



Navigating the Insider-Outsider Divide: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Ethical Encounters of an Action Researcher Bridging Immigrant Families and Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a reflexive phenomenological approach to explore the researcher's lived experience of ethical complexity within a participatory action research (PAR) project in a multicultural school in southern Sweden. The PAR project was facilitated by the first author in collaboration with a Home-School Liaisons team composed of four multilingual teachers and the researcher. Data for this phenomenological inquiry were drawn from the author's first-person accounts, systematically captured through reflective journals, field notes, and retrospective narratives. The school, located in a marginalized area, serves students from over 24 nationalities. The research is guided by three questions: (1) What is the lived experience of navigating the insider/outsider role? (2) How is trust phenomenologically experienced and managed? (3) How is confidentiality negotiated within a visible community? The project aimed to bridge cultural and linguistic divides between immigrant families and teachers through a bottom-up, trust-building approach. Analysis of reflective data revealed four core themes structuring the ethical encounter: liminal dislocation, the weight of unshareable knowledge, trust as precarious negotiation, and the erosion of anonymity. The study concludes that ethical practice in such contexts constitutes an "intercultural embodied ethical praxis" characterized by continuous reflexivity, emotional engagement, and the negotiation of visibility and power. It offers an original contribution to PAR literature by theorizing the concept of "intercultural embodied ethical praxis." This framework grounds ethical discourse in the phenomenology of the researcher's liminal, lived experience, moving beyond procedural norms to highlight the need for culturally attuned, reflexive, and relational approaches to foster sustainable school-family partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Action research; ethical challenges; parental engagement; immigrant communities; trust-building; reflexivity; phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the ethical dilemmas encountered by the author and a Home-School Liaisons team as they worked to foster stronger relationships between immigrant families and their children's schools in Southern Sweden. It examines how ethical tensions arise while navigating cultural differences, linguistic barriers, and institutional expectations in a multicultural educational setting, a context where immigrant families often face challenges related to integration, trust, and systemic exclusion (Agyare, 2025; Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Gil-Galván & Martín-Espinosa, 2023; Lunneblad, 2017; Motshusi et al., 2024). Trust is central to this work: parents often shared deeply personal stories, trusting the researcher to act in their interest, while school leaders expressed frustrations and hopes for more effective collaboration with immigrant families.

The study draws on a Home-School Liaisons project, which serves as a case study to illustrate the intercultural ethical challenges of participatory action research (PAR) in marginalized communities (Bradbury & Reason, 2015; Swantz, 2008). Navigating these challenges, while maintaining confidentiality, neutrality, and cultural sensitivity, became a delicate balancing act, requiring ongoing reflexivity and a commitment to relational, ethically engaged PAR.

At the heart of these dilemmas is the recognition that ethical knowledge creation in immigrant-serving contexts must move beyond observation to active, co-created engagement, where stakeholders collaboratively shape sustainable and culturally relevant solutions (Bradbury, 2015; Fazey et al., 2018). As Bradbury (2015) notes, action research is "a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation... a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people" (p. 3).

This article builds on the work of Bradbury (2015); Swantz (2008), and others to examine how PAR can navigate ethical challenges in intercultural, school-family partnerships. The Home-School Liaisons project sought specifically to bridge cultural and linguistic divides, foster trust, and empower immigrant parents and educators to collaborate effectively, addressing gaps noted in Swedish research on parental involvement and school integration (Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Dahlstedt, 2009; Motshusi et al., 2024). In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on sustainability and equity in education, demonstrating how ethically engaged PAR with marginalized communities can produce knowledge that is both socially and structurally transformative (Bradbury, 2019; Fazey et al., 2018; Swantz, 2008).

Ultimately, this article argues that sustainable partnerships between schools and immigrant families require iterative, relational, and reflexively managed interventions. Ethical dilemmas in such contexts are not merely obstacles but opportunities for reflexive learning and more inclusive practice. This aligns with Freire's (1968) vision of education as a transformative, human-centered process grounded in empathy, critical reflection, and a commitment to shared social progress.

While the ethical principles of participatory action research (PAR) are well-documented, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these ethics are lived and embodied in practice, particularly by an insider-researcher navigating the complex cultural terrain between immigrant families and schools. The subjective, emotional, and relational reality of enacting PAR ethics in such a visible, intercultural space remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by employing a reflexive phenomenological approach both to explore and to theorize the researcher's lived experience of ethical complexity within a PAR project aimed at bridging immigrant families and schools, culminating in the original conceptual contribution of "intercultural embodied ethical praxis."

This study addresses that gap by employing a reflexive phenomenological approach to explore the author's lived experience as an action researcher navigating these ethical tensions in a school serving immigrant families. The purpose is not only to explore but to theorize the researcher's lived experience of ethical complexity within a PAR project aimed at bridging immigrant families and schools.

Aim and Questions of the Study

Aim: To phenomenologically explore and theorize the researcher's lived experience of ethical complexity in a school-based PAR project with immigrant families.

1. How is the insider/outsider role lived and embodied in the ethical space between immigrant families and the school?
2. How is trust phenomenologically built and sustained amidst cultural asymmetries and institutional power?
3. How is confidentiality negotiated in practice within a visible, community-embedded project?

Structure of the Article

This article is structured as follows: following this introduction, a review of relevant literature contextualizes the ethical principles and tensions within PAR, especially in intercultural settings. The theoretical framework section integrates reflexive phenomenology and liminality to guide the analysis. The method section details the PAR intervention and the phenomenological design, specifying the participants, data collection tools, and analytical approach. The findings present four thematic structures of lived ethical experience, which are then discussed through theoretical and practical lenses. The conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and offers recommendations for researchers, institutions, and practitioners, followed by reflections on limitations and future research.

Positionality and First-Person Accounts

It is important to clarify that the participatory action research (PAR) project and the subsequent phenomenological inquiry into the researcher's experience were conducted by the first author, who served as the lead researcher and facilitator. The phenomenological data analyzed in this study consist entirely of the first author's first-person, reflexive accounts, documented in journals, field notes, and narratives, which capture the subjective, embodied experience of

navigating ethical dilemmas as an insider-researcher. The second and third authors contributed to the conceptualization, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. This reflexive focus on the first author's lived experience is central to the study's aim of theorizing ethical complexity in intercultural PAR

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This study is framed by the established ethics of participatory action research (PAR), which illuminate the core challenges encountered in the project. Key principles and tensions within PAR literature provide the lens through which the lived experiences documented in this study are understood (Baas & Tsoetsi, 2023; Kefi, 2023; Yüncü & Akgül, 2023)

The power dynamics between those taking part and those conducting the study play a key role in action research (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Swantz, 2008). Even though it aims to work together, action research can still worsen unfairness (ibid). Those who conduct action research studies might inadvertently push their own ways of doing things, which can silence the people taking part (Bradbury, 2015; Mahlomaholo, 2023). Cooke and Kothari (2001) call this the "*tyranny of participation.*" This critique underscores the importance of adopting an action-oriented approach that not only engages communities in the research process but also redistributes power by integrating their lived experiences into decision-making (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This is relevant to schools with people belonging to many cultural backgrounds, where misunderstandings and deep-rooted problems often get in the way of real teamwork (Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Lunneblad, 2017; Mokotjo, 2024; Motshusi et al., 2024) For example, families who have migrated to Sweden may face language barriers, differing expectations, and ambiguities within the school system, all of which can contribute to a lack of trust. This, in turn, may hinder both parents and school staff from establishing meaningful and collaborative working relationships, ultimately affecting student support and integration (Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Dahlstedt, 2009; Gil-Galván & Martín-Espinosa, 2023; Lunneblad, 2017; Motshusi et al., 2024).

Another vital but understated ethical issue is trust-building. For many immigrant families, engagement with educational systems can evoke fears rooted in past experiences of exclusion or discrimination (Bouakaz, 2007; Bunar, 2018; Dahlstedt, 2009; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Lunneblad, 2017; Motshusi et al., 2024) Building trust relies on keeping information private and showing respect for cultural differences (Swantz, 2008). To navigate these situations, researchers must critically reflect on their assumptions and actions. Action researchers have to strike a balance between being open about their work and protecting the privacy and independence of those taking part (Bradbury, 2015; Herr & Anderson, 2015). This balancing act becomes even more challenging in projects where shared cultural backgrounds blur the boundaries between professional and personal roles (Berger, 2015). This relational aspect of action research aligns with the notion that transformative learning occurs through emotional and social engagement, not just intellectual reasoning (Bradbury, 2015; Fazey et al., 2018).

The emotional and relational dimensions of action research add further complexity. Researchers often play two roles: they help and work together, walking a fine line between getting involved and staying apart (Bradbury, 2015; Bradbury, 2019). This dual role stands out when shared backgrounds create expectations or biases that make research trickier (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Recognizing this, action research must embrace praxis, the continuous interplay between action, reflection, and learning, to ensure that solutions remain responsive to evolving community needs (Bradbury, 2015; Bradbury et al., 2019b; Swantz, 2008). To handle these situations, researchers need to think hard about their own ideas and actions. This helps them stay responsible and deal with relationship issues (Bradbury, 2015; McNiff, 2016; Swantz, 2008).

Rules from institutions, like time limits for funding and what school leaders and administrators expect, also make the ethics of action research more complex (Bradbury, 2015). These pressures often clash with the idea of everyone taking part, forcing researchers to focus on results they can measure instead of how people work together (Bradbury, 2015; Kemmis, 2014). This disconnect between institutional demands and grassroots needs suggests the necessity for learning platforms that connect various stakeholders in sustained, participatory dialogue (Bradbury et al., 2019a). Balancing institutional demands with the priorities of participants requires ongoing negotiation and ethical vigilance (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

To examine how these ethical principles are lived in practice, this study adopts a phenomenological lens (van Manen, 1990), focusing on the researcher's subjective experience as primary data. This reflexive approach aligns with the call within PAR for critical examination of the researcher's positionality and emotional engagement (Berger, 2015; Bradbury, 2015).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by an integrated theoretical perspective combining reflexive phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) with the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960) as applied to insider research.

Phenomenology provides the foundational commitment to investigating the lived experience as the primary source of meaning, focusing on the researcher's embodied, pre-reflective engagement with ethical dilemmas (Finlay, 2002; van Manen, 1990). This aligns with the PAR principle of reflexivity but sharpens its focus on the subjective, experiential dimension.

The concept of liminality, the state of being "betwixt and between" stable roles and identities, offers a critical lens for analyzing the researcher's experience of navigating insider/outsider status (Mercer, 2007). It theorizes the spatial, relational, and emotional dislocation described in the findings not as a mere obstacle, but as a central structural feature of the ethical encounter.

Together, these lenses form a phenomenology of liminal reflexivity. This framework posits that ethical knowledge in intercultural PAR emerges from a critical examination of the researcher's own lived, liminal experience, where the "*in-between*" body becomes the primary site of ethical tension and insight.

METHOD

Research Design and Context

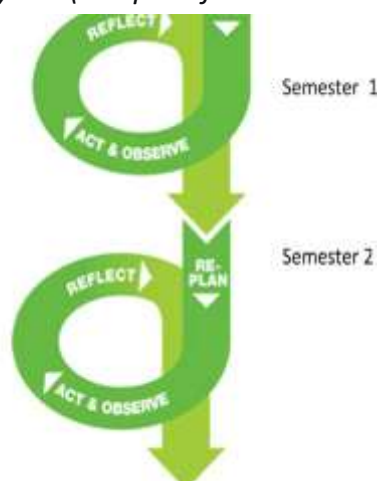
This study employs a reflexive phenomenological design ((Finlay, 2002; van Manen, 1990) situated within a broader Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. PAR represents a specific, collaborative, and democratic orientation within the broader action research tradition, emphasizing co-creation with participants to address issues of power and enact change (Bradbury, 2015). The phenomenon under investigation is the researcher's own lived experience of encountering and navigating ethical dilemmas while facilitating the Home-School Liaisons (HSL) project. The PAR process itself followed an iterative action research spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), which served as the context for generating the experiential data analyzed in this phenomenological inquiry.

Gaining access involved building trust and aligning intentions with the community (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Access was negotiated in stages: through university approval, with school administrators and teachers, and finally with immigrant parents. At an initial meeting, parents voiced a strong desire for meaningful participation, stating, "We do not want to be researched to death," which catalyzed the development of a structured program (Epstein, 2018).

The school served students from over 24 nationalities. An HSL team was created, composed of four multilingual teachers with cultural ties to the parent community, along with the researcher. The team followed an action research spiral over two semesters (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Key efforts included translating school documents and explaining school policies.

Figure 1.

Action Research Cycles (Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005)



Participants

The primary participants in the PAR intervention were the immigrant parents and school teachers. For this phenomenological study, however, the focal participant is the researcher themselves, whose lived experience constitutes the data. The project team, including the author and four teacher-researchers, shared cultural backgrounds with many of the participating

families, enabling empathetic engagement and access to deeper insights (Berger, 2015). Crucially, the author was a former teacher at the school, placing them in the role of an “insider-researcher” (Mercer, 2007), a positionality that is central to the ethical tensions explored in this phenomenological inquiry.

Using a bottom-up approach, the team invited parents to identify challenges and propose solutions for involvement. A letter, translated into four languages, led to a school meeting attended by 25 parents. Conversations revealed that many parents felt disconnected not only from the school but also from broader society. Key concerns included a lack of knowledge about the school system, uncertainty around participation, and broader integration issues (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Hornby, 2011).

The PAR Intervention

The intervention aimed to strengthen trust and communication between immigrant families and the school. Planning was guided by Epstein’s (2018) framework for parental involvement. The team initiated a parent-teacher organization and developed an evening education program for parents. School leadership emphasized inclusivity, and staff were encouraged to support family engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). The project’s organizational structure is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Structure of the Home-School Liaisons Action Research Project

Category	Details
Home-School Liaisons team and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Four teachers, including the researcher who used to work in the same school, served as Home-School Liaisons s team. - Language resources included four languages. -Used school facilities during evenings and holidays
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage parental involvement in children's education and provide guidance and educational opportunities. - Reach all parents, especially those difficult to engage (unreachable parents). - Increase parents’ knowledge of the school during the first semester. - Focus on solutions rather than assigning blame. - Build trust and mutual understanding through knowledge. - Facilitate understanding of cultural and religious differences. - Establish a parent-teacher organisation to sustain efforts.
Plan/Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plan and offer Parent Teacher Education program in different languages. - Produce and provide multilingual materials. - Conduct workshops led by the teacher and parents. - Hold regular parent meetings (two hours every fortnight), with six sessions during one semester. - Invite external role models and individuals from various backgrounds with long-term experience in Sweden.
Follow-Up and Data gathered by the researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Field notes, interviews, observations, photos, videos and questionnaires. Using Action research spiral.

Data Collection for the Phenomenological Study

The primary data for this phenomenological inquiry consisted of the researcher's first-person, reflexive accounts generated systematically throughout the PAR project. Three specific types of textual data were collected:

- **Reflective Journals:** Kept regularly to document immediate thoughts, emotional responses, and ethical uncertainties encountered during project activities and interactions.
- **Field Notes:** Detailed records of observations, conversations, and personal reactions written during or immediately after project meetings, workshops, and site visits.
- **Retrospective Narratives:** Written accounts composed after significant events or phases of the project, allowing for deeper reflection on cumulative experiences and evolving ethical dilemmas.

This triangulation of contemporaneous and retrospective reflexive writing provided a rich, layered dataset for exploring the lived experience of the researcher's ethical engagement.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic phenomenological analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), adapted for the study of one's own lived experience. The process involved: (1) immersion in the reflective data (journals, notes); (2) iterative coding of significant statements describing the ethical experience; (3) clustering codes to identify essential thematic patterns; and (4) defining and naming the themes that captured the core structures of the lived experience, which are presented in the Findings section.

Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations

As the primary instrument in this phenomenological study, my positionality as an insider-researcher is central. Ethical engagement required ongoing dialogue, not just initial consent (Bradbury et al., 2019b). This involved repeatedly clarifying the study's purpose and ethical dilemmas to participants (Burgess, 1991; McNiff, 2016), maintaining written consent forms, and transparently explaining data handling (Kemmis, 2014). To ensure the trustworthiness of this phenomenological account, strategies of prolonged engagement, thick description, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing with the HSL team were employed throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

The thematic phenomenological analysis of the researcher's reflective data revealed four essential, interrelated structures of lived experience within the ethical landscape of the PAR project. These themes directly address the study's guiding questions, illuminating the lived reality of navigating the insider/outsider role (Question 1), building and sustaining trust (Question 2), and negotiating confidentiality (Question 3). These themes are presented below and substantiated with detailed excerpts from reflective journals, field notes, and retrospective narratives that capture the visceral reality of these encounters.

The Liminal Body: Experiencing Spatial and Relational Dislocation

The core experience was one of occupying a liminal, in-between space, a position of dislocation felt physically, socially, and relationally. This was not an abstract role conflict but a daily, embodied reality.

My dual role as a researcher and my prior position as a teacher at the school gave rise to a fundamental ambiguity in how I was perceived. I was frequently regarded more as a colleague than a researcher. A telling moment was recorded in my field notes: *"When I mentioned research and my role as a researcher at the school, a few teachers 'shrugged their shoulders,' indicating that they believed research was not meant for 'people like us.'" This gesture of dismissal marked my initial transition from insider to a suspicious outsider.*

This dislocation became spatially enforced. My physical presence in once-familiar spaces triggered social rupture. I documented: "

Whenever I entered the staff room, my teacher colleagues frequently stopped talking, something that had not happened previously; they no longer saw me as a colleague but rather as one of the others, the parents and school administration."

The silence was a palpable, social boundary I had crossed. My changed practical circumstances exacerbated this: *"Owing to the fact that I had no teaching duties and a different schedule, this created envy and some irritation among some of my former colleagues who had difficulty accepting me in my new role as a researcher."*

The relational consequences were profound. I became an ambiguous figure, aligned with neither camp.

"Some of my former teacher colleagues stopped viewing me as a colleague and instead started to see me as someone who was closely aligned with the parents... I was also perceived as being close to the head of the school... which led some teachers to associate me more with those in power. Some of them started to avoid speaking candidly with me."

This experience embodied Bastiani's (1997) observation that liaison work runs the risk of falling between two worlds. My lived reality was one of a body out of place, a self perpetually negotiating its belonging in a fractured social field.

The Weight of Confidentiality: Bearing Unshareable Knowledge

The ethical duty of confidentiality was experienced not as a procedural rule but as a heavy, personal burden of carrying sensitive, unshareable knowledge, a burden that came from opposing sides and created an unsustainable ethical constraint.

Parents entrusted me with deep fears, but their trust was tinged with anxiety about repercussions. A persistent concern I recorded was:

"Parents kept worrying about how the information they provided might affect the way teachers treated their children in school." I became a repository for this anxiety. Conversely, former colleagues, still viewing me through a lens of professional solidarity, shared confidential concerns, "about different students and their parents but was told not to inform the parents."

This placed me in an impossible position, holding knowledge that could not be ethically circulated. The burden became critically acute when the confidential information pertained to systemic bias or prejudice. My reflective journals detail this tension: *“Confidentiality assurance included the need to not get involved in certain issues such as racism, power abuse... as demonstrated by statements like: ‘Why should we bother to integrate them...’ and ‘The teachers are racist...’”*

The phenomenological weight was in the silence it imposed.

“Unveiling such claims would be tantamount to destroying the trust that had been created... I felt that individual opinions like this could affect and hinder parents’ increased participation... Because of my commitment to my former colleagues, concern for personal vulnerabilities, and even the participants’ safety, I also felt compelled to keep some unfavorable information out of the project...”

Confidentiality was thus lived as a form of burdened complicity, a moral weight carried in the body and mind, where protecting one trust felt like a betrayal of another.

Trust as a Precarious, Embodied Negotiation

Building trust was experienced as a fragile, continuous performance, not a stable achievement. It required constant, embodied acts of reassurance and delicate boundary-setting.

The procedural ethics of consent became a primary site of this relational practice. My notes repeatedly emphasize the performative repetition required:

“I had to reassure the parents and the teachers again and again through written consent that nothing they said or their names would be readily identified... Parents and teachers needed to be reassured that the data gathered would be used exclusively for the study...”

This was not a one-time event but a ritual of reassurance necessary to sustain a fragile connection.

This negotiation was further complicated by shared identity. The immigrant background that facilitated initial access also created expectations that threatened to collapse the professional frame. I reflected on a pivotal invitation:

“Some parents invited me to their homes, either alone or with my family, as a way to show their appreciation and establish a personal relationship with me beyond the scope of the study. However, I was uncertain whether the parents fully understood the limitations of my role. I worried that they might believe they could gain my favor at the expense of other parents if I accepted these invitations.”

This dilemma highlights the double-edged nature of shared identity.

“Speaking the same language and sharing cultural and religious backgrounds made it easy for parents to feel they could trust me, but it also created the risk of them taking things for granted. I worried that my shared identity might compromise the objectivity of the research...”

Trust-building was thus a precarious dance of proximity and distance, where every interaction required careful calibration to maintain both relational warmth and ethical integrity.

Visibility and the Erosion of Anonymity

The public, high-profile nature of the project fundamentally altered the phenomenological ground of research ethics. Conventional guarantees of anonymity became experientially impossible, forcing a shift from *protection* to the *management of visibility*.

The project's success became its own ethical complication.

“As the project was well-known in the community and featured in some of the local TV and news... the teachers realized that the problems they were facing could be readily identified.” Furthermore, in the intimate setting of workshops, *“regardless of the presentation style, parents were able to identify the majority, if not all, of the staff from the provided materials.”*

Therefore, the lived experience was not of *protecting* anonymity but of *navigating its erosion*. Confidentiality transformed from a promise of hiding to a practice of operating in a transparent field where everyone was recognizable. This visibility added a layer of constant ethical awareness and pressure.

This transparent field also led to volatile, unforeseen power realignments that affected the participatory dynamic.

“Some parents succeeded in obtaining employment at the school through extra government integration funding. These parents suddenly aligned themselves with the teachers, but not with other parents whom they should have represented... Serving as parents' representatives at the school, these individuals also had colleagues they were expected to support. This was a great challenge to deal with.”

As the initiator, I was held accountable for these emergent social realities. *“As the initiator and research lead of the project, I was consequently held accountable for the project-related occurrences within the school.”* The erosion of anonymity meant the erosion of controlled roles; the research field became a transparent ecosystem of shifting alliances, where the researcher was accountable for dynamics they facilitated but could not control.

Ethical Encounters in Cross-Cultural Action Research: The Immigrant Parent Context

The ethical landscape of this PAR project was not shaped by abstract principles alone but by the concrete, lived realities of cultural difference, migration histories, and linguistic marginalization. Working as an insider-researcher within a multicultural school meant that every ethical tension was filtered through the experiences of immigrant parents, whose engagement with the Swedish school system was often marked by caution, past exclusion, and a deep need for cultural recognition.

The role of cultural broker extended beyond language translation to mediating unspoken norms and institutional expectations. This created an ethical tension:

“When explaining school policies, I found myself softening bureaucratic language that might trigger past trauma with authorities in their home countries. Was I facilitating understanding or mediating reality?”

This brokering role placed me in a liminal space similar to that of the parents, neither fully inside the institutional culture nor outside it, navigating a third space of cultural interpretation.

Informed consent became a culturally nuanced practice rather than a procedural formality. Even with translated materials, true understanding was often hindered by linguistic nuance and culturally rooted fears.

“A parent signed the consent form in Arabic but later asked if her statements could affect her family's residency status. The translated form guaranteed confidentiality, but her fear was cultural, not lexical, rooted in experiences of surveillance and mistrust”.

This illustrates how ethical protocols designed in one cultural context can fail to address the specific vulnerabilities of immigrant communities, where engagement with institutions may carry perceived risks of exposure or repercussion.

Confidentiality held heightened stakes within a community conscious of stigma and discrimination. Parents' disclosures were often accompanied by fears that information might lead to their child being labeled or marginalized within the school.

“One mother shared her child's learning difficulties but begged me not to inform the teachers, fearing he would be placed in a separate program, a practice she had witnessed in another country.”

This demonstrates how past educational traumas travel across borders, making confidentiality a matter of cultural and emotional safety, not just data protection.

Trust-building was inherently historical, built upon layers of previous institutional encounters. Many parents approached the project with what I came to understand as a “test of trust,” offering small disclosures first to gauge my response. *“They shared minor frustrations before revealing deeper systemic concerns, a cautiousness born from previous negative experiences with Swedish authorities.”* Building ethical rapport therefore required acknowledging this history, moving beyond transactional consent toward relational repair and demonstrated solidarity.

Finally, the public visibility of the project within a tight-knit immigrant community transformed anonymity from a guarantee into an ethical fiction. Parents were acutely aware that their participation was visible to others in their cultural network, which influenced what they shared and how they presented themselves. This visibility required a shift from protecting identities to managing transparency and mitigating the social risks of participation within a community where reputational concerns were closely tied to cultural belonging and collective identity.

Thus, the ethical praxis described in the preceding themes, liminality, confidentiality, trust, and visibility, was not merely personal or procedural, but fundamentally intercultural, shaped by the realities of bridging immigrant families and schools. These findings highlight a defining characteristic of PAR methodology: that substantive insight emerges through the recursive cycle of action and critical reflection. This continuous process made visible the specific

characteristics of ethical work in this context: its embodied, relational, and power-laden nature. It was this iterative praxis that enabled the translation of general PAR principles into the specific, culturally-attuned ethical negotiations documented here. Without PAR's structured, iterative approach to reflection, embodied in journals, team debriefings, and collective analysis, these nuanced experiential understandings of ethical negotiation would likely have remained unarticulated."

DISCUSSION

This study reveals the lived experience of navigating ethical challenges within participatory research in a multicultural school. By examining the researcher's lived experience, we move beyond abstract principles to understand how ethical imperatives are felt, negotiated, and embodied within the relational and intercultural space of immigrant-family engagement. This discussion interprets the four essential themes, and their cross-cultural resonances, through the theoretical lenses of PAR ethics, reflexivity, and phenomenology. The multicultural context does not introduce separate ethical dilemmas; rather, it intensifies and complicates the core reflexive challenges of liminality, confidentiality, trust, and power, demanding a more culturally-attuned ethical praxis.

The Liminal Researcher: Embodying Reflexivity in a Cross-Cultural Space

The lived experience of spatial and relational dislocation provides an embodied account of the insider-researcher dilemma central to action research (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Mercer, 2007), embodying the state of '*betwixt and between*' that characterizes liminality (Turner, 1969). This liminality, a prolonged state of transition from the classic rites de passage structure (van Gennep, 1960), felt as social silence and somatic unease, exemplifies the 'tyranny of participation' (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) as a lived tension of reflexivity. The researcher's presence disrupted the institutional *doxa* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), with staff room silences and collegial irritation serving as visceral manifestations of this disruption.

This embodied liminality was intensified by the cross-cultural context, where the researcher also acted as a cultural broker. This brokering created a double layer of reflexivity: navigating one's own positional ambiguity while mediating the cultural and institutional gaps experienced by immigrant parents. The shared experience of existing between cultures deepened the reflexive demand to continuously examine how cultural positioning, linguistic access, and insider/outsider status shaped the research relationship. A critical reflexive insight was recognising my own initial bias as a former teacher, having internalised professional norms and underestimated the defensive strength of the institutional *habitus* (Reay et al., 2001). My embodied discomfort became a crucial source of intercultural reflexivity, forcing a continual re-examination of how power, culture, and professional identity intersected in the PAR process.

Trust and Confidentiality: Reflexive Relational practice Across Cultural Boundaries

Trust and confidentiality emerged not as ethical milestones but as ongoing, precarious forms of relational practice. Confidentiality shifted from a procedural guarantee to a skilled practice of

“negotiated transparency” (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Gray, 2018), aligning with the PAR tenet of ethical engagement as a continuous process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Within the immigrant context, this practice was complicated by layers of cultural and historical meaning. Trust was built on ground marked by exclusion, linguistic marginalisation, and histories of institutional surveillance (Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Dahlstedt, 2009; Gil-Galván & Martín-Espinosa, 2023; Lunneblad, 2017; Motshusi et al., 2024). Procedural consent rituals often failed to address culturally embedded anxieties, as parents’ fears about confidentiality were tied to broader stigma and past traumas. Thus, building trust required moving beyond translated forms toward a slower, culturally attuned practice of relational reassurance. This highlights how reflexivity in cross-cultural PAR must engage with the historical and cultural narratives participants bring, transforming confidentiality from a binary rule into a continuous, culturally-situated negotiation.

Power Dynamics Felt in the Body and the Intercultural Social Field

The experience of shifting alliances and eroded anonymity provides a lived-experience account of theoretical discussions of power in PAR. While PAR aims to redistribute power (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), the researcher experienced power as a fluid, destabilizing force. The co-optation of parent-representatives and the accountability placed on the researcher demonstrate that power redistribution is neither linear nor guaranteed, revealing the paradox of participatory research within resistant institutional structures (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Reay et al., 2001).

The intercultural dimensions intensified these dynamics. Power played out along cultural and linguistic lines, with visibility within the immigrant community adding a layer of social risk. Parents were conscious of being observed by both the school and their cultural networks, meaning power was exercised in the management of reputation and representation. Navigating this multi-layered landscape required constant ethical vigilance and intercultural reflexivity. Learning to see these tensions as essential data, rather than as failures, was a crucial reflexive turn, revealing power as a dynamic, relational performance refracted through cultural difference.

Reflexivity and the Embodied Ethical Praxis in Intercultural PAR

This study’s findings confirm that in deeply engaged PAR, the researcher struggles not with detachment but with overwhelming immersion. A critical reflexive insight was realising that my desire for success initially framed emotional tension as a problem rather than as data on power and resistance. The duality between the engaged “*I*” and the reflective “*me*” required frequent negotiation.

In intercultural research, reflexivity becomes linked to cultural humility and positional awareness. Bell’s (1993) “realistic objectivity” is operationalised as rigorous, culturally-situated reflexivity, where credibility is forged from critical examination of one’s positionality and actions (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Finlay, 2002). For instance, the unsustainable weight of secret-keeping

led to institutionalised peer debriefing, transforming a private burden into a collective checkpoint.

Synthesizing these themes, ethical practice in insider PAR within multicultural contexts is best understood as an “*embodied ethical praxis*” that is deeply intercultural. This praxis is a continuous reflexive negotiation lived through bodily discomfort in liminal spaces, emotional practice across cultural divides, and skilled management of visibility within dual gazes. It reframes the researcher as a reflexively engaged body in a cross-cultural field, requiring tolerance for ambiguity and critical self-reflection as intrinsic to ethical inquiry.

Synthesis and Contribution: Toward an “Intercultural Embodied Ethical Praxis”

Synthesizing these themes through the integrated lens of phenomenology and liminality, this study makes a distinct and original contribution to the literature on PAR ethics by proposing the new theoretical framework of “intercultural embodied ethical praxis.” This praxis emerges from the recursive interplay between the researcher’s reflexive engagement and the culturally layered realities of immigrant families (Bouakaz, 2007; Bouakaz et al., 2025; Bunar, 2018; Dahlstedt, 2009; Finlay, 2002; Gil-Galván & Martín-Espinosa, 2023; Lunneblad, 2017; Motshusi et al., 2024). It is characterized not by static protocols, but by a continuous, situated negotiation of liminality, confidentiality, trust, and power, each intensified through cultural and linguistic difference.

The findings demonstrate that the researcher’s liminal body, occupying the transitional space *‘betwixt and between’* stable roles (Turner, 1969), becomes a site of both ethical tension and epistemic insight, a position magnified by the dual role of cultural broker, an extension of what Mercer (2007) describes as the “*double-edged sword*” of insider research. Confidentiality transforms from a procedural commitment into a practice of “*negotiated transparency*” (Gray, 2018), laden with the historical and cultural weights of migration, stigma, and institutional distrust (Bunar, 2018; Bouakaz, 2007). Trust-building evolves into a precarious form of intercultural relational practice, requiring repeated acts of reassurance that acknowledge both present vulnerabilities and past exclusions, a process echoing what Swantz (2008) terms the “*emotional and relational dimensions*” of PAR in marginalized settings. Meanwhile, power operates fluidly across institutional and community planes, demanding a reflexivity attuned to its cultural inflections and performative shifts, resonating with critiques of the “*tyranny of participation*” (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) and the need for critical, culturally-situated reflexivity (Bradbury et al., 2019b; Berger, 2015).

This praxis extends the theoretical discourse on PAR ethics by grounding it firmly in the phenomenology of the intercultural encounter (van Manen, 1990). While established literature addresses broad structural and participatory challenges in migrant communities (Bunar, 2018, Lunneblad, 2017; Dahlstedt, 2009, Bouakaz, 2007), this study offers a nuanced, experiential account of how these macro-dynamics are lived and navigated in the immediacy of reflexive practice. It argues that core PAR principles, reflexivity, reciprocity, and power-sharing (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), cannot be neutrally applied but must be continuously reinterpreted

within the specific cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts of the participants, advancing a more embodied, relational understanding of ethical praxis (Fazey et al., 2018; Bradbury, 2015).

Ultimately, this study contributes a situated, relational, and embodied framework for ethical research with migrant communities. It calls for a shift from procedural compliance toward a cultivated capacity for cultural humility, ambiguity tolerance, and critical self-reflection as integral to ethical competence. By framing the researcher as a reflexively engaged body within a cross-cultural field, it advances an ethical praxis that is as deeply intercultural as it is personally transformative, offering a pathway toward more responsive, respectful, and sustainable partnerships between schools and immigrant families (Epstein, 2018; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Dahlstedt, 2009; Bouakaz, 2007).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This reflexive phenomenological study has explored the lived, ethical terrain of conducting participatory action research (PAR) as an insider within a multicultural school serving immigrant families. By interrogating the researcher's own experience, it moves beyond abstract ethical principles to reveal the intercultural embodied ethical praxis that constitutes ethical engagement in such liminal spaces.

The study sought to understand the phenomenology of ethical challenges through three guiding questions. In conclusion:

- The insider/outsider role is fundamentally experienced as a state of liminal dislocation, an embodied and social in-betweenness that is not a temporary hurdle but the defining condition of the research. This position, intensified by the role of cultural broker, makes the researcher's body the primary site of ethical negotiation.
- Trust manifests not as a stable achievement but as a precarious, embodied performance, built through continuous relational practice that must navigate historical distrust, linguistic asymmetry, and cultural vulnerability.
- Confidentiality transforms in practice from a promise of anonymity to the skilled management of eroding visibility, requiring researchers to operate with transparency within the closely-knit ecosystems of immigrant communities.

The central original contribution of this study is the theorization of "intercultural embodied ethical praxis." This concept asserts that ethical competence in intercultural PAR is not a matter of procedural compliance but a cultivated capacity for continuous reflexivity, cultural humility, and emotional attunement, enacted through the researcher's liminal presence. The tensions inherent in this work, between connection and professional distance, visibility and protection, institutional power and community agency, are not problems to be solved but the very source of ethical insight and the engine of transformative partnership. The critical point emerging from this analysis is that the researcher's subjective, lived struggle within these tensions is not a methodological side-effect; it is the primary site where the democratic and transformative intent of PAR is tested, embodied, and ultimately realized.

Therefore, this study concludes that fostering sustainable, equitable collaborations between schools and immigrant families requires a fundamental shift: from viewing ethical guidelines as a protective framework to embracing them as a dynamic, lived practice that is as intercultural as it is personal. The researcher's journey of navigating liminality becomes a microcosm of the broader intercultural negotiation, modeling the reflexivity and relational commitment necessary for inclusive educational partnerships.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered to advance ethical, culturally responsive PAR practice:

For PAR Practitioners and Insider-Researchers:

- **Institutionalize Intercultural Reflexivity:** Integrate structured reflexive practices (e.g., phenomenological journaling, critical incident analysis) as non-negotiable components of the research process to consciously navigate liminality and process emotional practice.
- **Practice Negotiated Transparency:** Move beyond standardized consent forms. Proactively and continually discuss the practical limits of confidentiality and anonymity with participants, framing these conversations as a joint responsibility within visible community-embedded work.
- **Build Support Systems for Ethical practice:** Establish formal peer debriefing circles or secure intercultural mentoring to mitigate the isolation of the insider-researcher role, validate interpretations, and share the burden of ethical decision-making.

For PAR Methodology, Training, and Ethics Boards:

- **Ground Ethics in Phenomenology:** Incorporate phenomenological case studies of researcher experience into ethics training and review. This prepares researchers and reviewers for the embodied, relational realities of fieldwork, moving beyond formulaic risk assessment.
- **Validate Positionality as Data:** Encourage and legitimize research designs that treat the researcher's subjective, positioned experience as critical empirical data, particularly in studies involving marginalized communities where power dynamics are pronounced.

For Educational Institutions and School Leaders:

- **Formally Recognize Relational practice:** Acknowledge and resource the emotional, intercultural, and boundary-spanning work of roles like home-school liaisons, teacher-researchers, and cultural brokers. This can include dedicated time, training, and career recognition.
- **Cultivate "Partner-Ready" Institutions:** Actively work to create institutional cultures that are receptive to collaborative, open research. This involves reducing territorial defensiveness, sharing authority in decision-making, and valuing process-oriented, relational outcomes alongside measurable results.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is inherently limited by its focus on a single researcher's lived experience within one specific multicultural school context. The findings are not generalizable but offer transferable insights into the embodied and intercultural dimensions of ethical PAR practice with immigrant communities. Additionally, reliance on self-reported reflexive data may introduce subjective bias, despite methodological rigor through thematic analysis and peer debriefing.

Future research could:

- Adopt a *multi-phenomenological approach* to capture and contrast the ethical experiences of all stakeholders, parents, teachers, school leaders, within the same PAR project.
- Conduct *longitudinal studies* to trace how intercultural embodied ethical praxis evolves over extended partnerships and across different phases of migrant integration.
- Undertake *comparative case studies* across diverse national, cultural, and institutional settings to identify which ethical challenges are context-specific and which reflect broader structural patterns in participatory research with marginalized communities
- Explicitly investigate the development and training of "*intercultural embodied ethical praxis*," exploring how researchers and practitioners can be effectively prepared for the liminal, reflexive, and emotionally attuned work that intercultural PAR demands

Necessary information:

- The Corresponding Author confirms that this manuscript is original, has not been published before, and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.
- The Corresponding Author, confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors. I further confirm that the order of authors listed above has been approved by all of us.
- The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
- This work did not receive any funding
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