classroom practices and broader sociocultural dynamics—despite limited methodological training. Thirdly, by the late 1990s, particularly in 1999 and 2000, there is clear evidence of more complex qualitative research designs. For example, the 2000 doctoral dissertation on English language teaching utilized interviews, observations, document analysis, and questionnaires—signaling a more sophisticated and multi-method approach. Similarly, master's theses (M) dominate the early period, though by 1999 and 2000, doctoral research (DR) begins to appear more prominently.

This shift suggests that as qualitative methods gained partial legitimacy, they became more acceptable for high-stakes academic research. Finally, despite increasing use of interviews and document-based techniques, there is little evidence that early theses were grounded in specific qualitative traditions (e.g., phenomenology, ethnography). The findings from this analysis support the characterization of the 2000–2005 period as a phase of “emergence and ambiguity,” which was preceded by a foundational stage (1985–2000) defined by the experimental use of qualitative methods, sporadic integration of qualitative tools, and a general absence of theoretical alignment. Most theses from this earlier phase lacked a clearly articulated research design and predominantly employed descriptive case studies without explicit methodological justification. This trend mirrors global observations, where early adopters of qualitative

research in educational contexts often approached it pragmatically rather than from an epistemologically grounded standpoint (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Ponce et al., 2022). Comparable patterns were documented in Spain and Latin America, where the uptake of qualitative methods was uneven and hindered by limited training infrastructure (Ponce et al., 2022). Within the Turkish context, Karadağ's (2009) analysis of doctoral theses similarly pointed to weak design coherence and underdeveloped analytic strategies. Despite its limitations, this under-theorized early phase laid the foundation for the more structured and epistemologically robust qualitative research practices that emerged in subsequent decades.

### ***Growth Trends in Adoption of Qualitative Research***

From 85 theses in 2000–2005 to 4,230 in 2021–2024, the adoption of qualitative methods in graduate theses has expanded nearly fiftyfold. This dramatic increase reflects the growing legitimacy of qualitative inquiry within Turkish educational research, as well as the institutionalization of qualitative methods courses and tools like NVivo and MAXQDA in graduate programs. The inflection point appears between 2011 and 2016, during which the number of theses nearly tripled (from 1,038 to 3,055), suggesting a significant epistemological shift in training and supervision practices (Table 2).

As seen in table 2, especially the 2021-2024 period marks a significant epistemic shift, with 4,230 qualitative theses recorded. Case studies remained dominant (1,697 instances), but notable increases were observed in phenomenology (739), grounded theory (739), and action research (432). Ethnographic studies, while limited in number (16), showed improved conceptual coherence and cultural reflexivity. There was increased alignment between research design, problem statement, and analysis techniques, suggesting a maturing qualitative research culture.

**Table 3**

*Increase in the Use of Qualitative Research as Type of Preferred Research Design (2000-2024)*

Year	Degree	Method/Technique
<b>Earlier to 1985</b>	--	--
<b>1985</b>	M	Observation
<b>1995</b>	M	Interview + observation
<b>1999</b>	M	Interview + observation + questionnaire
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This shift suggests that as qualitative methods gained partial legitimacy, they became more acceptable for high-stakes academic research. Finally, despite increasing use of interviews and document-based techniques, there is little evidence that early theses were grounded in specific qualitative traditions (e.g., phenomenology, ethnography). The findings from this analysis support the characterization of the 2000–2005 period as a phase of “emergence and ambiguity,” which was preceded by a foundational stage (1985–2000) defined by the experimental use of qualitative methods, sporadic integration of qualitative tools, and a general absence of theoretical alignment. Most theses from this earlier phase lacked a clearly articulated research design and predominantly employed descriptive case studies without explicit methodological justification. This trend mirrors global observations, where early adopters of qualitative research in educational contexts often approached it pragmatically rather than from an epistemologically grounded standpoint (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Ponce et al., 2022). Comparable patterns were documented in Spain and Latin America, where the uptake of qualitative methods was uneven and hindered by limited training infrastructure (Ponce et al., 2022). Within the Turkish context, Karadağ's (2009) analysis of doctoral theses similarly pointed to weak design coherence and underdeveloped analytic strategies. Despite its limitations, this under-theorized early phase laid the foundation for the more structured and epistemologically robust qualitative research practices that emerged in subsequent decades.

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design, problem statement, and analysis techniques, suggesting a maturing qualitative research culture.

**Table 3**

*Increase in the Use of Qualitative Research as Type of Preferred Research Design (2000-2024)*

Year	# of QR	Case study	Phenomenology	Grounded theory	Ethnography	Action research	TOTAL
2000-2005	85	27	0	0	1	3	31
2006-2010	384	97	16	6	1	40	160
2011-2015	1038	380	98	21	7	128	634
2016-2020	3055	1143	415	42	11	402	2013
2021-2024	4230	1697	739	37	16	432	2921
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8792</b>	<b>3344</b>	<b>1268</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>1005</b>	<b>5759</b>

Table 2 presents a chronological distribution of the main qualitative research designs used in educational sciences in Türkiye, based on 8,792 graduate theses produced over five consecutive periods. The data offer critical insights into the historical evolution, methodological preferences, and epistemic shifts in Turkish graduate-level qualitative inquiry.

### *Developments in Research Design Trends and Challenges*

Across all five periods, case study remains the most widely used research design. From 27 instances in 2000–2005, it grew to 1,697 uses in 2021–2024 (Figure 1). Its popularity can be attributed to its flexibility, accessibility to novice researchers, and adaptability to various research topics in education. However, this trend may also signal a conservative tendency to rely on familiar and less theoretically demanding designs, as noted in earlier critiques by Karadağ (2009).

On the other hand, phenomenology shows a significant increase from virtually no use in 2000–2005 to 739 instances in 2021–2024. This reflects a growing interest in exploring lived experiences and subjective meanings, aligning with global shifts in qualitative research priorities (Van Manen, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Similarly, grounded theory rises from 0 to 37 across the period, though its use remains relatively limited—possibly due to the complexity of its coding procedures and theoretical demands.

Action research, initially underutilized (3 uses in 2000–2005), gained significant traction by 2021–2024 with 432 instances. This growth suggests an increasing embrace of practitioner-led, collaborative, and change-oriented inquiry in educational contexts. This aligns with calls in the literature (e.g., Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Ponce et al. 2022) to democratize educational research and foster transformative practice in schools and classrooms.

A similar trend was shown in the use of ethnography. Despite the growth in other designs, ethnography remains rare throughout the entire timeline, with only 16 uses recorded in 2021–2024. Its underrepresentation may be due to the intensive fieldwork, time commitment, and cultural-linguistic competencies required. Nevertheless, where employed, ethnographic studies have tended to offer deeper cultural and institutional insights, consistent with Geertz’s (1973) concept of “thick description.”



This period saw the emergence of a more diversified landscape, with some theses employing grounded theory, action research, and historical analysis. Yet, most continued to fall under a “basic qualitative design” category. Although diversification marked progress, professionalization remained incomplete. Doğan et al. (2022) showed that in Turkish graduate theses from this era, methodological inconsistencies persisted, especially in triangulation and analytical depth. Internationally, similar critiques were raised. For example, Dzogovic and Bajrami (2023) emphasized that despite increasing use of qualitative methods in higher education research, their implementation often lacked critical reflexivity and systematic analytical rigor. Hatch (2022) also pointed to a global gap between the expansion of qualitative methods and their proper theoretical anchoring in educational research settings.

The quantitative and qualitative expansion of research designs—particularly the steady increase in phenomenology and action research—reflects a maturing qualitative research culture in Türkiye. However, the dominance of case study and limited use of ethnography and grounded theory suggest continued room for theoretical diversification and deeper training. This evolution echoes global concerns about the balance between methodological expansion and conceptual coherence in qualitative research (Lunnay et al., 2023; Hatch 2022).

This most recent period represents a turning point in Türkiye’s qualitative research culture, marked by both quantitative expansion and qualitative maturation. The dramatic increase in the number of theses (4,230) reflects broader institutional support and curricular investment in qualitative training, aligning with international trends. For instance, Solmaz (2021), in her analysis of English Language Teaching graduate theses, reported a notable increase in the use of NVivo and advanced qualitative coding techniques. The findings parallel global observations that qualitative research is increasingly viewed as methodologically rigorous and epistemologically valid (Dzogovic and Bajrami 2023; Lunnay et al., 2023).

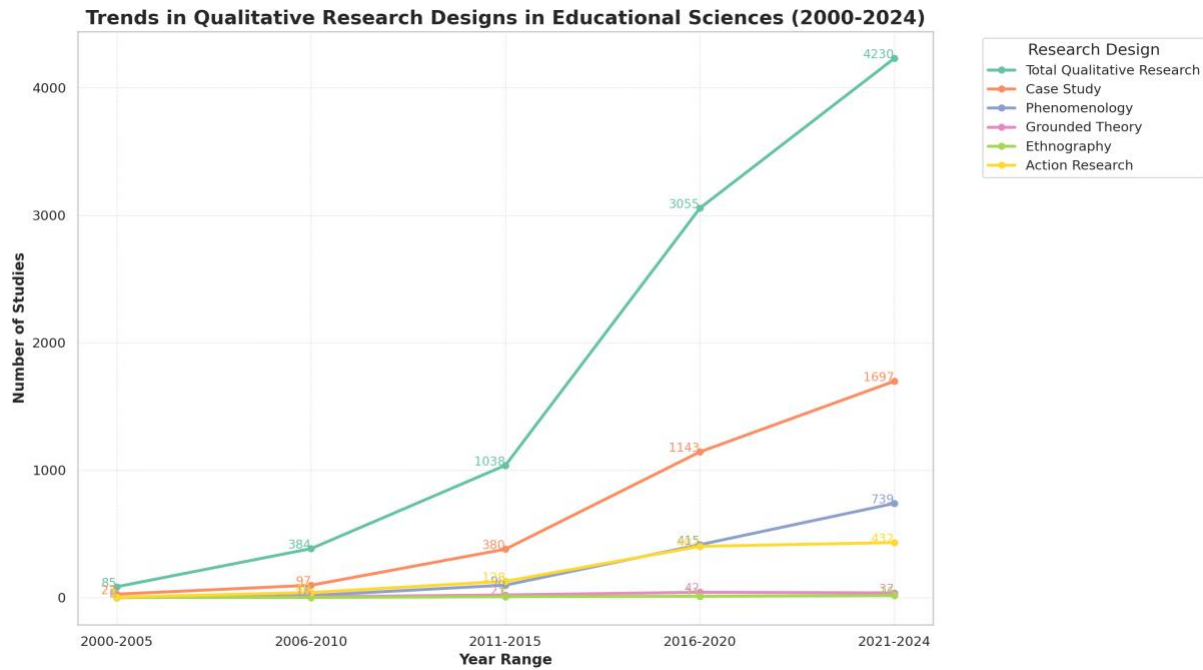
Moreover, the diversification of methods—particularly the rise in phenomenology, grounded theory, and action research—signals not only methodological maturity but an epistemic shift towards more participatory and experience-centered frameworks. Ethnographic studies, though fewer in number, began to reflect improved cultural reflexivity and conceptual coherence, echoing the arguments of Geertz (1973) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011) that thick description and immersion are essential to educational ethnography.

This visual trend analysis confirms a broader narrative of qualitative research in Türkiye: one of rapid expansion accompanied by increasing diversification. The rise of phenomenology and action research is particularly noteworthy, pointing to a maturing methodological culture. However, the field still exhibits over-reliance on case study designs and underutilization of more complex interpretive frameworks. For sustainable growth, graduate programs must continue to invest in advanced methodological training, critical reflexivity, and design literacy.

In sum, the findings of presented here align with previous research which emphasized the increase in using qualitative research in theses. For instance, Ezer and Aksüt (2021) found that social studies education graduate students appreciate the method’s flexibility, depth, and its potential to provide rich, holistic insights. Yet, these students also reported significant challenges, including the complexities of data analysis, ensuring validity, and mitigating researcher bias—echoing concerns identified in this study’s analysis of thesis methodologies. This underscores a persistent gap between methodological adoption and the cultivation of requisite research competencies.

**Figure 1.**

*Trends in Qualitative Research Designs in Educational Sciences (2000–2024)*



Compared to earlier studies, such as Tavsancıl et al. (2010), which identified that only 8.57% of master's theses in educational sciences employed qualitative methods between 2000 and 2008, our findings reveal an exponential growth in the use of qualitative designs in the following decades. This trend reflects a broader epistemological opening within Turkish higher education research, marking a departure from the previous over-reliance on quantitative techniques.

While this study provides a comprehensive mapping of qualitative research trends in educational sciences between 2000 and 2024, it does not account for changes in the overall number of graduate students during this period. As a result, the observed increase in qualitative research might partially reflect the general growth in graduate education rather than an exclusive paradigmatic shift. However, the scope of this study was limited to describing patterns within available thesis data, and not the broader dynamics of graduate enrollments. Future research is recommended to explore the proportional relationship between the growth in qualitative research and graduate student numbers to offer a more calibrated interpretation of the paradigm's evolution.

## Conclusion

This study provides an overview of qualitative research trends in educational sciences graduate theses in Türkiye, illustrating both the scale and depth of methodological evolution from 2000 to 2024. It situates this growth within larger epistemological, institutional, and pedagogical contexts, emphasizing the need for continued critical engagement, reflexive practice, and structural support. The future of qualitative inquiry in Turkish higher education depends not

only on expanding methodological repertoire but on cultivating an academic culture that values epistemic diversity, ethical integrity, and pedagogical justice.

The emergence and institutionalization of qualitative research in Turkish graduate education has followed a globally familiar pattern: initial descriptive pragmatism, followed by gradual epistemological awareness and design diversification. However, as many scholars argue (e.g., Karadağ, 2009; Doğan et al., 2022; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), applying positivist notions of validity without aligning with the interpretivist paradigm often leads to superficial methodological rigor. This tension is widely acknowledged in qualitative research literature (Schwandt, 2000; Kvale, 1995), where trustworthiness and reflexivity are preferred over traditional validity metrics.

In line with Ezer and Aksüt's (2021) findings, which highlighted graduate students' struggles with the operational aspects of qualitative research—such as data coding, thematic analysis, and ensuring methodological rigor—this study advocates for the institutionalization of more practice-oriented qualitative methods training within graduate programs. Specifically, appointing field-expert instructors and integrating qualitative data analysis software training can bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. Such pedagogical enhancements are crucial for fostering a research culture that not only values qualitative inquiry but also equips scholars with the methodological dexterity to employ it effectively.

Findings also show a growing institutional support structure, including the widespread offering of graduate-level courses in qualitative methods and enhanced access to analytical tools like NVivo and MAXQDA. Increased institutional support through coursework, workshops, and software tools like MAXQDA and NVivo suggests that qualitative inquiry is becoming embedded within the fabric of Turkish educational research infrastructure. However, as Ponce et al. (2022) caution, continued attention must be paid to epistemological grounding to prevent superficial or instrumental use of qualitative approaches.

Consequently, the progression observed over the 44 years reflects not only a quantitative expansion in the number of qualitative theses but also a paradigmatic shift in the research culture of graduate education. Whereas earlier theses often employed qualitative methods in a supplementary or descriptive manner, more recent works demonstrate increased methodological sophistication and stronger theoretical grounding. Over the past four decades, the formal integration of qualitative methods courses and research workshops has played a crucial role in legitimizing interpretivist inquiry within academic institutions. The subsequent rise of phenomenology and grounded theory signifies a departure from basic descriptive designs toward more conceptually and epistemologically engaged research. Likewise, the growing prevalence of action research reflects a shift toward practice-based, participatory, and transformative inquiry. Despite this progress, persistent challenges remain—including uneven methodological rigor, limited utilization of narrative and arts-based approaches, and a continuing lack of ethical reflexivity in many graduate theses.

## **Recommendations**

This study recommends the reinforcement of methodological training in both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Establishing dedicated research support units within universities and

promoting dual advisorships, particularly involving methodology experts, could enhance the methodological rigor of graduate research.

Based on the findings of this study, a contextual model for advancing qualitative research practices in Türkiye can be proposed. This model emphasizes three pillars: (1) integrating philosophy of science and epistemology into graduate curricula to strengthen researchers' theoretical grounding, (2) establishing national methodological networks and mentorship programs to enhance scholarly guidance, and (3) developing institutional policies that enhance the production and publication of methodologically rigorous qualitative research. This framework aims to foster not only the growth in quantity but also the deepening of the quality and critical potential of qualitative research within the Turkish educational sciences context.

To consolidate previous achievements and address persistent challenges, research institutions and affiliated programs should consider expanding and deepening training in qualitative methodologies. This includes offering advanced courses in narrative inquiry, ethnography, and emerging digital methods. Equally important is the professional development of thesis advisors, who must be equipped with up-to-date pedagogical tools to effectively mentor students conducting qualitative research. Establishing national networks and organizing conferences dedicated to qualitative inquiry would provide valuable platforms for sharing methodological innovations and critical reflections. Moreover, encouraging the publication of student theses in peer-reviewed, indexed journals can enhance both the visibility and academic legitimacy of their work. Universities may also support these efforts by providing open-access software, repositories of exemplary theses, coding manuals, and recordings of relevant seminars, thereby democratizing access to qualitative research resources.

While expanding methodological training and professional development in qualitative research is essential, as suggested, it is equally critical to reinforce the philosophical foundations that underpin qualitative inquiry. The strength of qualitative research lies not only in the diversity of its methods but also in the epistemological and ontological perspectives that guide these methods (Duberley, Johnson and Cassell, 2012). However, as noted in recent critiques, many researchers engage in qualitative methods without sufficient grounding in philosophy of science, which can lead to superficial applications detached from their transformative potential (Rudnick, 2014). Embedding robust philosophical education—covering paradigms such as interpretivism, critical theory, and constructivism—within research training programs is thus indispensable. This would not only enhance methodological rigor but also empower researchers to critically engage with the assumptions that shape knowledge production (Brinkmann, 2017). Without this depth, there is a risk that qualitative research remains a procedural alternative rather than a paradigmatic shift in understanding complex social realities. Consistent with Hsiung's (2012) recommendations, there is a pressing need to cultivate methodological pluralism by developing multiple qualitative toolboxes that are responsive to Türkiye's unique cultural and educational landscapes. Future capacity-building efforts should emphasize not only methodological training but also the epistemological empowerment of researchers to generate contextually relevant theories.

At the educational policy level, it is essential to institutionalize support mechanisms that promote the development of qualitative research methodologies in graduate education. The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and relevant ministries could mandate the inclusion of advanced qualitative research methodology and philosophy of science courses in all graduate

programs in educational sciences. Furthermore, national research funding agencies might prioritize and allocate specific grants for qualitative research projects, thereby legitimizing and encouraging diverse methodological approaches. Policy frameworks can also be developed to support open-access repositories, methodological training workshops, and cross-university collaborations, all of which would contribute to enhancing the capacity and visibility of qualitative research within Türkiye's higher education system.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As this study is based on publicly accessible theses from the YÖKTEZ database, there was no need for formal ethics committee approval. However, ethical integrity was maintained by ensuring that all data derived from the theses were reported in aggregate form without disclosing individual authors' identities.

Additionally, parts of this manuscript—particularly in the areas of language editing and structural refinement—were supported by artificial intelligence tools (specifically, language assistance from AI-based platforms). However, all data analysis, interpretation, and argumentation reflect the author's independent scholarly judgment and are not AI-generated.



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