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Ethics in educational research: introducing a methodological tool for effective ethical analysis

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Ethics is a complicated field and much has been written about its application to educational research. In this paper we introduce a way of planning for and dealing with situations that arise in the course of research that promotes detailed ethical analysis. We present a framework based on the work of Seedhouse and Flinders and describe a methodology for its use, alongside two examples in which the framework was used to achieve a comprehensive ethical analysis. The framework encourages us to view each situation from different philosophical perspectives and in doing so addresses issues about how to behave ethically, alongside methodological considerations, thus ensuring the integrity of the research. Use of the framework involves what Pring (2004) refers to as 'practical thinking' and addresses many of the concerns that other people raise about the limitations of linear codes and principles in a complex field.

Keywords: ethics; philosophy; ethical framework

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Introduction

All research undertaken in situations which involve people interacting with each other will have an ethical dimension; educational research is no exception and the ethical issues are often complex. They are likely to emerge and may change as the research proceeds. At one level, researchers need to be mindful of rules, laws and codes of conduct which determine how to behave whilst they are conducting their research. At another level, it can be argued that maintaining the integrity of the research is itself an ethical issue. This might include issues such as making efficient use of the resources available, gathering enough data on which to make recommendations and achieving triangulation. As researchers we have a duty to act ethically – with respect to the participants and by ensuring the integrity of the research – and to make sure that in reporting our research the reasoning behind ethical decisions is recoverable by the reader. Any activity involving people acting purposefully is complex; different people will come to different decisions when faced with the same situation. It is important therefore that the decisions that we make have a defensible moral basis and that the process of making those decisions is itself transparent. Ethical dilemmas will arise in research at both macro and micro levels. At a 'macro' level we will be concerned with issues like gathering enough data to draw valid conclusions; at a 'micro' level we need to consider, for example, the details of how we might conduct individual interviews.

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Thus any effective ethical analysis needs to take into account the behaviour of the researcher and maintaining the integrity of the research. It also needs to take place at a variety of levels such that any ethical decisions are recoverable. The thesis of this paper is that by thinking through the ethical dimension of research in a logical and structured way, a level of clarity can be brought to this field. We introduce a framework for ethical analysis, based on the work of David Seedhouse (1998a) and David Flinders (1992) and introduce a methodology for its use in educational research. We demonstrate its use through two examples and argue that this sort of analytical tool could fulfil the criteria for effective ethical analysis. The framework is not a set of principles or a code of practice; we argue that it is more powerful than either of those. It proposes a specific analytical process that aims to ensure good quality research is conducted within a moral framework. We begin by providing some background to moral theory and then introduce the work of Seedhouse and Flinders on which our framework is based. Finally we seek to demonstrate that our framework addresses some of the limitations of the conventional approaches, involving adherence to lists of principles, that have been highlighted by other authors.

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Moral theory

In order to act ethically, it could be argued that researchers need to understand the nature of morality and moral reasoning. There are two classical theories of western moral philosophy, which if followed literally may lead to conflicting rules and principles. Deontology is about 'doing your duty', regardless of the consequences. The notion of 'duty' is open to debate but could mean, for example, 'always keeping promises' or 'always telling the truth'. A deontologist would argue that certain actions are 'right' regardless of the consequences, because they involve behaving in a particular way. Consequentialism or utilitarianism on the other hand judges morality in terms of the intended outcomes. The rightness or wrongness of an action should be judged in terms of whether its consequences produce more benefits than disadvantages for the greatest number of people. If breaking a promise brings 'good' to a large number of people then you are morally justified to do so. Seedhouse (1998a argues (and many would agree with him) that anyone seeking to achieve 'competence in ethical thinking' (1998a, p. 113) needs to understand both dimensions of moral theory. He has designed 'an ethical grid' to enhance moral reasoning, which incorporates the classical theories of western moral philosophy and he argues that repeated use of the grid will lead to greater ethical awareness. The grid provides an authentic rationale for moral action and we will argue that by using the grid, a researcher can be confident that their actions are rooted in moral theory. Through using the grid, educational researchers will develop their appreciation and understanding of moral theory and what Seedhouse calls 'ethical learning' will take place.

Seedhouse's ethical grid

Seedhouse is a philosopher and introduces his ethical grid as a tool designed to help the user understand the ethical issues that they are facing. The grid was developed in the context of healthcare, but has been used successfully by social scientists in action research projects (Atkinson, 1989). The grid does not provide solutions, but provides a structure to guide the thinking of the user, enabling them to identify the issues and respond systematically. The researcher is then more likely to act ethically and can

present the decisions in such a way that the decision-making process is transparent and can be discussed. Seedhouse introduces the concept of an ethical grid by suggesting that we should think of ethical dilemmas as being like a spider's web where each idea is connected to all the others by all manner of routes. If you start to deliberate, you find that the ideas overlap and interconnect. The framework is presented in four concentric layers within a square (Figure 1). Seedhouse argues that the four layers represent four aspects of comprehensive ethical analysis: external, consequential, deontological and individual. In the figure, we are looking down on a square pyramid. Figure 2 redraws the grid in three dimensions.

Each layer represents an ethical aspect to a situation. Each 'aspect' approaches the situation from a different perspective. The outer (bottom) layer for example encourages us to think at an organisational level whereas the inner (uppermost) layer concentrates on individuals. Within each layer there are boxes that identify different issues within that aspect. While the boxes have been developed in the context of healthcare the thesis of this paper is that, through application to the context of educational research and comparison with the work of David Flinders, the grid could be adapted appropriately to suit the contexts that are likely to arise in educational research. For

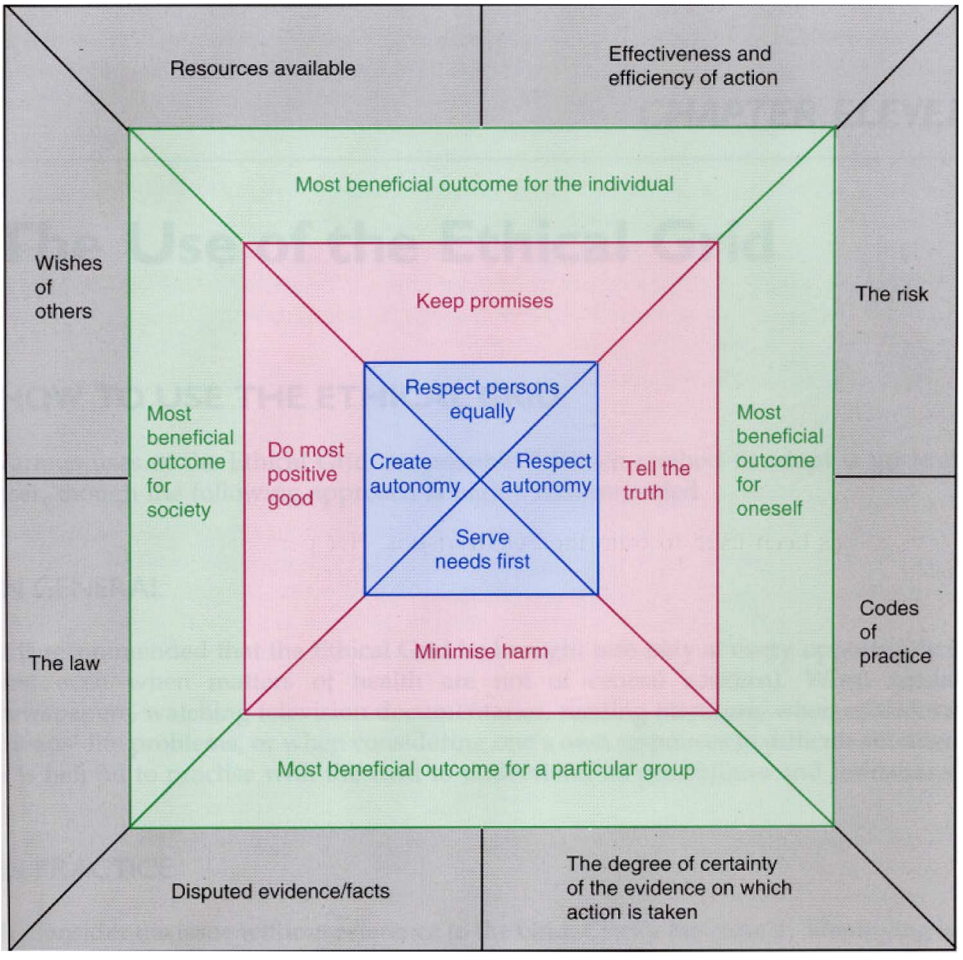

Figure 1. Seedhouse's Ethical Grid (Seedhouse, 1998b).

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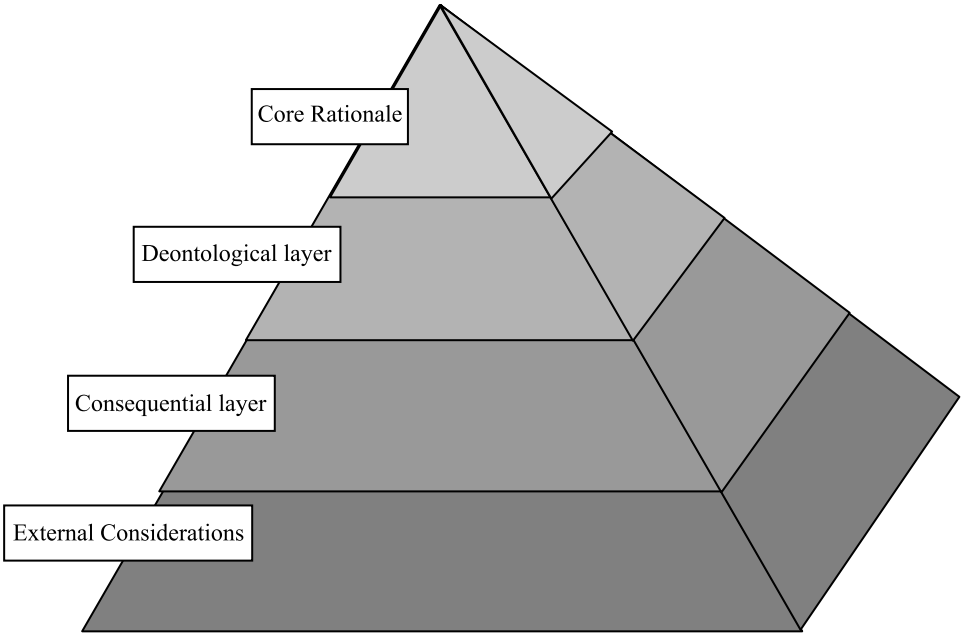

Figure 2. An alternative representation of the ethical grid.

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any given dilemma, all, some, or even just one of the boxes in a particular layer, might be relevant in that context. The position of the boxes in one layer relative to those in the next layer is not significant. In the original work, the layers are coloured differently for clarity. The layers can be summarised as follows:

(1) *External layer (outer layer).* This layer includes all the external issues, such as the law, codes of practice, and use of resources available. The user is encouraged to reflect upon the implications of the context in which they are working.
(2) *Consequential layer*. This layer encourages the user to think about the consequences of possible actions for society, for individuals or for particular groups of people.
(3) *Deontological considerations.* This layer covers issues to do with 'duty' and consideration of possible actions. It is concerned with the way in which things are done, rather than the consequences of doing them. The boxes in this layer include issues such as 'telling the truth' and 'minimising harm'.
(4) *The inner layer (uppermost layer).* This covers the 'core rationale' and includes issues of respect for the individual and autonomy.

As will be seen later in this paper, in developing a methodology for use, specific issues are sometimes considered in more than one layer. The fact that similar sounding issues occur at different levels illustrates why linear organising principles are difficult to follow in the field of ethics.

It must be remembered that the grid is an epistemological device. It was not intended to be an exact representation of the mental processes that make up moral reasoning but it provides, through its language, a practical and accessible route into

the processes of moral reasoning. The point of the grid is not that it will solve ethical dilemmas, but that it provides a moral framework for thinking about them. Seedhouse claims that 'it can throw light into unseen corners and can suggest new avenues of thought – but it is not a substitute for personal judgement' (p. 208).

Given the comprehensiveness of the grid, it is reasonable to expect that by analysing an educational research project with this grid, one can be confident that significant ethical issues are identified, that there is a moral basis for their identification and that any subsequent decision making processes can be made transparent. As is the nature of mental constructs such as this, one would expect that over time it would evolve and develop into something more directly relevant to educational research and its typical situations. However, it is only by using these ideas that we came to more fully understand and develop them. We hope to demonstrate how the sort of thinking advocated by Seedhouse can be adapted for educational research and that the work of Flinders (1992) is very helpful in this respect.

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Flinders' ethical frameworks

Like Seedhouse, Flinders recognises that moral philosophy should underpin any comprehensive ethical analysis. He argues that 'our professional norms teach us to get along without much explicit attention to questions of moral philosophy' (1992, p. 101). Researchers are often satisfied that by adhering to a particular set of guidelines or principles, they have indeed acted ethically. Flinders acknowledges that 'theories of… ethical conduct remain largely in the shadows of qualitative thought' (p. 101) and that researchers could benefit from models to better recognise and anticipate ethical dilemmas. Flinders maintains that in seeking to protect the human subject in research we are 'in need of ethical guidance'. He describes four ethical frameworks that will 'help us to foresee ethical problems and work through those problems that unavoidably turn up as research efforts unfold' (1992, p. 101). The frameworks provide a set of different perspectives from which to consider each stage of the research. The frameworks that Flinders offers are utilitarian, deontological, relational and ecological. Each framework provides a particular perspective on a situation. In utilitarian ethics, we are looking to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people; deontological ethics alert us to the fact that moral conduct cannot be justified entirely in terms of the consequences and must conform to 'standards such as justice and honesty' (1992, p. 104). Relational ethics places our 'attachments and regards for others' (1992, p. 106) at the centre of our considerations and ecological ethics takes account of the environment in which individuals are working. Flinders identifies the issues that arise within each framework, at each stage of the research process. These are summarised in Table 1 below.

If considered in its entirety as a grid, rather than as a set of alternative stances, Flinders' framework, like Seedhouse's, offers tools that can promote comprehensive 'ethical thinking' and there is considerable overlap between the two schemes.

Seedhouse's external layer encourages us to look at our situation in the wider context by considering responsibilities to sponsors and society. An ecological perspective (Flinders) acknowledges the fact that neither researcher nor participant can have complete control over a situation and that the context in which the work is taking place could raise ethical issues. Likewise, there is overlap in their thinking at the heart of the grid. In the internal layer, Seedhouse focuses on the needs of the individuals central to the situation. This involves a relational perspective in which

Table 1. Ethical frameworks.

	Utilitarian	Deontological	Relational	Ecological
Recruitment	Informed consent	Reciprocity	Collaboration	Cultural sensitivity
Fieldwork	Avoidance of harm	Avoidance of wrong	Avoidance of imposition	Avoidance of detachment
Reporting	Confidentiality	Fairness	Confirmation	Responsive communication

Source: Flinders (1992, p. 113).

'ethical goals should be confirmed above all else by a caring attitude towards others' (Flinders, 1992, p. 106). The overlap extends to the rest of the grid: Seedhouse's consequential layer is based on the same principle that underlies utilitarian ethics: an action or decision is moral if it leads the most positive outcomes for the most people. Deontological ethics is based on the premise that even if an action has positive consequences it must be carried out in such a way that it promotes honesty and justice. Likewise, in the deontological layer, Seedhouse encourages us to focus on duties and motives rather than on consequences. Flinders developed his ideas in the context of educational research and as we will show below, we have used his ideas to modify the 'boxes' within each layer of Seedhouse's grid to make them more applicable to educational research.

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A methodology for ethical analysis

We have interpreted each of Seedhouse's boxes as an aspect of the situation that should be considered within that level of thinking. We suggest that a helpful way in which to use this framework is to generate a set of questions that could be used to interrogate a particular situation (see Table 2). In thinking through the ethics of any piece of research, judgements will need to be made. Sometimes deontological demands such as honesty and openness may seem to conflict with relational demands such as trust. As outlined earlier in the paper, decisions need to be made as a result of identifying tensions between deontological duties to disseminate findings if they are perceived likely to be unpopular as weighed against the utilitarian aims of opportunities to afford the most benefit by doing so. The key feature of the grid is that it provides a way of thinking about the ethical implications of a piece of research in a logical and structured manner. It will not provide answers to dilemmas but will highlight the nature of such dilemmas within a moral framework raising them as something about which a decision needs to be made in order to act ethically. Crucially, the process of making judgements can be traced and justified. Through repeated use we would expect the grid to develop; different people working with the same boxes might generate slightly different questions, or indeed, different relevant boxes might be identified. In choosing a set of relevant boxes within each layer, we were guided by Seedhouse's original grid together with the ideas of Flinders. For example, in the external layer, 'cultural sensitivity', that is to say understanding the norms, roles and values of the institution in which you are working, is an important consideration for an educational researcher who might be working in a number of schools, applying particular research methods with different people in different contexts. In the deontological layer, Flinders' concept of reciprocity provides a cue for actions that ensure the participants fully understand the implications of what the researcher is trying to achieve. In healthcare, 'autonomy' is often at

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Table 2. An ethical grid including possible questions that could be posed within each level of the framework.

Rationale	No.	Questions to consider
External/ecological		
Cultural sensitivity	1	What are the values, norms and roles in the environment in which I am working and are they likely to be challenged by this research?
Awareness of all parts of the institution	2	What is the relationship between the group/individual I am working with and the institution as a whole? How does it affect the participant(s)?
Responsive communication – awareness of the wishes of others	3	How might my work be viewed/interpreted by others in the institution? How will the language I use be interpreted?
Responsibilities to sponsors	4	What are my responsibilities to the people paying for or supporting this research (local authority, my school, external bodies)?
Codes of practice	5	Have I worked within the British Educational Research Association guidelines? Are there other relevant codes which might also be applicable? Am I aware of my rights and responsibilities through to publication?
Efficiency/ use of resources	6	Have I made efficient use of the resources available to me, including people's time?
Quality of evidence on which conclusions are based	7	Have I got enough evidence to back-up my conclusions and recommendations?
The law	8	What legal requirements relating to working with children do I need to comply with? Am I aware of my data protection responsibilities? Am I aware of the need for disclosure of criminal activity? Do I need written permissions?
Risk	9	Are there any risks to anyone as a result of this research?
Consequential/utilitarian		
Benefits for individuals	10	What are the benefits of my doing this research to the participants? Would an alternative methodology bring greater individual benefits?
Benefits for particular groups/ organisation	11	What are the benefits of my doing my research to the school/department? Could these be increased in any way? How will I ensure that they know about my findings? Is my work relevant to the school development plan? Can I justify my choice of methods to my sponsors?
Most benefits for society	12	Is this a worthwhile area to research? Am I contributing to the 'greater good'? Is it high quality and open to scrutiny?
Avoidance of harm	13	Are there any sensitive issues likely to be discussed or aspects of the study likely to cause discomfort or stress?

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Table 2. (*Continued.*)

Rationale	No.	Questions to consider
Benefits for the researcher	14	Am I going to be able to get enough data to write a good thesis or paper? Am I aware of my publication rights? What might I learn from this project? Will it help in my long-term life goals?
Deontological		
Avoidance of wrong – honesty and candour	15	Have I been open and honest in advance with everyone who might be affected by this research? Are they aware that they can withdraw, in full or in part, if they wish?
Fairness	16	Have I treated all participants fairly? Am I using incentives fairly? Will I acknowledge everyone involved fairly? Can I treat all participants equally?
Reciprocity	17	Have I explained all the implications and expectations to the participants? Have I negotiated mutually beneficial arrangements? Have I made myself available when those involved might wish me to be? Are the participants clear about roles, including my own, as they relate to expectations?
Tell the truth	18	If there is any need for covert research how will I deal with this? What will I do if I find out something that the participants/school/department do not like? How will I report unpopular findings?
Keep promises	19	Have I clarified access to the raw data and how I will share findings including at publication? How will I ensure confidentiality?
Do the most positive good	20	Is there any other way I could carry out this research that would bring more benefits to those involved?
Relational/individual		
Genuine collaboration/trust established	21	Who are the key people involved? How can I build a constructive relationship with them?
Avoid imposition/respect autonomy	22	Am I making unreasonable or sensitive demands on any individuals? Do they appreciate that participation is voluntary?
Confirmation of findings	23	What steps will I take in my methodology to ensure the validity and reliability of my findings? Can I involve participants in validation? Will I report in an accessible way to those involved?
Respect persons equally	24	How will I demonstrate my respect for all participants? Have I treated pupils in the same way as teachers?

the heart of ethical considerations; in educational research, Flinders' 'collaboration' implies that establishing trust is of paramount importance, which is also a point that has been argued strongly by Bond (2005). We therefore present a provisional set of questions and will seek to demonstrate with two examples how these have enabled us to achieve thorough, recoverable, ethical analysis.

The questions listed are suggestions – a particular project would generate its own – and not all the questions will be relevant to every situation. Flinders identifies issues at each stage of the research process, whereas we would suggest that the grid can and should be used at various stages throughout the research as the issues will develop and evolve as the research proceeds. We would like to suggest that its strength comes from:

- the fact that it provides a logical and systematic approach to a potentially complicated and highly subjective field;
- its guidance of behaviour in a way that helps ensure the integrity of the research;
- its basis in moral theory ensuring that the actions arising from its use have a moral basis;
- its potential to assist resolution of disagreement, where a difficult decision can be traced back to a question and a place on the grid providing a context for a sensible discussion;
- the probability that ethical learning will take place through the repeated use of the grid in different contexts.

In the original work, Seedhouse suggests that competence in ethical thinking comes from understanding moral theory, understanding the features of major ethical ideas and recognizing the types of actions that each theory is likely to recommend. The fact that this grid has been developed from moral theory and is underpinned by strong academic arguments can give the user confidence that it provides a sound basis for their actions.

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Examples from educational research

In the first example, the grid was applied to a small-scale research project which took place at the University of Cambridge, England (see Figure 3).

Issues such as benefits to the school and the effect of the research on the teachers concerned, were represented in the consequential and deontological layers. Likewise, the issue of 'risk' (external layer) can be construed as being similar to potential harm (deontological layer). There will be risks at an organisational level and there is the risk of potential harm at an individual layer. This reflects the reality that many issues matter at a variety of levels, which is what makes linear organising principles difficult to follow in the field of ethics. The answers to similar questions, when considered at different levels, help ensure that nothing is missed and provide some clarity which is lacking in the conventional approaches to ethics, involving adherence to lists of principles. As our analysis later in this paper will show, consideration of particular lists of principles or guidelines (for example, BERA or ESRC) is included in the sort of ethical analysis we are advocating, but the grid offers rather more than guidelines alone.

Starting with the external considerations, the work was done within the BERA guidelines (2004). These are based on the principle of 'respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values and respect for the quality of educational research'. The main risks to the school were that the researcher was unknown to them

Project example 1

The object of the research was to investigate the activities of a group of teacher-researchers in a successful 11-16 school with a view to gaining insights into how such activities can contribute to sustained school improvement. The research was conducted in a subjective and constructivist framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of twelve research-engaged teachers. Meetings of the group were observed and documents were examined. Towards the end of the research, two extended, un-structured interviews were conducted with members of the Senior Leadership Group involved in research. Technical rigour came from what Ball (1993) describes as the conscious linking of the social trajectory of the research and the technical trajectory. The researcher was a member of the Governing Body (School Board) and occasional supply teacher at the school. This enabled more meaningful relationships to be established than would have been possible for an outsider, but ensured a greater degree of objectivity than would have been achieved by an insider. At the end of the project, recommendations were made to the school about how the impact of the researchers could be increased and some general observations concerning the nature of this sort activity were made.

Figure 3. A summary of Project 1.

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in a professional sense, would take up people's time and might make recommendations based on poor evidence. The position of the researcher as a governor and her own experience as a busy teacher reduced this risk considerably and these issues were explicitly discussed with the teacher research coordinator (TRC) at the beginning of the project in a number of initial meetings. Details of the research questions were negotiated along with access to the informants and invitations to various meetings, through her.

The main consequences for the informants were both positive (an opportunity to reflect on an aspect of their work with an interested outsider) and negative (if their views were misrepresented and the research took up too much of their time). All the informants were approached by letter explaining the purpose of the project, what was to be asked and how long the interview would take. Thus the principle of 'informed consent' was adopted. Time limits were observed during the interviews and the interview notes were read back to the informants to ensure that their views had been properly understood. The interviews were summarised on a simple pro-forma which could be read and checked easily by the interviewee. Thus causing harm to the informants was avoided. There was a strong desire to research something that mattered in a wider educational sense and had the potential to make a difference. The link between teacher-led research and the potential for school improvement (Wrigley, 2003) and the inclusion of this issue in the school's own development plan suggests that this has been the case. Thus there is the potential to 'do positive good'.

A difficulty for an outsider undertaking research in a particular school can sometimes be communicating findings that they know will be unpopular. By anticipating this in advance, the researcher was able to take various actions during the process of the research to ensure that trust was established so that communication could be open. Being an occasional supply teacher created the opportunity to establish relationships with the teachers in a professional context. The TRC was informed about all the activities of the researcher and findings were shared and discussed with her at a relatively

Project example 2

This study is a set of longitudinal case studies of teachers as they take on leadership roles in schools with the intention of understanding how they undertook their learning in this period of workplace transition. Notions of learning through participation (Wenger, 1998) are being explored. The desire is to follow individuals over a 3 year period in a series of cycles of intense data collection. The researcher-participant relationship was deemed central both methodologically and ethically to this study and the study began with an exploratory phase consisting of three extended semi-structured interviews exploring the life history of the participants. This allowed a relationship to be developed between researcher and participant along with establishing a negotiated research process for the main phase of the study. Learning opportunities were identified by the participant and methods of capturing examples of learning trialled, along with negotiating access to secondary documents and accounts from colleagues. Continued participation in the study was renegotiated after the exploratory phase and five of the seven participants felt able to continue. After verification of transcription data and discussion of emergent analysis throughout the study each of the participants have been promised a biographical account of their learning as a basis for analysing their learning trajectories (Wenger, 1998).

Figure 4. A summary of project 2.

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early stage in the analysis process. Thus, as a result of the relationships established, Bond's ethic of trust (2005) was at the heart of the project.

This project did not produce particularly difficult or complex ethical dilemmas and it is fairly typical of the sorts of studies being conducted in university departments of education. The application of the ethical grid provided a thorough analysis of the situation which enhanced the integrity of the research as well as identifying potential ethical problems. It became possible to prioritise clearly the main issues applicable to this situation. In particular the ethic of trust was vital to the success of this project, along with 'cultural sensitivity', which is an issue raised by Flinders in the context of ecological ethics. Crucially however, this project does demonstrate that this *way of thinking* proposed by Seedhouse, has potential and does indeed bring clarity to the field of ethics. This was confirmed in the second example.

The second example is of a doctoral study being undertaken at the Open University and as yet incomplete. It is a set of longitudinal case studies of teachers as they take on leadership roles in schools (see Figure 4).

Since this project consists of in-depth interviews with a relatively small number of participants, the 'relational' or 'individual' issues revolve around establishing trust and making sure that the participants fully understand the implications of the interviews. A concise ethical statement was produced which was shared with the participants and the need to 'avoid imposition' influenced the time, place and number of interviews. The intention in this project is to access the private and make it public (Denzin, 1970). Within the deontological framework it is clear that this carries with it the potential to do harm, especially if the discussions involve participants in reflecting on events from the past, and these reflections uncover uncomfortable memories. The participants were alerted to this possibility and the researcher undertook to be alert to signs of distress, whilst making it clear that she was not qualified to provide support after the interview but that participants might like to identify someone else in advance. In addition, making accounts public raises issues of reporting. This was particularly relevant when senior leaders were also interviewed about the participants' learning and required careful negotiation of access to this information involving both leader and participant; this was different in each case. Despite the risk of potential trauma,

there is a high chance that taking part in this process will have very positive consequences for the participants. There is clearly an opportunity here for them to reflect in depth on their own learning, with positive implications for their future development. The intention to provide each participant with a biographical account of their learning as they move into leadership positions in school, highlights the wish to ensure positive outcomes for the participants. From the researcher's point of view it is possible that the research process itself will lead to learning that might not otherwise have taken place and these will have analytical consequences to be dealt with. Considerations of external benefit are raised from such systematic analysis both at local school level and the potential for this research to do good in the broader sense. In the final stages of reporting dealing with honest but unpopular findings relating to the schools in which participants were working also require further ethical decisions to be made. This exemplifies how the issues operate at different levels. While at the micro level the project has already been validated by participants as being personally valuable to them, the potential to be valuable to the external research and practitioner community will depend on issues of validity and reliability as well as how it is disseminated. Due to local, potentially controversial issues being raised, it is unlikely that reports will be shared directly with the schools within which participants were based.

Further ethical issues arose during the project when respondents were asked to collect images that represent learning episodes which could then be interrogated using stimulated recall methodologies. This raised issues concerning how the public images would be made and it became clear that the researcher needed to be sensitive to the culture in which the respondent was working, including the wishes of other people, and to be flexible in this request. Separate ethical statements were negotiated for use in schools and at external events.

Again, we find, in this example a certain amount of repetition when identifying dilemmas which span more than one layer, and this serves to highlight the priorities. In this project, the issues of imposition and avoiding harm have proved to be significant and have guided particular actions, but this analysis has also offered to the study the potentially positive consequences for the participants and the implications of the interview itself as a vehicle for learning. In this case, the grid has provided a wider perspective which has had the effect of reducing the initial tensions experienced by the researcher in working out how to behave in sensitive situations.

Conclusions arising from the examples

In both examples we feel that use of the grid enabled a comprehensive ethical analysis to take place, supporting Seedhouse's claim that 'it can throw light into unseen corners and can suggest new avenues of thought'. Decisions about how to behave (informed consent, right to withdraw, written permissions for photographs) would have emerged from a conventional ethical analysis. However, by using the grid methodological considerations have also been considered as part of the ethical analysis. In the first project for example, the decision to conduct 25 minute interviews was a compromise between gathering the information and not making undue demands on the teachers' time (25 minutes was half a period, so they did not lose a whole 'free'). We are most struck however, by the moral dimension that this analysis brings to our thinking. In the second example, there are obvious serious ethical concerns around the issue of probing private experiences and making them public and the possible effect of reliving traumatic experiences on the participant. This is countered however, by focusing on

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the potential to do good and the realisation that, for the teachers concerned, the opportunity to reflect in detail on their learning as they develop professionally could be very powerful, and will indeed lead to further learning. This in turn has implications for the analysis stage of the project. Hence we find ourselves moving between issues of behaviour and methodology within a structured framework. Seedhouse suggests these sorts of issues are all interlinked and we feel that attempts to compartmentalise them can result in things being missed.

Thus we argue that the grid provides a framework for a detailed and logical analysis, which is based on moral theory. As Seedhouse states, such a grid does not provide answers to ethical dilemmas and we acknowledge that the 'boxes' as presented and the questions generated are not definitive. In fact we expect them to be clarified through repeated use of the grid in different contexts. As a way of thinking, however, we suggest that it is a powerful tool which promotes comprehensive and systematic thought within a complicated field. Judgments will still need to be made but, crucially, the basis for any difficult judgements or decisions can be made explicit and can be discussed in a meaningful way. Potential tensions, such as avoiding imposition whilst collecting enough data, will be clearly highlighted, bringing a clarity of thought and transparency to their resolution. Indeed, in using the grid with students of educational research, we have found that it requires them to articulate the fundamental beliefs underpinning the design of their research. We are aware that both examples provided are based on qualitative research methods involving interviews and observations and that pupils were not involved. We are confident from our work with students of educational research that the grid would bring the same benefits to other methodologies; a set of questions could be generated, consideration of which would highlight the key ethical issues. In conducting large-scale surveys, for example, issues of validity emerge at several levels – what constitutes an acceptable response rate would emerge in the 'external' layer whilst issues around being sure about who had actually completed the survey would emerge elsewhere. In web-based research, the issues of how to obtain informed consent and how to protect privacy are crucial and would emerge out of questioning at different levels. Likewise, in research involving pupils the issue of ensuring the right to withdraw would be made explicit and could be considered in the context of the potential benefits and risks of the project. Our claim is that the comprehensive nature of the grid ensures that less-obvious issues are also made explicit, leading to a more thorough ethical analysis. This is clearly an area for further work.

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Discussion of the applicability to educational research

The educational research literature is not short of guidance concerning ethical issues. The literature is extensive but there is surprisingly little overlap or cross-referencing, making it difficult for students of educational research to be confident that they have considered all the ethical implications of their research project. Since what we are proposing is essentially a way of thinking we would like to demonstrate that this approach incorporates much that has been written whilst responding to some of the limitations of conventional approaches that have been highlighted in the literature.

Educational researchers are often guided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2004) or the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) research ethics framework (2005). The BERA guidelines cover the responsibilities of the researcher to the research profession, the participants, the

public, and funding agencies, as well as issues around publication and intellectual ownership. They consist of 48 'shoulds' all based on the principle of 'respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values and respect for the quality of educational research'. The ethical grid as presented incorporates all of these principles at different levels. The ESRC framework identifies six principles, all of which are covered in the grid. Analysis of both the BERA and ESRC frameworks alongside the grid shows that by using the grid, both sets of principles are covered. However, the grid achieves more in that it also raises issues not covered in the guidelines – mainly around consideration of the consequences of the research and methodological issues – and enables decisions to be traced back to a fundamental level.

Many other authors tackle the issue of ethics in educational research. Anderson and Arsenault (1998) present a model for the research process which represents ethics as a force affecting every aspect of the process and provide guidelines for acting ethically. Oliver (2003), in a comprehensive guide to research ethics, encourages students to tackle the issue from different perspectives and advocates a 'situationist' approach. This recognises that a flexible system is needed to take account of the great variety of situations that arise in educational research and the best that we can do is to place humanity and the welfare of others at the centre of our considerations. It could be argued that this is what the 'relational' or 'individual' layer effectively does, whilst also prompting us not to miss the wider implications of the research. Simons and Usher (2000) set out to identify a set of principles to apply to all situations, but decide that 'any attempt to theorise situated ethics would be an impossible and self-contradictory enterprise' (p. 2). They suggest that a situated ethics is local and specific and that since educational research embraces a range of social practices, then ethical decisions cannot be reached by appealing to unambiguous principles or codes. There is no shortage of principles, however, in the literature. By considering the areas of overlap between the various codes of practice that apply to medicine, psychology, sociology and education, Denscombe (2003) identifies three principles: the interests (rights and dignity) of the participants should be protected; the researchers should avoid deception or misrepresentation and participants should give informed consent. These are similar to the principles developed by Bridges (2001) in his consideration of the ethics of outsider research, in which he places an emphasis on the importance of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Likewise, Cohen et al. (2000) draw on concepts and ideas from various domains in order to illustrate the issues and dilemmas that are part of educational research. They encourage researchers to establish a 'personal code of ethical practice' (p. 71) and provide an illustration of such a code. Bond (2005) urges us not to rely on codes that have been influenced by or developed in the field of healthcare. Traditionally, Bond claims, such codes place the ethic of autonomy of the individual at the centre, which Bond considers to be too paternalistic. He urges us to develop the 'ethic of trust' and to place that at the centre of our ethical deliberations. Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) adopt a similar thesis, suggesting that the relationships within a project are at the centre and 'your research must promote those human capabilities, including agency and choice, that are necessary for the quality of life of those who have participated in the research' (p. 369).

Busher (2002) develops four principles that might underlie the moral dimensions of educational research and applies these to a piece of his research. The resulting account is thorough; it highlights the difficulties arising in ethnographic research but does not provide a framework that could be applied to other situations. And this is the crux: much of what is described above is sensible and illuminating, and there is

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nothing with which most educational researchers would disagree. However, in the forms presented, these are not as useful as they might be. As one deliberates on the ethical aspects of a particular project any linear organising principles are deficient. Each idea is connected to others and it is difficult to be logical, consistent and sure that everything has been covered. Homan (1991) argues that 'the notion of an ethical code does not easily fit the conditions which apply in social research' (p. 36) and that the use of such codes has stifled the debate of ethical issues. We argue here that use of the grid has the potential to enhance and promote debate about ethical decisions. Small (2001) also argues that codes of ethics are not a good way of addressing the issues in educational research and that moral theory has much to contribute by looking at how ethical decisions are actually made, and can help develop models which provide guidance for moral learning. We suggest that in this paper we have presented such a model.

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Conclusion

Seedhouse's ethical grid seems to provide an explicit epistemology in which moral, ethical decisions can be expressed and that the process of taking those decisions is recoverable. We have adapted the grid for use in educational research and suggested a methodology for its use. By applying the methodology that we suggest, issues about how to behave are considered alongside methodological issues, thus ensuring the integrity of the whole process. We believe that repeated use of the grid would enable learning to take place and researchers to develop sharper ethical awareness. We have tested the grid using qualitative methodologies and look forward to further work and discussion about its use in a variety of methodological contexts. Indeed we are confident that it has the potential to stimulate the sort of debate that Homan (1991) suggests is stifled by the application of linear codes and principles. Pring (2004) looks at the moral considerations which underlie research. He comes to the conclusion that:

> … moral judgements or decisions require a great deal of deliberation in the light of many factors that need to be taken into account. There is rarely a clear cut, and context-free, set of rules or principles which can be applied without deliberation and judgement. Moral thinking is a kind of practical thinking… (p. 142)

We hope that the grid we have presented will promote 'practical thinking' and that it helps researchers to take into account the factors relevant to their situation. It helps us to take into account how to behave; how to ensure the integrity of the research; leads us to consider both the macro and micro levels and enables the decision making process to be transparent. Furthermore, by encouraging us to focus on the consequences of research in a broad sense, it highlights the potential of educational research to do good.

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