



Research paper

Addressing ethical quandaries in practitioner research: A philosophical and exploratory study of responsible improvisation through hermeneutical conversation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher researchers can experience ethical bewilderment or discomfort, notably when university ethics codes are inadequate.
- These experiences are categorised as quandaries rather than dilemmas, experienced as competing goods at stake.
- Quandaries require responsible contextual improvisation by sifting through situational features and personal beliefs.
- Ethical improvisation is supported by hermeneutical conversation, in working through quandaries towards a fusion of horizons.
- Research ethics guidance for practitioner researchers should offer more nuanced support for quandaries.

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ABSTRACT

In education and elsewhere, practitioner researchers sometimes experience ethical bewilderment when established university-based codes prove inadequate. We delineate this philosophically as a quandary, rather than a dilemma, necessitating responsible improvisation, which may be supported through hermeneutical conversation. We describe an exploratory study with eight participants. Analysis of pictorial designs, texts and interviews showed how they experienced quandaries (competing goods at stake, imagined negative consequences, an ongoing ethical impasse) and how they addressed them through hermeneutical conversation (the moral salience of the particular, the art of ethical improvisation). The implications for research in teacher education and research ethics guidance are considered.

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1. Introduction: ethics in practitioner research

In education and elsewhere, practitioner researchers have argued repeatedly that the prevailing ethical research codes used by university research ethics committees are poorly suited to practitioner research (Brown et al., 2020; Locke et al., 2013; Williamson & Prosser, 2002). The establishment of codes and review panels has been extremely valuable in the ethical framing of research involving humans in medicine and the social sciences (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019), including education (e.g., American

Educational Research Association [‘AERA’], 2011; British Education Research Association [‘BERA’], 2018), especially in the light of various scandals across the social sciences (Horner & Minifie, 2011; Reynolds, 2003; Tolich, 2014), but these codes and panels can sit awkwardly with practitioner research.

Practitioner research has several subspecies (Foreman-Peck & Winch, 2010; Fox et al., 2007; Menter et al., 2011), but can be defined “as an investigation of practice, carried out by practitioners” (Cramp & Khan, 2019, p. 344), typically “with a view to evaluation or improvement” (Campbell & McNamara, 2010, p. 24), and involving research techniques and methodologies. Unlike outsider academics, practitioner researchers are insiders, seeking to initiate change through research. It is unsurprising that they have argued that these codes are naively influenced by biomedical research ethics in universities, with legal and organisational

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concerns for safety, protection and compliance at cross-purposes with the spirit of practitioner research. Research ethics committees often focus on precautionary and administrative procedures that prioritise foresight, non-interference, and rule-compliance over emergent principled decision-making in complex relational situations. In contrast, practitioner researchers have repeatedly explained that their designs may evolve within changing contexts; they are usually embedded in either the research focus or the setting (Locke et al., 2013; Williamson & Prosser, 2002; Zeni, 1998) and thus are part of complex relational webs (Mockler, 2014; Poulton, 2021). These features however play at the boundary of rigid institutional codes (Brown et al., 2020), and of models of supervision (Gewirtz et al., 2009). Research by student-teachers may raise similar issues (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Gray, 2013). Qualitative researchers with longstanding, emotional ties with their respondents echo these points (Ellis, 2007; Hall, 2014; Iannaccone & Anderson, 2021) because their relational demands are also poorly met by codes.

Clearly, much practitioner research is in education, where relational complications and decisional uncertainties are not trivial and may lead to conflicting interpretations and actions. Levinson and Fay (2016) describe the “everyday dilemmas” of educational practice as “both utterly ordinary and immensely challenging” (p. 2). Dilemmas are situations where protagonists must choose between two or more courses of action, none of which seems self-evidently right; resolving them requires a mix of philosophical, social scientific and pragmatic “insight and expertise” (Levinson & Fay, 2016, pp. 4–6; see also Mercer, 2007), metaphorically in “a swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes’ incapable of technical solution” (Schön, 1983, p. 42). Ethical dilemmas in practitioner research arise in attempting to apply the principles upheld by research codes (which may be in harmony or conflict with personal or professional principles and values) within the relationships with the people and organisations affected by the research. For example, protecting subjects from harm is an unobjectionable principle, often pursued by guaranteeing anonymity. However, anonymising the research subjects or participants’ workplaces may be impossible for practitioner researchers if they publish under their own names because their institutions will be identifiable. Further, anonymising respondents’ identities from one another would be essentially unrealistic. Conversely, publishing under a pseudonym and making research confidential can have negative career implications (Floyd & Arthur, 2012) and for knowledge generation – as well as not being fail-proof. The practitioner researcher is faced with a dilemma, or “forked-road” problem (Dewey, 1910, p. 11), whereby the wayfarer needs to gather facts and reasons to support a choice between the directions of travel ostensibly open before them.

Difficult ethical choices may arise from the practitioner researcher’s embeddedness as an insider in a web of relationships in their institution or profession. For example, during an interview, a respondent may invite the practitioner researcher to collude in their negative assessment of a colleague. Any attempt to demur might result in the respondent being unwilling to share further information (Floyd & Arthur, 2012; Poulton, 2021). The dilemma here is deciding between the quality of the research data and one’s sense of moral integrity. Practitioner researchers’ ongoing presence means that issues can also arise after the research is completed; Pennacchia (2019) explores how a practitioner researcher’s findings might be invoked by their school leadership in ways that the researcher considers unethical.

Various strategies have been suggested to help practitioner researchers avoid ethical problems (Locke et al., 2013; Zeni, 1998), such as introducing a third party to mitigate power asymmetry in handling data and consent, or treating informed consent as

ongoing, but these strategies may simply worsen the tensions. Others have adopted deontological approaches seeking to generate rules or principles collaboratively to address the issue of relational ethics whilst conducting research, such as “respecting as stakeholders all those who have an interest in the focus of the research investigation” (Locke et al., 2013, p. 113). Such principles, however, only apply where an existing collaborative group is committed to shared values such as “striving for openness, the development of shared meanings, equality of esteem and equity of involvement” (p. 113), but these are not always present. In any event, they could be tested in the face of unforeseen challenges. Zeni (1998, p. 11) attempted an “alternative human subject review”, but gradually realised that “a new paradigm code of ethics” would itself become inflexible, unable to meet a myriad of different circumstances in advance (Brown et al., 2020). Others have turned to virtue ethics (e.g., Elliott, 2015; Poulton, 2021; Pring, 2001), often focusing on practical wisdom, i.e., *phronesis*, or integrity through the balancing of different potentially conflicting virtues; they have drawn on the classical tradition, notably Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2009), and its revival (e.g., McIntyre, 1983). We will also broadly draw on this tradition.

We noted a paradox in that practitioner research is said to lead to professional development, by elaborating and extending one’s practice and expertise (Bao & Dezheng 2022; Elliott, 2015; Zeichner, 1993), but instead can lead to ethical discomfort. This paradox intensifies because one argument for universities’ involvement in initial and in-service teacher education, e.g., in school-university partnerships (Fancourt et al., 2015; Hobbs et al., 2018) is that they can support teachers’ research engagement, but this is negated if the ethical demands become burdensome. Addressing this challenge requires reconsidering the nature of the demands and any potential strategies. We have variously encountered such demands in our careers as teacher educators (Fancourt et al., 2015), practitioner researchers (Fancourt, 2010; Foreman-Peck & Travers, 2013, 2015), teacher education researchers (Mayer & Oancea, 2021) and philosophers of educational research (Fancourt, 2018; Oancea & Furlong, 2007). We seek to address both the philosophical and lived features of practitioner researchers’ experiences of addressing difficult ethical situations when research codes prove inadequate, aiming at “refining understandings of the relationships between research [and] practice” (Mayer & Oancea, 2021, p. 5). Instead of a literature review, we delineate these situations philosophically as a quandary in contradistinction to a dilemma and propose responsible improvisation through hermeneutic conversation as a means to address them. This discussion is pitched broadly to cover practitioner research across various professions. Then we investigate empirically how some practitioner researchers in education experienced quandaries.

2. From dilemmas to quandaries

So far, we have used the common term *dilemma* (see Gowans, 1987; Mason, 1996) to mean any sort of ethical problem faced by practitioner researchers. In this section, we introduce a distinction between ethical *dilemmas* as problems of choice, and ethical *quandaries*, as experiences of apparently intractable ethical discomfort or bewilderment. This article focuses on investigating this latter concept, which is adopted in many disciplines (Erikson & Kress, 2004; Iannaccone & Anderson, 2021; Lavazza & Garasic, 2020; Posel & Ross, 2014) but rarely defined. To pinpoint the situated intractability of quandaries, we seek to build a more precise philosophical distinction between dilemmas and quandaries before considering how the latter might be resolved.

Both terms refer to the fundamental ethical problem of knowing the right thing to do in uncertain situations. However, in this paper

we reserve the term “dilemma” to refer to a situation where the applicable rules and the details of the situation are clear, but where any of the alternative courses of action that might be taken in applying the rules to the situation may be considered wrong or undesirable in some sense; for example, the different moral rules or principles that may apply are explicitly at variance (e.g., do not kill/kill one person to save the lives of five people). This is experienced as cognitive dissonance. A resolution of a dilemma might consist of choosing what is judged to be the least-worst option or choosing which rule takes priority.

We suggest a different use for the term “quandary”, to refer to the persistent ethical discomfort or bewilderment experienced by individuals in ambiguous and problematic ethical situations. When we experience a quandary, we cannot frame the situation according to specific ethical rules or norms because either the situation is, or the rules are, unclear; they are marked by ambiguity and imprecision. Collingwood (1951/1978, p. 103) describes such experience as being “up against it”, akin to being a novice or a traveller in foreign lands.

This ambiguity can manifest itself differently. Quandaries might arise because we lack the experience and knowledge to identify the situation as one to which particular known rules or norms apply. Quandaries may also be experienced when the situation is perceived as of a particular type, but either the existing rules or norms are insufficient, or there seem to be different sets of rules at stake, each pertaining to a distinctive domain of practice; when ethical ambiguity is compounded by role conflict and a sense of personal impasse, the problem is not one of choice between alternatives, but of *phronetic* extemporisation.

3. Responsible ethical improvisation

So, what are the features of navigating such quandary situations? Schauer (1993, p. 42) uses the phrase “recalcitrant experiences” to describe “occasions on which the generalisations of the past prove unsuitable for the needs of the present”. A recalcitrant experience arises when a rule, as a prescriptive generalisation, fails to apply adequately in a decision-making situation, because the “application of the generalisation to the current decision appears to frustrate rather than serve the justification lying behind the generalisation” (p. 51). In a purely rule-based decision-making mode, Schauer argues, the rule would be treated as entrenched and would be applied regardless of situational resistance. In contrast, in a conversational and particularistic mode, the rule would only be seen as directly applicable if such application would be coherent with the rule’s underlying justification. As a result, the rule may be contextually augmented and continuously revised during its application. This plasticity arises because the normative pressures come not from the rule itself but from its underlying justification.

Rules and routines act as initial guidance by codifying the best past experience of what to do in certain types of situations. They thereby regulate future behaviour or constitute new behaviours (Schauer, 1993). For example, the rule that prohibits deceit in research simultaneously both defines “deceit” in relation to the positive notion of consent and prohibits it. As such, rules may cover many less problematic cases and help focus professional judgment more on pondering over those cases that are not straightforward. Quandaries would therefore occur because the coverage of rules is inevitably sub-optimal: they are both too under- and over-inclusive to provide clear reasons for specific actions in all relevant situations.

When rules are sub-optimal, however, quandaries are not simply reducible to a succession of smaller choices in response to mini-dilemmas. The problem cannot straightforwardly be broken down into ethically simpler elements. To move forward on this issue, we

turn to Collingwood (1951/1978), who argues that the ethical decision-making in such situations that resist direct application of rules (as “no rule can tell you how to act”, p. 104), demands instead “improvisation”. He argues that when “you are up against it ... you must improvise as best you can a method of handling it” (Collingwood, 1951/1978, p. 103). Improvisation is here considered a valuable creative activity, rather than an unfortunate compromise or deviation. This point is strongly endorsed by a review of concepts of improvisation by Holdhus et al. (2016), who synthesise conceptualisations from rhetoric, drama, and music to identify improvisation with dialogic, open-scripted, interactive, and responsive exercise of skills and knowledge, drawing on an existing repertoire but unfolding in context- or domain-specific ways.

Sawyer (2011) and Berlinger (2016) expand on the importance of improvisational practice and, respectively, of ethical “work-arounds” in teaching and health care. Sawyer (2011) mobilises insights from Schön (1983), Eisner (1979) and Shulman (1987) to argue that “the best teaching is disciplined improvisation”, as opposed to “instinctive” and “nebulous” (p.2). It “involves both the possession of a large knowledge base of expertise and a knowledge of improvisational practice” (Sawyer, 2011, p. 11) and results in creative freedom and “artful balance” (p. 12) akin to theatrical or musical improvisation, as “[s]tructures” such as scripts, plans, schemas, or (we may add) codes are not simply “applied” in particular situations, but used contingently and imaginatively, as both the aims and the circumstances of practice “unfold during the course of the action” (Eisner, 1979, p. 176).

Nussbaum echoes this notion of improvisation in the ethical realm by focusing on the interplay between general rules and contextual particularities, “where what counts is flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the external; to rely on an algorithm here is not only insufficient, it is a sign of immaturity and weakness” (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 74). However, recognising the need for improvisational practice is not the same as claiming that rules or norms are irrelevant in dealing with ethical quandaries. Where the rules provide insufficient guidance, we must improvise, but, as Sawyer’s notion of “disciplined improvisation” suggests, we are not free to improvise any kind of response in any given professional situation. Professionals’ understandings are constrained by their history of obligations and by existing structures. In quandary situations, their response must be attuned both to the situational and relational context and to these encoded understandings that inform their practice (Sawyer, 2011). As Nussbaum (1992) remarks, although they may not have a script, they still need to remain in character, and she contrasts “standing terms”, i.e., the rules or norms, with “perceptions”, by which she means “the ability to discern acutely and responsively the salient features of one’s particular situation” (p. 37). She suggests that “perceptions ‘perch on the heads of’ standing terms, they do not displace them” (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 155), and describes the exchange between these two elements as “a process of loving conversation between rules and concrete responses, general conceptions and unique cases, in which the general articulates the particular and is in turn further articulated by it” (p. 95). We suggest the term “responsible ethical improvisation” to capture the mode of improvisation intimated by Nussbaum and Sawyer. Such improvisation therefore requires (a) a critical understanding of the existing rules and norms and of their underlying justification, (b) an understanding of and responsiveness to the particular situation and context, (c) the ability to use one to interrogate the other, and (d) an emergent strategy for charting and revising, individually and collectively, an appropriate course of action. This informed, responsible, hermeneutic and emergent improvisation is a far cry from any notion of simply “winging it” or instinctively ad-libbing. Rather, this is a complex and demanding exercise of informed practical wisdom

that needs to be both palatable to the individual and defensible within their professional or other community/-ies.

Emphasising this complexity begs the question of how one learns to improvise responsibly in a quandary situation. Neither Nussbaum nor Collingwood addresses this directly. Still, Nussbaum's metaphor of a "loving conversation" between rules and situated responses, as well as Schauer's framing of decision-making in recalcitrant situations as "conversational", suggests a possible path. To explore this suggestion more fully, we have drawn on Gadamer, particularly on his account of hermeneutical understanding, which he embeds within a conception of *phronesis*, as an ongoing conversational process.

4. Hermeneutical conversations

Hermeneutical conversations spring from experiences or situations that surprise, shock, confuse or pull us up short, because they do not conform to our current understandings. As Gadamer puts it, we encounter "the negativity of experience" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 353) – perhaps akin to Schauer's notion of recalcitrant experience. These experiences challenge the pre-judgements that inform our thinking. They call our extant beliefs and values into question and show the limitations of our understanding or "vision". We may be surprised in this way by an object, a text, a person or a situation. Each participant in the hermeneutical conversation will bring a history of experiences, presuppositions, pre-judgements, fore-meanings, and explicit and implicit expectations; they form a background of "prejudice" that frames their horizon of understanding. Gadamer (1960/2004) argues that we can escape our "effected historical consciousness" (p. 391) by engaging in the art of the hermeneutical conversation. This conversation can be virtual, as in encountering a text or an object, or it may occur in actuality. In each case, we do not simply experience a momentary difference in views but a sense of almost complete and persistent differences in approach.

In trying to understand another viewpoint, a "willingness to attend to the opinions of others" (Nixon, 2017, p. 29) is essential. Any attempt at understanding requires the willingness to engage in actual or virtual exploratory talk about how each party sees the matter at issue; that talk itself involves finding the right questions (the "right horizon of inquiry"). This suggests dialogue that is imaginative, open to learning from others, seeking clarifications of meanings and resisting premature judgements and conflict resolution. Such a hermeneutical stance acknowledges the "questionableness" of that which we do not yet understand, and our view of the world is thereby also opened up to those of others (Gadamer, 2001); it is this that makes a "fusion of horizons" possible.

The goal of a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 305) involves neither accommodation nor consensus in judgements, but a reorientation towards an exploration of differing meanings. Although the German term "Einverständnis" is translated as "agreement", it means that the goal of hermeneutic conversation should be to expand understanding as one moves together with one's horizon, or to go through "circles of understanding" in order to ease into a shared orientation to the matter at issue, as "a participation in shared meaning" (Gadamer, 1959/1988 p. 69) – rather than to strive for straightforward agreement. Instead, understanding is a matter of "bringing a subject matter into language" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 390). The fusion of horizons involves the formation of a new context of meaning that enables the recognition of what is otherwise unfamiliar, strange or anomalous. To do so, one may "let stand the claim to correctness of what the other person says" (Gadamer, 1959/1988, p. 68), while also calling into question one's own unavoidable prejudice. Thus within the new horizon, the other's views may have become more intelligible (Nielsen, 2013).

Such conversations can give us insights into the truth of a text, object or event, or a matter at issue, by being opened up in conversation, real or virtual. A hermeneutical conversation will result in an expansion of our views and thus our understanding.

Interpretation of experience is thereby rooted in the struggle to make sense of the situatedness of ethical concerns. Gadamer highlights hermeneutical understanding as a form of moral knowledge in that "the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 312) – what Lawrence (2002) describes as "uncovering truth in action" (p. 180). Arguably, it is the individual's experiences of their own quandaries that they bring to the other (including to the general rules) in conversation. Thus, in these situations, the fusion of horizons can be seen as the space within which responsible improvisation is possible. However, both the features of quandaries and the processes of conversation may vary, and deserve more attention.

5. Methodology: researching the hermeneutics of quandaries

To explore quandaries, responsible improvisation and the role of hermeneutic conversations empirically, we sought to analyse stories of moral deliberation undertaken by practitioner researchers who faced quandary situations. We investigated the following questions:

1. How do practitioner researchers experience quandaries in specific cases related to their research? (We were interested in how they described or conceptualised quandaries, their accounts of navigating the inner elements of a quandary situation, and the kinds of values in question).
2. How do practitioner researchers come to understand and deal with quandaries generated by their practice-based research through hermeneutical conversation? (We wanted to unravel what kind of understanding is involved, and how effectively this can support responsible improvisation).

Drawing on Gadamer, we conceived of our task as exploring the dynamics of moving through the various hermeneutical stages: from initial "pre-judgements", as practitioner researchers will arrive at a problem with a set of explicit and implicit expectations, and both professional and personal perspectives; then to through "negativity of experience", into "conversation" as a means of developing understanding of a situation; the move towards a "fusion of horizons" that can further enable responsible improvisation.

We therefore adopted a conversational model (Roland & Wicks, 2009) for exploring qualitative information about ethical issues through theoretically-driven small-scale exploratory longitudinal research. The research design included four steps: a process of crystallising a theoretical model of conversation into pictorial designs (see appendix 1), which would provide a structure without imposing specific rules; documenting participants' initial uses of the designs in group sessions structured around researcher-generated scenarios; supporting their visual and textual re-interpretations of these designs as they applied them to quandaries arising from their own practice; and concluding with reflections on this process and subsequent uses of this and other designs in further responses. This was second-order research (Elliott, 1985; Hanfstingl et al., 2020), akin to "inquiry on inquiry" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 17), in that we were interested in whether and how our philosophical work related to practitioner researchers' ethical experiences in their own research.

The eight participants were all volunteers recruited through

open calls at two points during the academic year. Six were school or further education practitioners engaged in a master's professional development programme. These six were all qualified teachers with at least three years' experience; one had also completed their initial teacher education at the institution. Five worked in schools and one as a law teacher in further education. Fancourt taught on the course; Foreman-Peck and Oancea were uninvolved. The sample was purposive on our part (Emmel, 2013) and self-selecting by the students, since they had to recognise that they were encountering or had encountered ethical challenges.

The masters' programme sought to encourage teacher-research studies that were valuable professional development and robust contributions to research knowledge (Burnard et al., 2015; Campbell & McNamara, 2010; Martell et al., 2021). No single model of research was applied; students could choose, for example, action research, case study, or quasi-experimental design (see Stylianides & Childs, 2019). It did not require them to address topics of ethical concern though some did (Elliott, 2015), and they could choose to adopt emancipatory approaches (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Griffiths, 2009). However, some course requirements potentially raised professional or ethical challenges, including: implementation of an intervention, interpreted loosely as an action taken to improve a situation, and necessitating some educational change; collaboration with school colleagues, which ensured a degree of wider participation, but also engendered relational work; obtaining formal ethical approval from the university and their school, and following BERA (2018) guidelines, though these organisations might have different ethical perspectives and demands.

We also opened the call to other, doctoral, students in the institution who had first-hand professional experience of school settings and saw their research as practice-based, with potential ethical complexities. Two doctoral students responded, a teacher studying part-time and a full-time student who had worked as a student counsellor and was researching behavioural issues in schools. Allowing for some accommodations to fit their schedules and priorities, all participants remained in the project throughout.

We offered places at initial (Group A) and mid-year (Group B) workshops organised as part of the project to all volunteers who expressed interest. The project progressed through three meetings roughly six weeks apart, in addition to the master's course's usual teaching arrangements. Fancourt and Foreman-Peck collected various data through tasks involving pictorial stimuli, written accounts by the participants, a classification task, and (recorded) group discussions (Fig. 1). The pictorial designs (see Appendix 1) were inspired by the notion of imaginatively working conversationally and narratologically (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) through quandaries, as a means of learning to improvise. These pictures functioned as an initial stimulus provided by us, to "carry theory elegantly and eloquently" (Weber, 2008, p. 47), to elicit participants' responses, and so to "capture the ineffable, the hard-to-put into words" (Weber, 2008, p. 46; see also Banks, 2008). They were developed with a professional artist to encourage participants to see through their quandary by scaffolding their conversational engagement through four ideal stages inspired by Gadamer's ideas (but necessarily simplified): initial different horizons of understanding; dialogue between two interlocutors; expanded, overlapping horizons of understanding; the interlocutors' individual thoughts on these new horizons. In each picture, the characters were shown talking or thinking, but the designs left the contents of their speech or thought bubbles blank.

The second form of data consisted of written accounts of how individuals were coming to understand both their own ethical quandaries and the Gadamerian concepts after completing the pictorial task. We also obtained final written evaluative reflections by email from seven participants. Third, we conducted group

discussions at the three events described in Table 1, which were audio recorded and transcribed. Lastly, we asked the participants at the final session, working in groups, to create categories out of vignettes of all the quandaries across the project.

Unsurprisingly, the project, which had formal University of Oxford ethical clearance, raised its own ethical issues. Participants were likely to be discussing sensitive issues about their professional life, their own research and their own personal ethical convictions; the intervention however was dependent on their willingness to share their own experiences openly. We therefore asked that they treat other participants' descriptions of their quandaries confidentially. Increasingly, our own ethical issues became apparent. For example, some of these quandaries were so specific that anonymity was at risk, and thus the choice of pseudonyms and pseudonymous locations would become complex. Further, we recognised our own quandaries emerging. For example, one of us had close links with one participant's school and knew several protagonists well, and thus had to make (and constantly revisit) decisions about how to manage this prior knowledge throughout the research process.

Data analysis (of discussion transcripts, completed pictorial designs, record of categorisation, and written outputs) was through an iterative process of coding and clustering across all the different types of data, with team discussions after each data set was analysed (Miles et al., 2020). We initially proceeded through identifying relevant codes for both research questions and developing an initial coding scheme, which we piloted on a selection of data. The pilot led us to recognise that the analysis needed to differ for each research question. For the first, it needed to be more inductive, seeking common features within different individuals' accounts of their quandaries, because we sought to tease apart their internal features. For the second question, we drew more deductively on Gadamer's concepts to create an initial frame, and then coded the data in order to appraise its value. This often required rereading Gadamer's texts, to check for appropriate concepts to describe newly emergent features in the data. It also required extended cross-coder discussion to clarify, calibrate and integrate the categories and themes so developed. This process of analysis was itself implicitly Gadamerian itself as we moved between Gadamer's text and our data (Kerdeman, 2015).

The following table presents a pseudonymised summary of the quandaries narrated by the eight participants (Table 1).

This summary is an aggregate of information gathered through all the methods described above; more detailed examples of participants' accounts will be used in the remainder of this paper to build an understanding of the experience of quandaries and how hermeneutic conversations enable the learning of responsible improvisation.

6. How do practitioner researchers experience quandaries?

The inductive categories that resulted from the data analysis in addressing the first research question are presented in this section and illustrated with examples from the writing and transcripts of discussion with the participants. The presentation is organised around three themes, which highlight our interpretation of the salient features of the quandaries described by our participants. All accounts of these quandaries hinged on something of value at stake; all were experienced subjectively as impasses; all participants expressed awareness of the risks and potential negative consequences of not navigating such quandaries well. Although these themes were identifiable across all accounts, many quandary situations consisted of multiple strands, which evolved and developed in discussion.

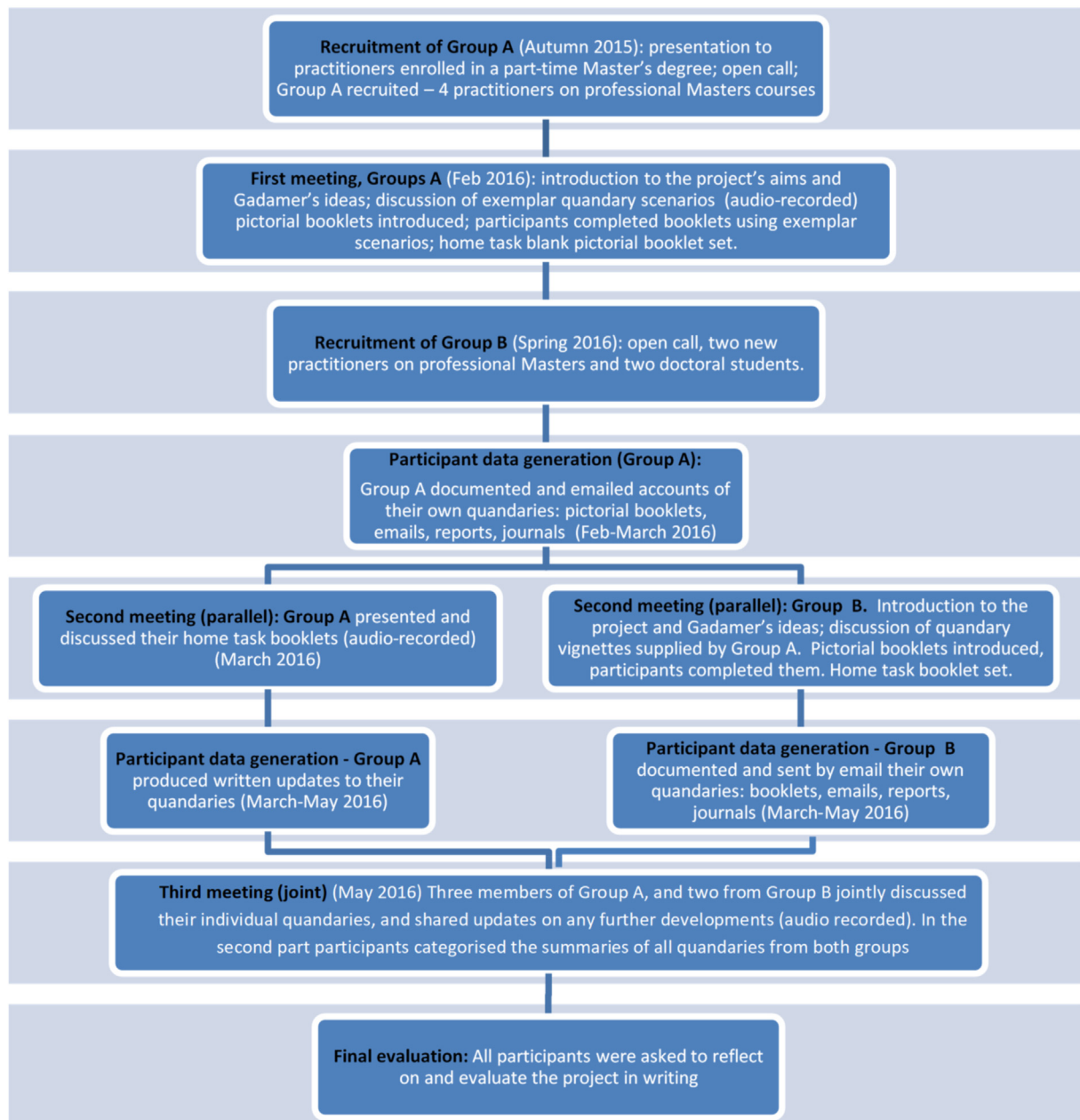


Fig. 1. Study design and timetable

6.1. The competing goods at stake

Participants expressed awareness that their quandary situation put into question something that they valued, the good at stake, and that there were different competing or incommensurable goods involved. The most obvious tension described was an internal one between wanting to conduct rigorous research and meeting professional obligations. For example, Pippa worried that she “had been blinded by concerns about the appropriate evidence for the research rather than the best course of action for my students”. Here, she sees a tension between ensuring the quality of her data collection and acting responsibly towards her pupils. Alice highlighted a relational issue when dealing with colleagues, in that “my conversation with the participants was not genuine and I had another purpose and outcome in mind”, suggesting that her professional integrity would be in doubt because her research agenda

would make her inauthentic.

For others, quandaries arose out of tensions between the goods they valued and those they perceived the school valued. Abdul's individual research agenda conflicted with his school's institutional concerns, rather than his own professional ethics. He contrasted his personal priorities in undertaking research as part of a post-graduate degree (“I need to get a good grade, I need to do well, this study is important”) with the school's view that “his topic [Prevent] is not going to help ... is a can of worms”. Here, he felt that the research was personally valuable and professionally appropriate but rubbed up against broader organisational goods.

Other kinds of goods could also be at stake, notably when a participant's personal ethics became entangled with both their research and their professional role. Here is Neil:

Table 1
PARTICIPANT'S quandaries.

Participant	Title and brief description
Neil	Values Wording. Neil needs his Headteacher's permission to carry out a survey. The Headteacher objects to its pre-amble, which he suggests implies that the school does not have high moral values. The Headteacher's suggested re-phrasing is in Neil's opinion untrue and will lead to biased data.
Abdul	Prevent Survey. Abdul needs his Headteacher's permission to send out a survey on the Prevent ² strategy. A question on the survey seems to imply that Abdul is against the strategy. The Headteacher is worried that the survey may cause problems, and refers the matter to the Governors who veto the survey. Abdul is doubly worried that he is labelled as a troublemaker and that his own community is being stereotyped.
Kelly	Theatre Group. Kelly has set up drama sessions led by a theatre company Director from outside her school. The sessions are designed to foster confidence in students who have been selected by other teachers as needing additional help. It becomes apparent that two students are both confident and disruptive, which has a negative impact on the others. The Director thinks that the project may fail; Kelly's research depends on the Director's willingness to continue.
Pippa	Traffic Lights. Pippa wishes to see whether a formative assessment intervention will have a positive outcome on her students' written work. However, to carry out the research she will have to break her department's policy on assessment whereby all written work is first drafted, then commented on and then redrafted. She is worried that by not giving comments and allowing redrafting she is disadvantaging her students in order to do her research. Her students are in an examination year.
Heather	Exam Paper. Heather is a legal educator. Her proposed research is on the process of writing a professional examination. However, this could expose her to the power struggles of her colleagues and put her in a difficult position professionally, although she acknowledges that the topic is an important one and would benefit legal education.
Tom	Giving Offence. Tom was a counsellor working abroad before undertaking doctoral studies in the UK. He studies bullying in schools, as an outsider researcher. His concern is knowing how to stand up to people whose language is offensive to marginalised groups instead of remaining silent. He feels he has not had the knowledge or courage to do this in the past and he wishes to develop as a moral person.
Revi	Biased Data. Revi holds a senior position in her school. She wishes to get honest feedback on her proposed innovations. She suspects that staff may feel too intimidated to give critical feedback, while the students will want to please her. She does not know how to overcome this power asymmetry, in order to do her research.
Alice	Voluntary Participation. Alice is a senior teacher responsible for research in her school. She is worried that staff who volunteer to be research participants may feel coerced because of her position. She is uncertain of their true feelings when they do not produce data. She would like them to feel able to opt out without expecting negative consequences, but she also needs their cooperation to get her research done.

^a This is a legal requirement on schools to "prevent" pupils being drawn into terrorism, and which Muslim communities considered over-targeted them.

I've got my position as a teacher, and not to want to rock the boat, my responsibility to my students, and if I got a negative view from parents about what I'm doing ... And the point of view of the research. And the point of view as a citizen.

Neil sets out four distinct and potentially competing goods at stake: as a teacher within the school organisation, enabling its smooth functioning; as a teacher with obligations to pupils and their parents, who might be upset or challenged by his project; as a researcher aware of the demands of the research itself; and his perception of his civic role, for him linked strongly to global social justice and the obligation to challenge inequality. There was considerable scope for quandaries to arise from these.

6.2. Imagined negative consequences

Most participants were worried about their research's viability, and by implication their postgraduate qualification. In some cases, however, the problem was not actual but anticipated as a potential possibility that cast doubt on the wisdom of proceeding further along a particular course of action. For example, Pippa worried that staff and students would complain if she broke with her school's policy of mastery learning. Previously, when she had not implemented school policy, a pupil had objected when she told the class to rewrite an essay for which there had been no feedback on the first draft. She recounted how a pupil had complained, "but you haven't marked the last essay. I need to know what I did wrong on that one before I write this one". She was both rehearsing possible outcomes, but also dramatising her own conflicting concerns – the pupil's point was reasonable and carried moral weight for a teacher.

For Alice, the ethical problem was that her research involved other more junior teachers in collecting data. She was a senior teacher in her school and responsible for assessing beginning teachers. If teachers did not submit data, would she be pressurising them if she sent a reminder email? The data was for her doctorate, which she recognised was for her own personal advancement. In her pictorial representation of her quandary, she imagined a teacher saying: "I've got 1001 things to do, wedding plans, course

work, marking, exam reports - oh, and Alice's research!".

Abdul's headteacher had been worried about Abdul's proposed staff survey about an anti-extremist strategy and had referred the matter to the governors who had vetoed the research. His school was also embedded in the internal politics involving the local community. Abdul was fearful of being labelled a continual troublemaker because he had previously raised professional objections about anti-extremism training (considering it anti-Islamic), had objected to a lack of consultation over the introduction of unisex toilets, and had been obliquely linked with a allegedly extremist charity. He feared for his future career as a teacher. In response to an email from his head forbidding him to start his research, he wrote: "I felt that these comments were highly charged and judgemental. I began having thoughts about my future and felt a loss of job security." The research – intended to develop his practice – was possibly negatively impinging his teaching career. Thus, unlike a dilemma, where the different outcomes are essentially foreseeable, in a quandary, they are vague and inchoate.

6.3. An ongoing ethical impasse

All the teacher participants expressed a sense of being at an impasse in discussing their quandaries. This had both cognitive and affective elements and was expressed as a feeling that they neither knew what to do, nor think about the situation, nor navigate the emotional discomfort. In Abdul's words: "It's all messy. It's all really messy ... I do feel like it's hanging over me ... You don't know what could happen next".

As Collingwood noted, such a sense of impasse may arise from inexperience, like being a stranger in a foreign land. For several participants, the execution of their initial research design resulted in a quandary; as researcher novices, they did not know enough about alternative research designs to meet the ethical or prudential objections they foresaw, notably Pippa, Revi and Alice, and to some extent Heather. For example, Pippa attributed part of her quandary to being "a novice at formal research"; she regretted that she did not know enough about research design to circumvent the ethical problem posed by her proposed pre- and post-intervention design,

and in her written reflections commented “I have not undertaken formal classroom research before: all experimentation within my practice has been guided by my own perception of what works rather than a desire to ‘prove’ that something works.” The process of questioning during the research elicited from many participants the realisation that they lacked or overlooked some element of knowledge relevant to their situation which had a material bearing on their deliberations. In [Gadamer's \(2004, p. 347\)](#) terms, they were experiencing the negativity of experience as being how “false generalisations are continually refuted by experience”. For example, for Kelly, negativity of experience came with the realisation that two students were reacting in unexpected ways to what she and the Director of the Theatre Company were attempting. Instead of being cooperative and appreciative, as she had expected, they expressed boredom, and their attitude and behaviour threatened the project's viability:

[The theatre director] and I had worked hard to create a safe space and build the will of the group, the two learners had taken the opportunity to communicate their true feelings: “I'm bored”, “I don't see the point in any of this” etc.

Part of Kelly's quandary was realising that neither she nor her colleagues knew the disengaged students well: they had managed to stay “under the radar”. The experience also revealed other areas of uncertainty and anxiety in dealings with colleagues. She had asked for names of students who simply lacked confidence, but staff had collectively identified students with very specific educational or other problems (for example Special Educational Needs or obesity); further, no one had alerted her to the fact that some could not attend the whole week because they were already booked for other forms of support. As a senior leader, she became aware that colleagues were not addressing her questions or demands in a manner that fully focused on the students and their needs.

Whilst always awkward, for some participants the realisation of ethical impasse was through surprise, in that expectations had been thwarted or explicitly blocked. Neil, for example, had gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure that his preamble to the staff survey he wished to carry out was “neutral”: “I had considered this introduction carefully and intended it to be as objective as possible. In order to achieve this, I had asked for input and advice from a number of colleagues and my supervisor.” He was therefore shocked to meet opposition from his Headteacher. The Head's opposition raised an ethical quandary. To get permission to proceed, he had to agree to something that he did not wholeheartedly endorse, which put his professional and researcher identities in tension.

7. Developing improvisation through hermeneutical conversation

In response to the second research question, we explored the different forms of hermeneutical conversation in our data. Some conversations were actual verbal exchanges, e.g., the workshops. Others were reported, for example, Neil's description of his exchange with his Headteacher. Some were imagined, for instance, when Alice gave voice to the hassled teacher with several other obligations and commitments besides aiding her research. These different forms of conversation potentially play different roles in reaching understanding; however, we use them collectively to illuminate how conversation assisted in developing an ethical perception that would facilitate responsible improvisation. As indicated above, the need for improvisation arises when there is a deficit in conventional routines and expectations, because they are either insufficient or thwarted.

7.1. The moral salience of the particular

Through the workshops, participants began to question aspects of one another's quandaries. There was a search for clarification of what had happened and why the situation was perceived as problematic. They sought further details. Questions could be straightforward requests for factual information, or clarification of attitudes, beliefs or values, but strikingly at no point was a set of ethical codes or principles offered as a solution. The other participants tried to build a detailed picture of an individual's quandary, filtering out what was unimportant and refining their understanding of what was important.

For example, Neil shared that his Headteacher had requested a rewording of his survey preamble to the effect that the school was a moral place, where discussion of right and wrong takes place daily and “nobody spoils it for anyone”. Neil was uncomfortable with that because he believed it was only partially true. After listening to Neil's account of his quandary and his reluctant compliance with the Head's request, Abdul asked Neil, “so what have you done in terms of data collection?”. Neil explained that the hundreds of responses he had received to his questionnaire had only mentioned the school values, and no wider social or global values beyond; the unsaid implication was that this was due to the Head's interference. Further questioning from other participants prompted fuller unpacking and sifting of the particular details of this situation. Thus, Neil expanded on a specific example of the school's recent mandating of a new uniform from a particular store chain. Abdul offered his own clarification as to why this may be a problem for Neil, by referring to the store's parent company, “They are [XXX] really aren't they?”. This parent company was notorious for exploiting its labourers in the developing world, so Neil's position was immediately illuminated. Neil then picked up the thread and expanded what Abdul had said: “you're [implying] they are essentially evil - so we can't say ‘nobody should spoil it for anyone’, because simply by buying the uniform you are spoiling it for people”. The school's “no one spoils it for everyone” stance was thus implicated in international patterns of injustice. Karen pressed Neil further about his attitude to the Head's stance; “So are you saying in a way it is essentially a lie? In terms [of simply life within the school] you might believe [the Head's position], but with the uniform example that you have given, it's a lie?” The questioning elicited in concrete detail both the depth of Neil's disappointment in his research findings and the nature of his moral objection to the Head's approach. Moreover, a shared understanding of the ethical particularities of the quandary was co-constructed conversationally with the other participants.

The process of asking and answering questions enabled participants to tune into their quandary's particulars and thereby to identify the ethical salience of both these particulars and the whole quandary. In Gadamerian terms, the concept of “questionableness” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 368), became apparent as the participants started problematising their own point-of-view, for example, through framing elements of their quandary via imagined conversations in the pictorial designs. In [Image 1](#), Abdul shows his own and his Headteacher's different views of the situation by rehearsing his Head's possible thoughts and questions and also asking questions of himself.

The conversation thus refined the participants' perception by enabling them to identify and reflect on the ethically salient features of their quandary situations.

7.2. The art of improvisation

While some participants sought to resolve their difficulties by side-stepping the problem or drastically changing their research

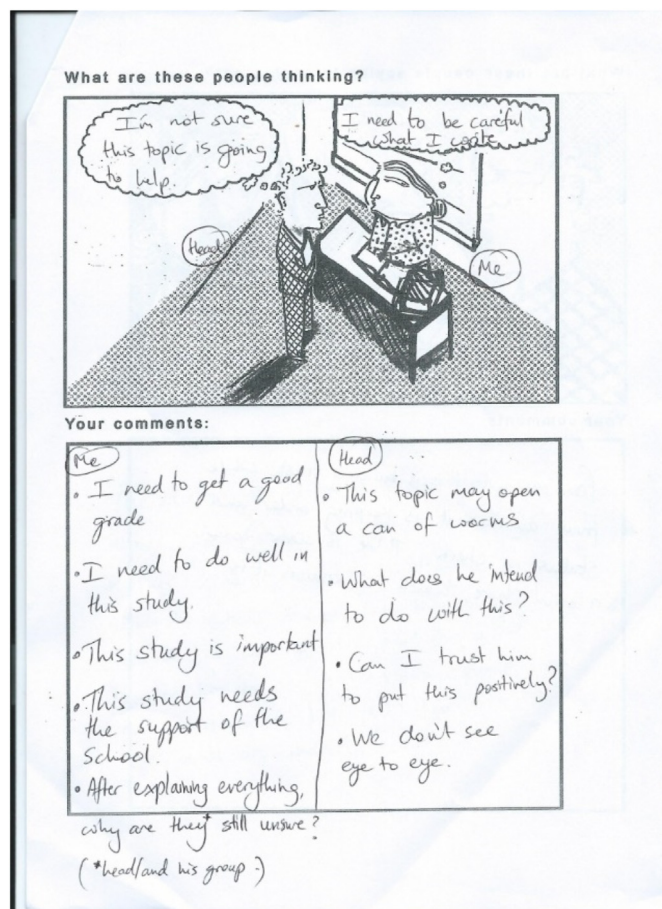


Fig. 2. A page from Abdul's completed booklet

plans, most participants felt compelled to act despite the ethical uncertainty, bewilderment or discomfort, because the ordinary demands of work continued. To do so, they had to improvise. For example, Alice saw no way around her situation and decided to carry on into uncharted territory, despite feeling unhappy about it. Kelly's investigation into the background of her two "troublesome" pupils revealed that some teachers were allowing them to opt out of the curriculum as a way of managing their behaviour. As a senior teacher, she felt obliged to act on that information despite having promised confidentiality. Even though his research was eventually permitted by the school, Abdul remained uneasy because he felt labelled as a troublemaker. Finally, Neil came to an ongoing awareness that his professional identity as a teacher was at odds with the head's vision of social harmony within the school. In navigating their quandary, none of them is merely ad-libbing. Rather, they engaged in conversation with their own written reflections, with their retold or imagined accounts of encounters with others, and with the other participants to sharpen their understanding of the particular situation and context and of any relevant rules and norms, with their underlying justifications, conflicts and limitations. The course of action that they thus improvise requires ethical perception shaped by deeper and broader understanding and (hermeneutical) conversational skills.

The actual conversations among participants allowed them to expand their accounts of their quandaries, finding new ways to present the issues involved in response to other participants. Here, Kelly's empathetic response to Heather's quandary also added a point that provoked Heather to elaborate further on the issues of

researching assessment in legal education:

Kelly: I think it's horrible, because – I'm not an expert on assessment or anything like that – but it sounds like that's a really good piece of research on how you structure the [examination] paper, but it's what comes out of that isn't it? All the side-lines then become distractions because you get into the politics and the personalities.

Heather: it is the politics, because – if you are going to talk to any people who were brilliant and had no problem in writing [examination] papers and could pass on all these pearls of wisdom; but you don't necessarily know what's going on in people's heads until you ask. And so, if you want – it's to identify weaknesses to other strengths, so that you could balance out the things on why people ... find it difficult, then you'd be having to ask somebody those questions, wouldn't you? So you wouldn't only be getting the positives, you would have to be getting the negatives, to have a balanced piece of research.

Heather makes explicit her perception of the incommensurability of balance in research with the politics of uncovering individuals' weaknesses. Indeed, the structure and syntax of the transcript show how she entrenches the demands of research; this entrenchment leads her to amend her research question, selecting a less sensitive topic and thereby avoiding the issues.

Self-questioning and re-framing became sharper as, during the group discussions, a participant would make a point about an individual's quandary, and the individual would then ask for further clarification or ethical reasoning. Here is an exchange between Neil and Abdul, where Abdul starts to set out his views on the underlying issues in Neil's quandary, on British values, and Neil becomes intrigued by this portrayal of his quandary:

Abdul: ... What is [the pupils'] identity? And that is itself very loaded. It's like a really, really hot potato at the moment. Is there a problem with being British? That's going to be a big issue, I think, for a lot of people. And that's just a feeling that I got from it.

Neil: Okay. So from reading this, you felt that I was hostile towards it?

Abdul: No, I don't think it's you. I think it's ... because you put in there that definition of Fundamental British Values at the start, and to be honest that definition's really dry, it sounds really, really negative ... It might rock the boat, like you said, but I think it might also affect your research with it.

Neil: How do you think it would affect the research? In what way?

Abdul: if you've got negative thoughts in your mind, don't you think that would come across in the answers then?

Neil: interesting. I think I've got to go back to the questionnaire to see if there are biases

In this actual conversation, Neil sought a new perspective on his own quandary from Abdul, who highlights wider points of ethical salience. Abdul models Nussbaum's 'conversation' between a general framework (in the legislation), and particular circumstances, but in relation to Neil's quandary, so that Neil comes to explore his own pre-understandings through Abdul's representation of his recounted conversation with the Headteacher.

Finally, the art of responsible ethical improvisation can be seen when an individual can reframe their quandary, within a fusion of

horizons. Thus Neil commented about his Headteacher:

But that is his thing – “nobody spoils it for anyone”. Which is interesting because ... it’s basically the inverse of the Golden Rule: treat others as you want to be treated yourself. And it’s actually don’t treat others as you don’t want to be treated. Exactly. So it’s the negative of the Golden Rule. And it’s also John Stuart Mill’s harm principle as well: you just shouldn’t harm anybody. So I agree with it. But as soon as you take it out outside the school, and the impact that the school, and the kids will have in an interconnected global community, then ... I say here, “I completely agree with what you’re saying, but we just need to make it bigger”.

Neil here exemplifies the four features of respectful ethical improvisation: he adopts a critical understanding of existing rules when he invokes various ethical positions (the Golden Rule, utilitarianism); he responds to school context when he draws on his Head’s motto; then he uses one to interrogate the other, allowing him to find affordances in this motto, by establishing what they agree on (“I completely agree ...”), and delineating where this agreement ends (“but as soon as ...”). Finally, he develops an emergent strategy for the next appropriate course of action, by rehearsing a respectful conversation with his Head. He no longer simply sets up opposing views, but instead places them against wider perspectives and codes, also thereby reconciles his own various roles, as active citizen, teacher and researcher. He and the Head are not actually in agreement – fusion of horizons is not a consensual solution – but this process gives him strategies to imagine speaking to his Head as the next stage in working through the quandary.

8. Conclusion: from codes to hermeneutical conversation

We initially noted that practitioner research has long been presented as a powerful, even essential, part of initial and in-service teacher education, leading to professional growth (e.g., Elliott, 2015; Zeichner, 1993). We also noted that it can sometimes create unsettling experiences (e.g., Pennachia 2021; Poulton, 2021). We believe that universities have a vital role in teacher education and sought to expand the boundaries of existing research by identifying issues and researching innovative strategies to address some complications of school-university relations (Fancourt et al., 2015; Hobbs et al., 2018). We explored a shortcoming in ethical codes and review processes when addressing practitioner research, in that their deontological, pre-emptive features are ill-suited to the relational complexities of quandaries, and there are three implications for this shortcoming from our study.

First is the philosophical work in defining and delineating quandaries. We argue that the distinctiveness of the combination of elements would suggest that the conceptualisation of the quandary as against a dilemma is valuable. The quandaries of practitioner researchers resist codification and cannot be navigated through more requirements or rules, as there are too many details in the process affecting the outcome, so virtue, *phronetic*, approaches are appropriate. Clearly, these individual elements may occur in other forms of research. Relationally complex qualitative research would be one example but also the elements of a quandary could appear across collaborative research, such as longitudinal research in schools, where the different participants’ ethical obligations may not align: researchers, senior leadership, and teachers. The quandary is thus between collaborators rather than within the individual. Other philosophical lenses might assist in their delineation and support in these settings.

Second, there are implications for further empirical work. We

have described a close-grained small-scale project as proof-of-concept work. Wider more elaborate interventions would be fruitful, as would research in other practitioner settings, such as forms of education (e.g., higher education, museum education, assessment) or the health sciences (e.g., nursing, counselling). As noted, teachers’ ordinary dilemmas have their own demands and nuances, and doubtless, other professions’ quandaries will be structured differently. One challenge with further research is that (thankfully) not every practitioner researcher will experience quandaries; our invitation went out to around a hundred students across two programmes for a final sample of eight. Another is that this kind of research does demand a degree of openness which may only be possible where there is trust between researchers and participants.

Lastly, there are implications for the practice of research ethics. The model proposed, both philosophically and heuristically, provides alternative strategies for supporting practitioner researchers through quandaries. How it could be incorporated within research governance procedures and/or practitioner research training and supervision is more complex. Institutions could consider these internally, and we suggest that the facilitation of hermeneutical conversations would help those in quandaries to develop an ethical skill of refining the art of responsible ethical improvisation, without recourse to more codes. Pictorial designs were a means to achieve this, and others might be fruitful. Professional bodies could review their codes and guidance to develop a richer language to address and support both practitioner researchers and others doing complex relational research, as other scholars have suggested (Iannacone & Anderson, 2021; Poulton, 2021). Further philosophical and empirical research across a range of quandaries and other forms of ethical bewilderment in different settings would be insightful for conceptual clarification and exploration of their inner workings. How ethical issues are reported in research journals may need more honesty. A consequence of front-loaded ethical clearance is that researchers rarely explain why or how their research became ethically complex, as it can seem like an admission of wrong-doing. Yet the more there is open exploration of these issues, the more they will be considered significant and worthy of deliberation, as a potential consequence of doing research, to be explained rather than hidden.

Credit author statement

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103760>.

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