"Methodological Somersaults": The Need for Paradigmatic Dialogues in an Era of Uncertainty

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Abstract

In an era marked by unprecedented global disruptions (including the Covid-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crises, geopolitical conflicts, and accelerating climate change), the limits of traditional qualitative research approaches have become increasingly apparent. Traditional methodologies, such as phenomenology, often struggle to capture the complexity, unpredictability, and fluidity of these uncertain times. This paper argues for the urgent need to reimagine qualitative educational research through paradigmatic dialogue that transcends disciplinary boundaries. By encouraging engagement among diverse epistemological perspectives, researchers can better grasp the layered realities of crisis and transition. Drawing on a case study of doctoral research conducted immediately after the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions in England, this article illustrates how integrating multiple paradigms enables a more responsive and adaptive research practice. This example demonstrates the potential of such dialogues to inform innovative, context-sensitive methodologies that not only reflect the *messiness* of contemporary social realities but also contribute to the pursuit of resilience and equity in future research agendas.

Keywords: *paradigmatic dialogues, methodological innovation, Covid-19, qualitative research, uncertainty*

Introduction

Research paradigms do more than shape how we conduct inquiry; they shape the questions we ask, the methods we employ, and the kinds of answers we find meaningful. Yet in moments of profound disruption, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, these paradigms can feel more like constraints than tools. Across education, health, governance, and care, the pandemic exposed the limitations of existing research frameworks to capture the rapid, non-linear, and emotionally charged nature of lived experience. The pandemic revealed that what we once took for granted can no longer be assumed, as circumstances can change unexpectedly and frequently. We are now working within a new reality: one that demands methodological approaches capable of navigating uncertainty, embracing complexity, and adapting in real time.

Denzin (2008, 2014) calls for paradigmatic dialogue, challenging researchers to participate in deliberate and reflexive engagements across research traditions that resist rigid allegiances and instead highlight openness, multiplicity, and collaboration. This is not simply an academic preference; it is a necessity. To generate knowledge that speaks to the crises of our time, we must move beyond narrow, paradigm-bound thinking. This paper takes up Denzin's call by arguing for the transformative potential of methodological hybridity, particularly in moments where the traditional research playbook no longer applies. By "traditional", I refer to methodological approaches that operate within rigid disciplinary boundaries and privilege fixed, standardised procedures. Such approaches often presume stability and certainty, whereas the complex and uncertain conditions of contemporary research contexts demand more expansive, integrative frameworks that draw across paradigms to generate new methodological possibilities.

Drawing on my own doctoral research, which unfolded in the chaotic aftermath of Covid-19 lockdowns in England, I explore what it means to do research when nothing goes to plan. I introduce the concept of "methodological somersaults" to describe the radical flexibility and theoretical creativity required when navigating a volatile research landscape. Through the integration of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Foucauldian theory, and post-intentional phenomenology (PIP), I demonstrate how crossing paradigmatic boundaries enabled a more empirically grounded understanding of early childhood practitioners' (ECPs) experiences during crisis. This paper positions these methodological shifts not as compromises, but as necessary adaptations that point toward a future of research that is reflexive, relational, and resilient.

Case Study: My Doctoral Research Journey

I began my doctoral research in September 2019 with a near-finalised proposal outlining a three-year study focused on early childhood education and care (ECEC). The original project aimed to explore how ECPs conceptualise and experience the notion of the "quality interaction" with children aged three to five in their care. Although the definition of the quality interaction remains contested[1], this study draws on Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence's (2007) argument that "quality" in ECEC (and, by extension, the quality interaction) is inherently context-dependent, continually evolving, and resistant to fixed or universal definitions.

Guided by this conceptual framing, this research involved a multi-phase methodological approach, including observations of ECP-child interactions, followed by in-depth, one-to-one semi-structured interviews with ECPs to explore the meanings they attributed to these engagements.

[1] Whilst some scholars propose frameworks for identifying and encouraging a quality interaction (see Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022), others problematise the very concept of "quality," arguing that it resists universal definition (see Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). Nevertheless, dominant contemporary discourses in ECEC tend to position the quality interaction as a mechanism for promoting children's developmental and academic outcomes (EEF, 2022).

The final phase included a focus group designed to facilitate collective reflection among the ECPs and me, to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct the concept of the quality interaction through an ECP-informed lens. The project was grounded in poststructuralist theoretical frameworks, particularly drawing upon the work of Foucault (1977, 1982), to interrogate the power-knowledge dynamics implicit in ECEC discourse and practice.

However, the trajectory of the research was profoundly disrupted by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. As the UK entered lockdown, ECEC settings were significantly affected. Many nurseries operated at reduced capacity, some were temporarily closed, and a large proportion of ECPs were furloughed (Bonetti & Cottell, 2021). Access to ECEC settings was restricted primarily to children of key workers and those deemed vulnerable. This sudden and unprecedented shift rendered the planned data collection infeasible. Initial attempts to adapt the research design to online methods yielded limited success, particularly in capturing the nuanced, embodied, and context-dependent nature of ECP-child interactions, which was central to the research questions. Given the continuous and unpredictable evolution of the pandemic, educational environments were required to adapt rapidly. Consequently, I found it necessary to temporarily suspend my doctoral studies to evaluate the unfolding circumstances. This interval motivated me to formulate innovative approaches to address the complexities of this period and its effects (both immediate and persisting) on ECPs.

This disruption also prompted critical reflection. The pandemic surfaced the fragility of taken-for-granted constructs within ECEC, revealing the urgent need to reconsider what constitutes the quality interaction in times of crisis and uncertainty (Azorín, 2020). The collapse of “normal” routines and educational structures highlighted the inadequacy of pre-pandemic conceptual frameworks to account for the lived realities of ECPs during this period. Consequently, I was compelled to return to the foundational stages of my project, reimagining both its methodological and theoretical underpinnings. The revised study sought to engage more directly with the complexities and ambiguities of ECP’s professional lives during the pandemic, recognising their efforts to sustain their conceptualisation of a quality interaction under radically altered and often stressful conditions.

This reorientation not only aligned the project with the realities of a post-Covid research landscape but also enabled a more ethically responsive and epistemologically flexible approach to knowledge production in uncertain times. Building on interpretative phenomenological analysis, I incorporated Foucauldian theories of self-regulation and governance to capture how ECPs’ practices were framed by broader relations of power, whilst post-intentional phenomenology provided a means of engaging with the fluid, evolving, and sometimes contradictory nature of their lived experiences. Taken together, these methodological shifts enabled the project to move beyond a search for fixed meanings and instead foreground the contingent, situated, and dynamic ways in which ECPs sustained their understandings of the quality interaction under pandemic conditions.

The Case for Paradigmatic Dialogues

Traditional qualitative research often operates within strict paradigmatic boundaries, favouring coherence over adaptability (Denzin, 2014). Whilst such frameworks have historically offered valuable epistemological clarity, they increasingly constrain inquiry in an era marked by uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change. The contemporary social landscape (shaped by volatile political climates, global crises, and emergent digital cultures) demands a more fluid and dialogic approach to knowledge-making. This section introduces the concept of paradigmatic dialogues, which calls for a loosening of rigid methodological allegiances in favour of more open, cross-paradigmatic engagements. Rather than viewing paradigms as static, impermeable systems, this approach positions them as evolving conversations that can accommodate contradiction, disruption, and innovation—qualities essential for meaningfully engaging with today's unpredictable realities.

In the face of growing complexity and uncertainty, qualitative research demands methodologies that can account for shifting ontological and epistemological terrains. Rather than adhering rigidly to a single methodological tradition, paradigmatic dialogues encourage researchers to draw on multiple approaches that best suit the evolving demands of their inquiry, particularly in complex, uncertain, or crisis-laden contexts (Denzin, 2008; Lobina & Weghmann, 2021). Rather than grounding research in fixed paradigmatic positions, there is a growing call for methodological agility and theoretical diversity, enabling researchers to work across difference without collapsing it into "sameness" (Denzin, 2008). Reflexivity is particularly important in this context, especially for researchers employing phenomenological methodologies, as it demands ongoing scrutiny of how their positionality shapes the methodological choices they make and the interpretive power they hold in framing participants' experiences.

Denzin (2008, p.322) argues that "paths for fruitful dialogue between and across paradigms need to be explored", highlighting the need for methodological innovation that can not only respond to, but also critically engage with, the conditions of uncertainty and transformation. This advocacy rejects grand narratives in favour of localised, contingent truths. By blending methodologies, researchers can construct a "bricolage"[2], resisting reductionism and instead developing a richer, multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Although often seen as challenging, Lobina and Weghmann (2021) argue that paradigmatic divides are not insurmountable. Echoing Denzin (2008, 2014), they caution against rigid intellectual silos and instead promote immanent critique and reflexive engagement as strategies for productive dialogue across traditions (Lobina & Weghmann, 2021). Transparency about the rationale for integration is vital here, not only as a methodological consideration, but as an ethical commitment that attends to power dynamics in knowledge production.

[2] This aligns with Levi-Strauss's (1966) notion of the "bricoleur", who improvises methodologically using available tools and materials; a useful metaphor for the kind of adaptive, resourceful inquiry required in times of disruption.

In this sense, methodological dialogues are not merely a matter of technique; they are epistemological and ethical practices. These dialogues ask researchers to critically examine their positionality, the affordances and limitations of various paradigms, and the power dynamics involved in knowledge production. Such dialogues also require humility—an openness to uncertainty, contradiction, and the possibility that no single method can fully capture the richness of human experience. Ultimately, these dialogues offer a way forward for researchers working in unstable and rapidly changing environments.

Nevertheless, the adoption of paradigmatic dialogues requires careful reflection to navigate potential tensions and inconsistencies. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) stress the importance of maintaining clarity about the purposes and limits of each paradigm within the integrated approach to avoid epistemological confusion. When managed thoughtfully, however, these dialogues can spark methodological innovation and deepen our understanding of complex social issues.

Methodological Somersaults: What this Meant for my Project

Conducting research during the Covid-19 pandemic was marked by an ongoing sense of instability. Government restrictions, institutional guidelines, and fluctuating public health advice meant that I had to revise my research design multiple times. Each amendment was not simply logistical; it reflected deeper methodological and ethical tensions. I found myself constantly rebalancing the demands of rigorous data collection with the need to safeguard the wellbeing of both my participants and me. The precarity and unpredictability of the context made traditional methodological approaches feel insufficient, even inappropriate at times. They could not account for the sheer absurdity, complexity, and chaotic nature of living (and researching) within a global crisis.

Originally, my project was designed using IPA, a method I chose for its strength in exploring lived experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Rooted in the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions of Husserl and Heidegger, IPA focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences, treating meaning-making as both deeply personal and shaped by a 'participant's social context (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Peoples, 2021). However, it often operates with an implicit assumption of a coherent, experiencing subject (Noon, 2018). As the pandemic unfolded, I began to question whether IPA's established structures were adequate to capture the shifting emotional, temporal, and spatial dimensions of my participants' experiences, particularly those of ECPs navigating constant change due to the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. It became clear that the rigidity of method had to give way to responsiveness.

An early revelation during the data analysis process was the profound influence of inherent power structures in shaping and reshaping ECPs' experiences and conceptualisations of the quality interaction, particularly in the context of the "catch-up" learning initiatives following the resumption of regular school and nursery functions post-lockdowns. Whilst IPA elucidated the

ECP's experiences with accountability, professionalism, and external expectations (such as those from Ofsted), it fell short of fully capturing the intrinsic acts of self-regulation demonstrated by ECPs in their experiences.

This limitation was addressed through the application of Foucault's (1977, 1982) theories, particularly his concepts of surveillance, discipline, and self-regulation, which proved instrumental in demonstrating how ECPs navigated institutional expectations and constructed their sense of professionalism. These insights highlighted how pandemic-era policies not only influenced behaviour but also redefined professional identity and care relationships. By integrating this poststructural analysis with a phenomenological framework, the study effectively encapsulated the tension between individual agency and systemic constraints—an aspect that would have been oversimplified in a more conventional interpretative approach.

Whilst IPA and Foucauldian theory provided valuable foundations for exploring lived experience and power structures, the complex and fluid nature of pandemic life necessitated a further conceptual shift. I therefore integrated post-intentional phenomenology (PIP), which reimagines traditional phenomenology through a poststructuralist lens (Vagle, 2024). Unlike approaches that seek the core essence of experience, PIP conceptualises phenomena as shifting, interconnected, and continuously evolving (Vagle, 2024; Vagle et al., 2024). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) "Lines of Flight", PIP frames meaning as "produced" through context, theory, and reflexivity, rather than simply "discovered". Phenomena are seen as assemblages, entangled with social, cultural, and historical forces (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). This view of meaning-making resonated with my interest in how ECPs interpreted a quality interaction in multiple, shifting ways that remained open to reinterpretation over time. This approach aligned more closely with the reality I observed. Experiences of practice, care, and policy during COVID-19 were emergent and constantly reframed by new circumstances.

It is important to note that this integration was not a rejection of IPA or Foucauldian theory but an evolution of both. PIP complemented these frameworks by enabling a deeper engagement with the multiplicity, relationality, and context-dependent nature of experience central to the research (Soule & Freeman, 2019; Vagle, 2024; Vagle et al., 2024). Whilst IPA and Foucauldian theory tended towards more stable or structural orientations, PIP offered the flexibility to capture ongoing shifts and the complexity inherent in the ECPs' narratives and their encounters with broader forces.

This shift required me not only to adapt how I collected and interpreted data, but also to rethink how knowledge itself is produced. In PIP, experience is never fully knowable or static; it is becoming, rather than being (Vagle et al., 2024). This theoretical move helped me legitimise methodological flexibility and embrace uncertainty as a valid research condition rather than a limitation. It also drew attention to the temporality and contingency of experience, which traditional IPA can risk stabilising too readily (Noon, 2018). Ultimately, this methodological evolution was not pre-planned but emerged organically in response to unfolding real-world conditions. This required

a “methodological immaturity” (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p.500), in which I embraced “not-knowing” by reflexively engaging with uncertainty and recognising how disruption can open up new research “worlds”. This methodological immaturity then evolved to what I term a methodological somersault: an openness to drawing on multiple perspectives in order to do justice to the lived realities under investigation. The pandemic did not simply challenge my research design; it reshaped my understanding of what it means to conduct ethical, meaningful, and responsive research during times of profound social disruption.

In this project, methodological somersaults enabled a more nuanced engagement with the lived experiences of ECPs. IPA provided the foundation for exploring how the ECPs made sense of their experiences, ensuring their voices remained central. The subsequent integration of Foucauldian theory (1977, 1982) situated these experiences within broader discursive and institutional contexts, revealing how ECPs’ practices were shaped by regimes of power, surveillance, and regulation. This highlighted that lived experience is always entangled with normative structures and disciplinary forces. The later incorporation of PIP further enriched the analysis by resisting fixed or essentialist interpretations. Instead, it offered a framework for viewing phenomena as fluid, unstable, and continuously in flux (Vagle, 2024). In the volatile context of Covid-19 (where meanings, routines, and identities were constantly shifting), PIP enabled a more agile, open-ended, and ethically attuned approach. Importantly, as part of the IPA process, my interpretations were shared with the ECPs during follow-up discussions, allowing them to respond, clarify, and expand on the emerging themes. This dialogue ensured that their voices remained central throughout the research and helped guard against the risk of their experiences being overshadowed by more abstract theoretical lenses. Instead, theory was used in service of amplifying the ECPs’ accounts, not replacing them.

Traditionally, these paradigms are often considered theoretically incompatible. IPA assumes a somewhat stable experiencing subject (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Noon, 2018), Foucauldian analysis deconstructs the subject altogether, and PIP dissolves intentionality into multiplicities (Vagle, 2024). However, the integration of the three approaches allowed for focus on the lived experiences of the ECPs, whilst also embracing the multiplicity inherent within their narratives, and analysing the broader structural forces shaping the ECPs’ experiences (Soule & Freeman, 2019; Vagle, 2024; Vagle et al, 2024). It is through an “orbiting” of different methodological approaches (by selectively drawing elements from each that complement one another and enrich the research) that I was able to construct a framework suited to this particular context. Rather than fully embedding a single methodology, I engaged with aspects of multiple paradigms in a way that reflects Denzin’s (2014) paradigmatic dialogues.

Throughout this process, reflexivity played a critical role in guiding my methodological decisions. Reflexivity, in this context, was not only a methodological tool but an ethical imperative, necessary to address the asymmetrical power relations between researcher and participant, particularly given the interpretive complexity of the methods employed. Embracing methodological

immaturity meant I was continuously required to examine how my own positionality, values, and interpretive authority shaped the direction of the research, especially during my methodological somersaults (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p.500). These shifts were not neutral; they carried ethical implications, particularly in how the ECPs' narratives were framed and interpreted. To ensure transparency, I maintained a research journal, documenting key decisions, and shared interim interpretations with the ECPs during follow-up discussions. Through this, I sought to make visible the interpretive processes that shaped the findings, thereby enhancing both ethical rigour and accountability.

Challenges and Opportunities

Whilst merging paradigms offers significant potential, it also presents notable challenges. Reconciling divergent epistemological commitments requires careful negotiation and a willingness to embrace ambiguity (Denzin, 2008, 2014). Without careful reflexivity, such combinations risk internal contradictions or superficial integration. Researchers must be transparent about their methodological choices, critically engage with tensions between approaches, and remain mindful of their own positionality and interpretive authority. Crucially, theoretical frameworks should not overshadow participants' lived experiences, especially in phenomenological research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Acknowledging limitations and clearly articulating the rationale for integration enhances both transparency and ethical rigour. When approached thoughtfully, methodological plurality becomes a productive dialogue between ways of knowing, rather than a shortcut to innovation.

Within my research, there was a risk that the addition of Foucauldian theories and PIP could overshadow the ECPs' voices or impose interpretations misaligned with their intent. Sharing my interpretations with the ECPs helped to mitigate this concern, ensuring their voices and lived experiences remained central - an essential principle in IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Nonetheless, holding multiple paradigms in productive tension required ongoing negotiation and critical reflection, highlighting both the potential and the complexity of methodological plurality.

For me, the greatest challenge lay in balancing IPA and Foucauldian theories of power and self-regulation: two approaches often regarded as philosophically conflicting. Although Foucault initially rejected phenomenology, particularly its focus on lived experience and the transcendental subject, his later works reveal a more nuanced engagement with phenomenological ideas, influenced notably by Heidegger and a phenomenological understanding of the body (Foucault, 1969, 1982). Whilst IPA and Foucauldian theory may seem methodologically contradictory (especially regarding notions of chronology and subjectivity), they can be complementary. Both attend to the significance of personal experience and its interpretative nature, providing avenues for transformation and deeper understanding (Levin, 2008; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2023). In my research, Foucauldian theory is not used in isolation but as a complementary lens to IPA, enriching

the analysis by situating ECPs' experiences within broader discursive and historical contexts and illuminating the role of power in shaping these experiences.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities for innovation and discovery are substantial. Methodological flexibility empowers researchers to tackle pressing social issues with depth and nuance that single-paradigm approaches may lack. It also aligns with an ethical imperative to honour the complexity of participants' experiences, promoting research that is rigorous, responsive, and compassionate. By blending methodologies and perspectives traditionally seen as incompatible (such as IPA, Foucauldian theory, and PIP), this approach reveals insights inaccessible through singular frameworks. Within my research, I was able to understand the broader implications of the quality interaction, encompassing aspects such as power imbalances, self-regulatory behaviours, and the evolving nature of the ECP's experiences as the pandemic progressed. These insights would have remained concealed had I adhered strictly to a singular framework.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic did not simply disrupt the logistics of research; it unsettled its very foundations. In this context, clinging to singular paradigmatic commitments risks rendering qualitative inquiry ill-equipped to engage with the uncertainty, fragmentation, and transformation that define our times. This paper has argued that paradigmatic dialogue is no longer optional—it is an ethical and methodological imperative. By embracing the tensions between frameworks (such as the integration of IPA, Foucauldian theory, and PIP), we create space for research that is not only intellectually rigorous but also contextually responsive and relevant.

The concept of methodological somersaults speaks to the radical flexibility and courage required of researchers navigating unstable terrains. These somersaults are not simply methodological adjustments; they are a refusal to reduce complexity, a commitment to staying with the trouble of experience, and a recognition that knowledge-making is always partial, relational, and in motion. In a moment defined by crisis, the call to engage across paradigms is about building research that can move with the world rather than lag behind it.

As we look toward the future of qualitative inquiry, we must ask not how to return to methodological normalcy, but how to evolve our practices to meet the demands of this new era. In particular, phenomenological approaches offer vital tools for attending to the depth and complexity of lived experience, especially in times of disruption. However, these methods must also evolve to reflect the emergent, fragmented, and relational nature of contemporary social realities. Paradigmatic dialogue offers one such path, inviting us to rethink the boundaries of our disciplines, the ethics of our engagements, and the very purposes of our research. By engaging with uncertainty and methodological plurality not as a threat to rigour but as an invitation to innovate,

we can create knowledge that not only understands the world, but also helps to shape it more justly.

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