

Ethics, Access, and Adaptation: Evolving a Multiple Case Study Design in Juvenile Child Care InstitutionsAdbhut Pratap Singh¹<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17861978>**Review: 30/11/2025****Acceptance: 04/12/2025****Published: 09/12/2025**

Abstract: Research within Child Care Institutions (CCIs) poses unique methodological and ethical challenges due to the vulnerability of institutionalized children and the restrictive bureaucratic structures governing access. This paper presents a comprehensive methodological account of a doctoral study examining educational rehabilitation practices in NGO-run CCIs in Uttar Pradesh. Initially conceptualized as a Sequential Transformative Multiphase Mixed Methods design involving juveniles, staff, and multiple state-run institutions, the study underwent a significant redesign after the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) restricted access, prohibited interviews with children, and permitted data collection only in NGO-run homes. Consequently, the study evolved into an Exploratory–Descriptive Multiple Case Study involving four CCIs: two boys’ homes, one girls’ home, and one special needs home. Data were generated through staff interviews, structured and unstructured observations, field notes, institutional artefacts, and an extensive reflexive journal. A multi-level qualitative analytical strategy—Thematic Analysis, Framework Matrix, Cross-Case Synthesis, and Interpretive Pattern Matching enabled systematic interpretation. This methodological paper illustrates how field realities, ethical mandates, and institutional gatekeeping reshape research design, and it offers a reflexive blueprint for conducting rigorous, ethical inquiry in restricted institutional environments.

Keywords: *Child Care Institutions (CCIs), Exploratory–Descriptive Case Study, Methodology, Ethical Constraints, Reflexive Research.*

1. Introduction: Conducting research in environments that house vulnerable and institutionalised children, particularly those in need of care and protection, those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and juveniles involved in POCSO-related cases, presents profound methodological, ethical, and practical challenges. Such settings operate within a protective legal framework, strict confidentiality norms, and varying administrative structures that together act as powerful gatekeeping systems. These structural realities reshape the possibilities of inquiry, often compelling methodological improvisation, negotiation, and reflexive rethinking. Within this complex terrain, the present paper provides a comprehensive methodological reflection on how a doctoral study originally conceptualized as a Sequential Transformative Multiphase Mixed Methods Design was ultimately transformed—through real-world constraints—into an Exploratory–Descriptive Multiple Case Study (Collective Instrumental Type, Holistic Analysis).

This methodology paper is rooted exclusively in the data actually generated during fieldwork: interviews with staff members, interview logs, observation schedules, field notes, institutional artefacts, memos, and an extensive reflexive journal. Importantly, the researcher did not conduct interviews with children, due to ethical and legal restrictions imposed by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). Interactions with children occurred only informally when initiated by the children themselves. As such, this paper offers a transparent, realistic account of how ethically compliant research can be conducted within tight institutional restrictions without compromising depth and rigor.

The methodological trajectory described here is both a documentation of practice and a study of the conditions that shape research practice. It highlights the dynamic interplay between research design, field realities, institutional power, ethical constraints, and researcher reflexivity—offering insights that are rarely articulated in conventional methodology descriptions but are crucial for researchers entering similar institutional terrains.

2. Context of the Parent Study: The methodology presented here is part of a doctoral research project titled “Educational Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Juveniles: An Exploratory Study.” The study aimed to understand the educational rehabilitation processes within Child Care Institutions (CCIs), focusing particularly on NGO-run homes in Uttar Pradesh. These homes cater to diverse categories of minors:

- Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP) aged 10–18, including:
- Boys aged 10–18, often orphans, run-away, and surrendered cases;
- Girls aged 10–18, often with backgrounds of trauma or POCSO cases;

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- Children aged 10-18 with intellectual disabilities, including mild, moderate, severe, and profound categories.

The educational activities across these institutions varied widely—from structured classes and vocational sessions to informal instructional routines embedded within daily living skills. Observation logs document a broad spectrum of institutional realities: children making jigsaw puzzles, participating in UNO games, practicing dance to Bhojpuri music, folding dresses, engaging in craftwork, receiving toilet-training sessions, or attending morning yoga and prayer routines. In special needs homes, a significant part of education involved basic functional skills like holding a spoon, identifying body parts, recognizing colours, or learning gross and fine motor movements. These contextual nuances strongly shaped the methodological architecture. The diversity of institutional purposes, discipline policies, teacher qualifications, staffing ratios, and therapeutic provisions necessitated a research design capable of capturing variation, complexity, and dynamic institutional processes.

3. Evolution of the Research Design

3.1 The Original Ambitious Design

The research was originally conceptualized as a Sequential Transformative Multiphase Mixed Methods Design consisting of four phases:

Phase 1: Exploratory Phase

- Exploratory interviews with institutionalised juveniles
- Interviews with post-release juveniles
- Interviews with staff members and administrators
- Observational documentation
- Field notes

Tools for all these components were prepared and standardised.

Phase 2: Descriptive Phase

- A large-scale quantitative survey of institutionalised juveniles across multiple districts
- Psychometric tools assessing educational and social competencies

Phase 3: Explanatory Phase

- Explanatory interviews with juveniles and staff
- Linking quantitative findings with qualitative interpretations

Phase 4: Transformative Phase

- FGDs with staff and post-release juveniles
- Model-building for institutional and policy-level reforms

The entire plan required access to:

- Observation Homes
- Special Homes
- Aftercare institutions
- NGO-run CCIs across multiple districts of Uttar Pradesh to ensure generalisability.

3.2 Collapse of the Original Research Plan: The methodological trajectory shifted dramatically when the researcher approached the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) of one district to seek permission for data collection. The Chairperson:

- Denied permission for interviewing institutionalised children
- Suggested that children aged 0–18 could only be interviewed outside institutional settings
- Stated that accessing Observation Homes or Special Homes would require approval from:
 - Juvenile Justice Board
 - District Judge

and that “this will not be possible.”

Repeated negotiation led to a restricted permission:

- Data could ONLY be collected from NGO-run centres
- No direct interaction with children
- Only staff could be interviewed

Researcher must obtain:

- A detailed itinerary
- Approval from the District Probation Officer

- Assurance of anonymity
- Explicit documentation that no child would be interviewed

Given the bureaucratic intensity of the process, replicating it across multiple districts became untenable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Consequently,

- the study was delimited to a single district.
- State-run Observation Homes, Special Homes, and Aftercare Organisations were removed from the sample.
- The entire mixed-methods design became unworkable

3.3 Emergence of a New Design: In response to these realities, the research evolved organically into a qualitative Exploratory–Descriptive Multiple Case Study (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018) because:

- Staff interviews became the primary accessible source of experiential knowledge
- Observational data became central for understanding institutional ecology
- Informal conversations provided the richest and most candid insights
- Reflexive journaling helped trace the emotional, interpretive, and ethical dynamics in the field

This emergent design aligned with the study's revised scope and ethical boundaries.

4. Case Selection and Final Sample

4.1 Initial Selection: Nine Institutions: Using the Mission Vatsalya website's district-level listing of NGO-run homes, nine institutions were originally planned:

- 2 male homes (10–18)
- 2 female homes (10–18)
- 2 homes for children aged 0–10
- 1 male special needs home
- 1 female special needs home
- 1 special needs home for 0–10 children

4.2 Field Reality and Institutional Gatekeeping: During field visits:

- 1 male home (10–18) denied permission
- 1 female home (10–18) denied permission
- 1 home for children aged 0–10 denied permission
- 1 special needs home for 0–10 was inoperable
- 1 female home (10–18) was inoperable → replaced by a boys' home of the same NGO

4.3 Final Sample of Four Institutions: The study was ultimately conducted in the following four NGO-run homes:

- *Home A:* Boys aged 10–18
- *Home B:* Boys aged 10–18 (run by another NGO)
- *Home C:* Girls aged 10–18
- *Home D:* Special needs home for both boys and girls aged 10–18

These institutions represent the actual operational landscape accessible under the ethical and bureaucratic constraints (Yin, 2018).

5. Participants and Recruitment

Participants included:

- Special educators
- Counsellors
- Administrative heads
- Guards, drivers, and various support staff

Staff participation was:

- Voluntary
- Based on verbal informed consent
- Flexible to accommodate institutional demands

Children were not interviewed, and any child-researcher interaction occurred only when children themselves initiated conversation.

Recruitment depended on:

- Rapport-building

- Staff comfort
- The institutional environment at that moment (e.g., behavioural crises, inspections, meal routines)

Often, the richest insights emerged in:

- Hallways
- Playgrounds
- Kitchen areas
- Staff resting spaces
- After interviews when the recorder was turned off

Such informal data are integral to the methodology (Patton, 2015).

6. Data Sources and Data Collection Methods

6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews with staff members formed the backbone of data generation. Discussions covered:

- Educational routines
- Vocational training
- Counselling processes
- Reintegration challenges
- Behavioural issues (aggression, hyperactivity, hypersexuality)
- Staff emotional labour and burnout
- Institutional resource constraints

Interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes and were frequently interrupted by:

- A child crying
- A child running away
- Staff being called urgently
- Medical or behavioural emergencies

These interruptions became meaningful data points reflecting institutional realities.

6.2 Observations: Observations were both structured and unstructured. They captured:

- Daily routines
- Staff-child interactions
- Classroom environments
- Activity sessions
- Physical infrastructure
- Hygiene standards
- Movement patterns within premises

Observation schedules recorded fine details (e.g., torn school shoes, broken volleyball pin, transparent classroom doors) that revealed institutional priorities and limitations.

6.3 Field Notes: Field notes documented:

- Sensory details
- Non-verbal cues
- Institutional rhythms
- Contradictions between staff narratives and observed practices

6.4 Reflexive Journal and Memos: The reflexive journal captured:

- Researcher emotions (withdrawal, empathy, frustration, helplessness)
- Ethical dilemmas
- Role negotiation
- Power asymmetries
- Emotional labour involved in witnessing distressing situations

This journal became a methodological artefact illuminating the influence of researcher subjectivity (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2020).

7. Data Management and Transcription Procedures: Given the sensitivity of institutional environments and the ethical restrictions set by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), data management was designed to ensure maximum confidentiality, secure handling, and strict demarcation between identifiable and non-identifiable information. All interview audio files, notes, and transcripts were stored under encrypted folders with restricted access.

7.1 Transcription: All interviews with staff members, special educators, counsellors, drivers, guards, caregivers, and administrators, were manually transcribed to preserve accuracy of tone, pauses, and contextual nuances. Emotional inflections, sudden interruptions (e.g., a child screaming, staff being called abruptly), and moments of hesitation were noted in square brackets, as these often reflected institutional pressures or personal emotional discomfort.

Interview logs were maintained for:

- Date and time
- Location within the institution
- Participant code (never names)
- Notable contextual interruptions
- Researcher's emotional reactions (to be later included in memos)

Transcription was performed within 24 hours of each interview to retain contextual freshness.

7.2 Organisation of Data:

A case-wise folder structure was created:

- Case Folder A: Boys' Home (NGO 1)
- Case Folder B: Boys' Home (NGO 2)
- Case Folder C: Girls' Home
- Case Folder D: Special Needs Home

Each folder contained:

- Interview transcripts
- Observation schedules
- Field notes
- Photographs of notice boards/timetables (not including identifiable images)
- Reflexive memos

7.3 Anonymization and Coding: Each participant was assigned a unique code (e.g., E01 for educator; C02 for counsellor; S03 for support staff). Child mentions, even in staff narratives, were anonymised using generic labels such as "Child A," "the severe boy," "a girl with ADHD," etc. Observed events involving children were described without identifiable details, focusing only on behaviour, environment, and interaction patterns (Miles, Huberman & Sadana, 2020).

7.4 Storage and Security:

Data was stored digitally in:

- An encrypted external USB drive
- A password-protected cloud folder
- A local laptop folder with two-step authentication

The reflexive journal, handwritten, was scanned and stored securely, and the physical copy remained locked in a separate cabinet. These measures ensured compliance with the CWC's stipulation of strict confidentiality and protected the emotional and psychological safety of participants.

8. Analytical Framework

A multi-level qualitative analysis strategy was adopted, integrating:

1. Thematic Analysis
2. Framework (Matrix) Analysis
3. Cross-Case Synthesis
4. Interpretive Pattern Matching

This layered approach allowed a systematic movement from descriptive coding to conceptual interpretation, accommodating the complexity and heterogeneity of institutional environments.

8.1 Thematic Analysis (Initial Level): Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involved:

8.1.1 Familiarisation: The researcher repeatedly read:

- Transcripts
- Field notes
- Observation logs
- Reflexive memos

This allowed immersion into the institutional world, not only through the participants' words but through the researcher's embodied field experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

8.1.2 Initial Coding: Coding was inductive, capturing:

- Behaviours (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity, withdrawal)
- Institutional routines (yoga, prayer, vocational tasks)
- Emotional tones (frustration, empathy, burnout)
- Resource availability and constraints
- Organizational structure and support
- Staff-child interactions

8.1.3 Code Clustering and Theme Formation: Codes were grouped into preliminary themes such as:

- Emotional labour of staff
- Institutional discipline and behavioural management
- Role of physical space in learning
- Hidden curriculum through daily living activities
- Vocational training as identity building
- Staff burnout, coping, and resilience
- Administrative constraints and institutional gatekeeping
- Gender and safety considerations

These themes became the foundation for the next analytic step.

8.2 Framework (Matrix) Analysis: Framework Analysis was used to organise data case-wise and theme-wise in matrix form.

8.2.1 Development of the Analytical Framework: Based on initial themes, a matrix was created with:

- Rows representing cases (institutions)
- Columns representing themes

This allowed systematic comparison across institutions.

8.2.2 Extracting Illustrative Narratives: Relevant quotations, observation notes, and memos were inserted into each cell (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

8.3 Cross-Case Synthesis: Following Yin's approach, cross-case synthesis compared similarities and differences across homes.

8.3.1 Identifying Convergences: Common findings included-

- High workload and emotional exhaustion among staff
- Strong reliance on informal teaching and behavioural improvisation
- Lack of trained specialists (e.g., only one counsellor for 132 children)
- Use of vocational tasks (folding clothes, gardening) as educational tools
- Institutional pride in success stories of reintegrated children

8.3.2 Identifying Divergences: Differences were observed in-

- Professional training levels
- Educational rigor
- ICT access
- Behavioural management philosophies
- Gender-specific vulnerabilities in the girls' home

These differences helped highlight the role of institutional culture in shaping educational rehabilitation (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2006).

8.4 Interpretive Pattern Matching: The final analytic layer involved-

- Comparing empirical patterns with theoretical concepts (social learning theory, rehabilitation frameworks, ecological models)

- Mapping institutional behaviours to conceptual categories
- Understanding why certain practices emerged and how they shaped educational rehabilitation trajectories.

For example:

- Staff emotional labour matched with concepts of compassion fatigue and institutional trauma exposure
- Behavioural management patterns aligned with operant conditioning and applied behaviour analysis (ABA) principles
- Institutional constraints reflected broader themes of structural scarcity and policy-implementation gaps

This interpretive step transformed descriptive insights into conceptual contributions (Yin, 2018).

9. Ensuring Quality, Trustworthiness, and Rigor: Given the qualitative and ethically constrained nature of the research, trustworthiness was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

9.1 Credibility

- Triangulation across interviews, observations, memos, and field notes
- Prolonged engagement in four institutions
- Cross-checking interpretations with field realities
- Thick description of institutional contexts
- Capturing contradictions (e.g., staff claiming "everything is fine" vs. observing chaos)

9.2 Dependability

- Maintaining an audit trail (interview logs, methodological memos)
- Documenting everyday field decisions
- Recording how institutional restrictions shaped data collection

9.3 Confirmability

- Reflexive journal capturing researcher biases, emotional responses, and positional negotiation
- Bracketing personal assumptions about rehabilitation
- Using direct quotations wherever possible

9.4 Transferability

Although limited to one district, transferability is enhanced through:

- Detailed contextual descriptions
- Institutional profiles
- Rich depiction of routines, interactions, and cultural practices

These allow readers to judge applicability to similar settings.

10. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Researcher positionality played a profound role in shaping access, rapport, and meaning-making.

10.1 Negotiating Power Asymmetry

As an outsider, the researcher:

- Had no authority within institutional hierarchies
- Was perceived initially with suspicion ("Are you inspecting us?")
- Had to repeatedly reassure staff that the study was not evaluative

This affected openness, especially in early interviews.

10.2 Emotional Labour

Reflexive entries reveal:

- Discomfort witnessing neglected hygiene
- Emotional heaviness after observing children with profound disabilities
- Empathy towards overworked staff
- Instances of feeling helpless, especially when staff recounted traumatic child histories

10.3 Insider-Outsider Oscillation

Although always an outsider to institutional authority:

- The researcher gradually became an emotional insider as staff began sharing off-record realities, frustrations, and personal experiences

- Informal conversations (e.g., during lunch, after interviews, while walking through premises) became a methodological goldmine

10.4 Reflexive Adaptation

The unexpected collapse of the original mixed-methods design forced:

- A methodological reorientation
- Acceptance of ethical constraints
- Creative reliance on staff narratives and observation
- A deeper appreciation of field-imposed limits in rehabilitation research

11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical sensitivity lay at the core of this research, given the vulnerability of children residing in Child Care Institutions (CCIs) and the layered bureaucratic protections governing their lives. The study adhered strictly to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, CWC guidelines, and institutional confidentiality norms. Ethical considerations shaped who could be interviewed, what could be observed, what could be recorded, and how data could be handled.

11.1 Permission and Institutional Gatekeeping

Access was granted only after:

- Multiple negotiations with the Chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC)
- Submission of a detailed visit itinerary
- Approval from the District Probation Officer
- Written assurances that children would not be interviewed
- Agreement on non-disclosure of institutional identities

The CWC explicitly denied:

- Interviews with institutionalised children
- Engagement with Observation Homes and Special Homes
- Engagement with Aftercare Organisations
- Multidistrict data collection (as each district would require a separate chain of permissions)

Thus, the bureaucracy itself became an ethical boundary.

11.2 No Direct Interaction with Children

To respect ethical mandates:

- No formal interviews were conducted with children
- Any child interaction occurred only incidentally
- Children were never asked questions or probed
- Staff were cautioned not to bring children intentionally
- No identifying information about children was recorded or retained

This avoided risks of retraumatization, coercion, or inadvertent disclosure.

11.3 Protection of Participant Identities

Given the sensitivity of the institutional environment:

- Participants were anonymised using codes
- Institutional names were removed
- Descriptions of events avoided personal identifiers
- Sensitive comments were stored separately and used cautiously
- No image of any child was captured or stored

Even adults feared administrative backlash, making confidentiality essential to their safety and willingness to speak.

11.4 Avoiding Harm and Minimizing Intrusion

The researcher:

- Avoided entering highly sensitive spaces (isolation rooms, medical rooms, dormitories) unless permitted
- Respected staff workload and postponed interviews during crises
- Did not disrupt routines such as prayer, meals, therapy, or medication times

- Avoided taking field notes in situations where it could make staff uncomfortable

The priority was non-intrusion and non-disturbance.

11.5 Emotional Safety

The researcher also attended to:

- Self-care after emotionally heavy field days
- Debriefing through reflexive journaling
- Monitoring personal emotional responses so they would not distort analysis
- Maintaining boundaries between empathy and over-identification

Ethical research includes the emotional safety of both participants and the researcher.

12. Methodological Challenges

The fieldwork encountered substantive challenges that shaped the final dataset, analytical trajectory, and scope of findings.

12.1 Gatekeeping and Restricted Access

The most significant challenge was the denial of access to children, Observation Homes, Special Homes, and Aftercare institutions. As a result:

- The mixed-methods design collapsed
- Sampling became restricted to four NGO-run homes in a single district
- Only staff voices could be recorded

This fundamentally altered the research questions, methods, and analytical orientation.

12.2 Institutional Unpredictability

During data collection, staff were frequently:

- Called away to handle crises
- Attending medical emergencies
- Occupied with a child's behavioural episode
- Preparing for inspections
- Managing conflicts between children

Interviews were repeatedly interrupted, postponed, or shortened.

These interruptions became part of the methodological reality, shedding light on the chaotic nature of institutional life.

12.3 Emotional Barriers of Staff

Many staff members:

- Expressed fear of being recorded
- Worried their statements might be used against them
- Censored themselves during audio-recorded sessions
- Spoke more openly only off the record

Thus, the richest data came through:

- Informal conversations
- In-between spaces
- Unscripted moments after turning off the recorder

This required acute reflexive awareness and ethical discretion in using such narratives.

12.4 Limited Physical Space for Interviews

Interview settings included:

- Corridors
- Empty classrooms
- Staff rooms
- Staircases
- Corners of playgrounds

Privacy was minimal. Conversations often proceeded with children moving around, music playing, or staff engaged nearby.

These spaces shaped the tone, depth, and direction of discussions.

12.5 Variation in Staff Expertise

Not all institutions had:

- Trained counsellors
- Special educators
- Adequate teacher-student ratios
- Consistent routines

This introduced methodological complexity, because:

- Some interviews were highly informative
- Others required significant probing
- Some staff lacked conceptual vocabulary to articulate their experiences

The researcher had to adapt probing strategies dynamically.

12.6 Emotional Intensity of Field Observations

The field included emotionally challenging moments:

- Children with profound disabilities unable to communicate
- Children sleeping in class due to sedation
- Hyperactive episodes
- Children expressing desire to go home
- Staff breaking down due to emotional burden

These experiences required careful reflexive processing.

13. Methodological Contributions of This Study

Despite constraints, the study makes significant methodological contributions:

13.1 Demonstrates a Realistic Model of Research in Restricted Institutional Settings

The paper shows how research evolves under structural limitations, offering a replicable pathway for other scholars entering JJ or CCI environments.

13.2 Highlights the Value of Staff Narratives

Because direct child interactions were not permitted, staff became the primary narrators of:

- Institutional culture
- Educational practices
- Behavioural challenges
- Reintegration experiences

This demonstrates how peripheral actors can become central sources in restricted settings.

13.3 Shows the Power of Informal Data

Informal conversations such as hallway chats, comments made during activity observations, and post-interview disclosures produced the richest insights. This highlights the methodological significance of:

- Building rapport
- Attentive listening
- Observational sensitivity
- Reflexive interpretation

13.4 Integrates Multi-Level Qualitative Analysis in Case Study Research

The combination of:

- Thematic analysis
- Framework matrices
- Cross-case synthesis
- Interpretive pattern matching

provides a robust analytical scaffold for multi-case qualitative educational research.

13.5 Demonstrates How Reflexivity Can Strengthen Methodology

The researcher's reflexive journal:

- Traced emotional responses
- Mapped power asymmetries
- Captured field tensions
- Documented methodological decisions

This reflexive dimension enriches the interpretive validity.

14. Implications for Future Research

Based on the methodological trajectory, several implications arise:

14.1 Need for Clearer Guidelines for Researchers in JJ Settings

There is no uniform process for gaining research access. The study shows:

- The central role of CWC
- The variability of permissions across districts
- The need for a formalised research-access protocol

14.2 Importance of Staff as Key Informants

Future research should systematically integrate:

- Caretaker perspectives
- Counsellor narratives
- Informal staff insights

as they often hold the most consistent knowledge of institutional life.

14.3 The Value of Mixed Observational Approaches

Since interviews alone cannot capture institutional ecology, future researchers should rely heavily on:

- Field notes
- Structured observations
- Embedded observation cycles

14.4 Ethical Research Must Prioritise Non-Intrusion

This research reinforces that:

- Vulnerable children should not be interviewed without necessity
- Staff must be protected from institutional retaliation
- Informed consent must be ongoing, not one-time

14.5 Scope for Future Multi-District Comparative Studies

Once a standardised permission protocol is structured, comparative work across districts can:

- Reveal systemic patterns
- Identify institutional disparities
- Inform policy-level reforms

15. Conclusion

This methodology paper documents a real, grounded, field-driven evolution of research within the constraints of institutional care settings for vulnerable juveniles. The collapse of an initially ambitious mixed-methods design into a more ethically compliant and contextually sensitive Exploratory–Descriptive Multiple Case Study illustrates how qualitative research must remain flexible, responsive, and reflexively grounded.

Through staff interviews, observational immersion, and extensive reflexive journaling, the study successfully navigated institutional barriers, ethical restrictions, and emotional complexities. It demonstrates that even within highly constrained environments, meaningful, rigorous, and ethically responsible research can be conducted—provided the researcher adopts an adaptive, relational, and reflexive stance.

This methodological account offers a comprehensive blueprint for scholars entering similar environments, highlighting the essential balance between rigor, responsiveness, ethical sensitivity, and reflexive integrity.

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