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Chapter 29

Ethics in educational research

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Introduction

Research ethics have become a central issue in educational research and no research can be conducted without due regard to ethics. Regulatory frameworks and regulatory bodies have been established to manage and approve research ethics protocols. Hence, data gathering for an educational research project can only begin once ethical clearance has been sought, approved and a certificate of ethical clearance has been issued. For most research conducted in higher education, ethical clearance applications are managed and processed through dedicated structures within the institution.

Since research ethics are a central issue in educational research, this chapter will present an overview of the founding knowledge that informs ethical practices, the key issues that need to be considered in research ethics and the process of application for ethical clearance. This chapter will focus on the following:

- What is meant by research ethics?
- What are the key dilemmas in conducting educational research?
- What are some of the ethical issues in different approaches to research?
- What ethical considerations should be taken into account within a research project?

What are research ethics?

Ethics are closely associated with morals and involve embracing moral issues in the context of working with humans (Gregory, 2003). Ethics have now evolved to include issues beyond humans, incorporating a respect for and conservation of the environment. Ethics are also located within human rights and democracy discourses. With respect to the latter, society has become sensitive to the idea that the rights of people should be protected, particularly those who are vulnerable. The rights of South African citizens are, for example, enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

According Burgess (1989), ethical questions are the subject of interdisciplinary deliberations. Over the years philosophers have examined ethical issues in abstract terms, whereas sociologists and psychologists have focused on extreme cases and research 'scandals' to highlight ethical issues in research. In the contemporary world, ethics should be the concern of all researchers and they should have a critical awareness of potential ethical risks when performing research on an everyday basis. Broadly, there are three different perspectives on ethics:

1. *Ethics as a disposition:* This perspective is derived from Aristotle's notion of virtues that a person possesses, such as justice, generosity and honesty. Ethics in this instance is a disposition.
2. *Ethics as duty:* This perspective is derived from Kant, and it focuses on the duty humans (as rational beings) have to act in ways that show respect to other human beings.
3. *Ethics as utilitarian:* This perspective relates to guiding principles for ethical conduct that should benefit a majority of people.

All three of these perspectives are important and they should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Educational researchers should be aware of all of them; however, it is the latter one that dominates approaches to ethics within institutions where educational research is conducted.

The Oxford Dictionary defines ethics as: 'moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity [… or] the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles' (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ethics). This definition focuses on moral principles and guidelines for human behaviour. However, such definitions tell us very little about ethics related to the daily activities of researchers, teachers, learners and practitioners. In fact, the work of most educational researchers proceeds unnoticed, and it is only with hindsight that they become aware of decisions made that could have done harm in some way. Therefore, ethics in educational research should focus on creating awareness among researchers about how their daily decisions could potentially harm human beings and the environment.

Researchers, who are representatives of powerful institutions such as universities, can use their power negatively and exploit members of society who seemingly hold less powerful positions, such as those who are poor, women, people of colour, children, and so on. It is therefore important for all researchers, particularly those who work directly with human beings, to carefully identify possible ethical risks and to take the necessary steps to reduce such risks. Of course, many ethical issues only emerge during the investigation and they cannot always be pre-empted. Moreover, ethical questions are not always clear-cut and are often controversial. Ethical standards also differ depending on the type of research that is conducted. However, an understanding of what research ethics entail, what the major ethical dilemmas in education research are, and what ethical considerations should be taken

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 433 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

in consideration when conducting a research project would assist researchers in mitigating ethical risks.

Key ethical dilemmas and how to overcome them

Burgess (1989) identified four ethical dilemmas that are relevant to educational research: research sponsorship, research relations, informed consent and data dissemination. These continue to remain key ethical dilemmas and concerns that should receive consideration by researchers.

Research sponsorship

A sponsor of research is any person or body that funds research or allows researchers access to data. Sponsors could be governments, national funding bodies such as the National Research Foundation (NRF), the corporate sector, private organisations or private individuals. Research sponsorship relates to the intervention of sponsors in research activities. It concerns the extent to which sponsors influence different aspects of the research process, such as the research questions posed and well as the findings of the research. Funders could play a gatekeeping role whereby they will only fund a research project if it meets their own requirements. They could also claim ownership of data and prevent the publication of findings.

There have not been many research scandals in educational research — or at least not many have been made public. However, there was one documented case worth mentioning. In Britain, Maurice Punch conducted research at Dartington Hall, an independent progressive school in the south-west of England. He had signed an agreement that his research would only be published if the chairman of the Trust of Dartington Hall provided written consent for the publication of the research. As a consequence, Punch had difficulties in publishing his research and it took a battle of 15 years before he could do so. This case raised issues concerning research sponsorship, confidentiality, identification, freedom to publish and the nature of professional standards (Punch, 1986). In most cases ethical dilemmas can be mitigated by written agreements between sponsors and researchers, but the contents of such agreements must be carefully considered so that no harm is done to research participants and academic freedom is not unreasonably curtailed.

Research relations

This relates to the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Burgess (1989: 5) argues that research relations concern questions of access, power, harm, deception, secrecy and confidentiality and that all of these should be considered and resolved by the researcher. Most educational researchers are associated with universities and this produces a power differential when working with vulnerable groups in society such as women, children and those marginalised based on race, religion, sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS status, and so on. It is therefore important

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 434 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

that researchers take care not to exploit vulnerable groups that they are researching and that they remain conscious of the effects that their positions as university-based researchers might have on the researched. Moreover, when negotiating access to settings, researchers should familiarise themselves with the protocols of communities such as religious communities and indigenous communities.

Ethical dilemmas related to research relations could be overcome through collaboration in participatory approaches to research, whereby communities are able to participate in many aspects of the research process and where the benefits for both research participants and the researcher are negotiated.

Informed consent

Informed consent holds a key place in research ethics and concerns the voluntary consent of an individual to participate in research. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) points out that the first step in obtaining consent is for researchers to ensure that participants understand the process that they are engaging in, why their participation is required, who will use the research findings and how it will be reported. The researcher should also inform participants that they have the right to, at any stage, withdraw from participating in the research process without providing any reasons for doing so. In cases where cultures adopt a collective approach to consent, this needs to be respected by researchers. If research is done in public schools, then permission must be obtained from provincial departments of education (PDEs), and in the case of minors, the consent of parents or guardians is required. Universities ensure that the principle of informed consent is respected through including this as a criterion for granting ethical clearance. Ultimately, the researcher has the responsibility to apply this principle. An area that does provide a challenge is when important information is obtained from research participants in informal conversations, for which consent was not obtained.

Data dissemination

Data dissemination is also a key area where ethical considerations are involved, including a range of aspects such as confidentiality, the extent to which data can be reported back and the extent to which research reports can be used by policy makers and in educational practice. In disseminating data, researchers should ensure that they accord participants the right to confidentiality and anonymity — unless the participants or their guardians have waived this right. One of the advantages of member-checking, used in qualitative research, is that it gives research participants an opportunity to comment on both interview transcripts and interpretations of interviews. This mitigates the possibility of misrepresentation of participants by researchers. Data security and the ethics around data dissemination are normally taken into consideration by ethics committees in universities as part of the ethical clearance process.

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 435 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

Ethics within different approaches to educational research

Before specifically discussing ethical issues that may arise due to certain approaches to research, some general points will be raised about the integrity of the research process. It is fundamental that researchers ensure the integrity of the entire research process, which means, among other things:

- that they ensure their research is trustworthy (valid and reliable)
- that their findings are based on evidence
- that their arguments can be justified
- that they follow acceptable guidelines for conducting research within the chosen research paradigm.

According to Howe and Moses, issues of integrity of data are salient ethical matters. They write: 'For both quantitative and qualitative research studies, the integrity of the research is determined by the authenticity of data, proper data representation, and political issues surrounding research findings' (1999: 29). If researchers do not ensure the integrity of their research, they can be guilty of misconduct should they bring research into disrepute in any way. BERA (2011: 10) identifies various actions that could result in researchers being guilty of misconduct, namely:

- falsifying research evidence or findings
- sensationalising findings in order to gain maximum exposure
- deliberately distorting findings by selectively publishing some aspects and not others
- criticising other researchers in a defamatory or unprofessional manner
- undertaking work for which there is a perceived conflict of interest or for personal gain
- undertaking work for which they are not qualified
- publishing work carried out with co-researchers as the basis of individual outputs without the agreement of the co-researchers
- using research for fraudulent or illegal purposes.

The ethical considerations discussed earlier apply to all research conducted in education. But there are instances where particular research approaches or designs give rise to unique ethical dilemmas.

Firstly, in the case of experimental or quasi-experimental designs, an intervention is introduced to an experimental group and not to a control group. Say, for example, a computer-mediated programme is introduced into a school to see whether it improves learners' performance in physical science. The programme is introduced to the experimental group, whereas the control group continues with the normal lecture method which both groups received prior to the intervention. If, for example, the intervention results in a significant improvement in learners' achievement in physical science, then the control group would have been denied an important learning experience. Such a design would be unethical in educational research. There are

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 436 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

other designs that could be used in education, such as evaluation designs, which do not require the use of a control. Evaluation designs might be less rigorous than experimental designs, but ethically more sound for use in educational research.

Interpretive (qualitative) research – and in particular the 'thick description' that characterises this kind of research – presents its own challenges. One challenge is how accurately the narratives of participants are presented. Moreover, if these narratives are co-constructed with participants, the question arises as to who owns the data and how much power participants have to challenge and edit the data (Howe & Moses, 1999: 44). Another matter in qualitative research is the problem of anonymity. Even though the names of schools, teachers and learners are not divulged in qualitative studies, because the contexts of such studies are often described thickly, it is possible through such descriptions to identify research sites and participants. It is important that researchers reflect on these ethical challenges, mitigate the risks and openly acknowledge in their research reports the dilemmas which emerge in such studies.

In the case of action research, for example, researchers' own reflections as part of the inquiry could impinge on others, such as when a person has the dual role of being both teacher and researcher (see Chapter 30 for more on action research). According to BERA, 'dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly' (2011: 5).

In summary, there are ethical matters that all researchers should take into consideration, but there are also particular ethical issues that certain research approaches or designs lay bare.

Domains of ethical consideration within a research project

There are various domains within the research process that require ethical consideration and that are subject to ethical clearance with an ethical clearance certificate number before commencement of the research process. This section of the chapter presents the domains of research that involve ethical considerations and discusses what is expected of researchers within these considerations.

Bearing in mind that research institutions are mandated to provide ethical clearance for most research projects conducted by researchers affiliated to the research institution, the requirements for obtaining such clearance may be different across institutions. The general process is that the research proposal is developed and accepted for scientific merit before ethical clearance is applied for. The approval of a research proposal is generally done by a faculty research board, a college research board or a university research committee and is peer-driven, meaning that peers who are experts in the research area will review the proposal for scientific rigour. (See Chapter 28 for details on writing a rigorous research proposal.)

Once the research proposal has been accepted, an ethical clearance application is made to the research ethics committee, normally facilitated through an application form processed through the faculty research office. It is not uncommon for the

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 437 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

research ethics committee to also review the scientific merits of the proposal in addition to the ethical clearance application. This is done to ensure that there are checks along the way to ensure high standards of ethics in research. Some institutions review the research proposal and ethical clearance applications simultaneously. The different ways of reviewing ethical clearance applications impact on the time it takes to award an ethical clearance certificate. Some processes take up to a month for ethical clearance approval, while some may take six months to a year. This means that the timeframe for the research may have to be adjusted and in certain cases this may cause substantial disruption to the research agenda.

There are also different levels of ethics consideration in research proposals. Some proposals may have few ethical issues, for example desktop research, literature studies or studies that do not include humans or animals. Ethical clearance for these kinds of research is usually gained in a short amount of time. Some research proposals involve the collection of data from very sensitive participants (such as vulnerable children, people living in poor socio-economic conditions or mentally compromised individuals) or animals that are on the endangered species list. These proposals would require greater scrutiny for ethical standards that have been set globally and therefore may take up to a year to approve.

In designing a research agenda, the researcher must keep in mind the ethical issues that would need to be addressed and what processes would need to be followed in obtaining ethical clearance. Some institutions use coding systems to identify the different levels of ethical clearance that are required of a research proposal. Using a coded system may speed up the ethical clearance approval process for a research protocol (used synonymously with 'research proposal') where no humans or animals are involved in the data collection process.

For the purposes of this chapter, the domains of ethical clearance consideration include scientific validity, data management, informed consent, gatekeeper's consent, risk assessment and other considerations of ethics. These are discussed in the sections that follow.

Scientific validity of the research

This domain of ethics requires a review of the coherence within the research protocol. Specifically, it looks for alignment between research topic, research purpose (aims and objectives) and research questions, and that these elements cohere. Having established this alignment, the next process is to review the participants (sample and population) from whom data will be collected. The appropriateness of the participants and the process of sampling needs to be clearly spelt out so that there is an alignment between the information required for the answering of the research questions and the source of this information. Ethical issues arise when information is obtained from secondary sources without the consent of the primary target participant. Correctness, trustworthiness and biases are addressed through a review of who the participants are and how they are recruited into the data generation process.

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 438 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

The participant recruitment process (sampling process) needs to be clearly spelt out in the protocol. The sampling process has implications for the findings of the research project. For example, in extrapolation studies, it is important to use an appropriate probability sampling process (eg random sampling) in order to make generative statements about a population (eg teachers). For studies that seek to understand a particular phenomenon, perhaps a purposive sampling process would be most appropriate, as information-rich cases would provide the depth of information required for understanding the phenomenon under consideration. The ethical considerations associated with the selection of participants are that the most appropriate participants should be selected for the intention of the research agenda, so that the findings are acceptable, defensible and not biased.

The scientific validity screening would also require the submission of the research instruments through which the data will be collected. For example, if a survey is intended, a questionnaire would be required with the ethical clearance application form. The questionnaire will be reviewed in terms of the nature of the questions that are being asked of the respondent, whether the questions align themselves to the research questions of the research project, and whether the questions refrain from being hurtful or have the potential to evoke emotional trauma in the participants. All data collection instruments that will be used in the study would have to be subjected to review. Examples of data collection instruments include questionnaires, validated test instruments and scales (eg psychological tests), interview schedules and observation schedules. A review of the questions in these instruments is done to evaluate their alignment to the research questions for the study and their potential effects on the participants.

Some participants may react adversely to some of the questions in the data collection instrument and these reactions may require counselling or medical support. Such reactions are a real possibility and can lead to harm to the participants, and as such the researcher needs to anticipate these kinds of reactions and account for how he or she would support the participant in such situations. The support process to provide assistance to the participants needs to be clearly spelt out in the ethical clearance application so that judgements can be made about the nature of questions that will be asked by the researcher, the potential harm that these questions may cause the participant and the sufficiency of support afforded to the participants to minimise the potential harm.

Participants' rights and responsibilities in the research process

The identification and selection of participants in the research process raise issues of ethical concern. Participants who are vulnerable or who are not able to make informed decisions are cause for ethical concern. Working within a human rights discourse and its associated responsibility values means that participants need protection. The ethical requirement of protecting participants' rights is a central

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 439 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

issue in research ethics. Participants must know their rights and limitations within the research process. These rights include:

- the right to full disclosure of the research intentions
- the right to full disclosure of the nature of the participants' involvement within the research design
- the right to full disclosure of the potential risks to the participants
- confidentiality of information provided by participants
- the ability to withdraw from the research process without any consequences to the participants.

Full disclosure and the participants' ability to comprehend the nature and purpose of the research, as well as their own involvement in the research, are issues of key concern in the application for ethical clearance. Hence, the review panel for ethical clearance applications needs to know who the participants are, how they are selected and whether they can comprehend the research process in order to give formal consent to be a participant in the research process.

Special categories of participants have been identified as being vulnerable and therefore require more protection in the research process. These vulnerable groups of participants include, among others, children, persons who are intellectually or mentally impaired, persons who have experienced traumatic or stressful life circumstances, persons who are HIV positive, persons highly dependent on medical care and persons in dependent or unequal relationships. The ethical considerations when using these groups of participants revolve around:

- the protection of the anonymity of respondents
- the confidentiality of the information provided by these participants
- the prevention of social stigmatisation
- the prevention of victimisation
- the support services that need to be put in place to support adverse reactions to participation.

Therefore, in order to use these groups of participants, additional permission needs to be obtained. Such additional permission could be obtained from parents or caregivers of children, or institutional managers for intellectually or mentally impaired participants.

Data collection and data management

The ethics associated with data collection are twofold. First, the nature of data to be collected may raise ethical issues. These situations include:

- collecting confidential data without the permission of participants
- the use of stimuli, tasks or procedures which may be experienced as stressful or unpleasant
- participants being required to commit acts which might diminish self-respect or cause embarrassment or regret
- research using any form of deception.

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 440 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

If such data are required for the research project, then full justification is needed and an indication must be given of what steps will be taken to minimise the effects of such action on the participants.

The second ethical consideration with data collection is the management of the data once collected. In the full disclosure of the research agenda and process, the researcher is obliged to indicate how the data will be managed once collected. For example:

- Will the data be accessible to others?
- How will the anonymity of the data source be guaranteed?
- Where will the data be stored?
- Who will have access to the data?
- When will the data be disposed of?
- How will the data be disposed of?

The responses to these questions may influence participation in the research process and the participants have the right to refuse to participate in the process based on these responses.

Gatekeeper permission and consent from participants

Access to research sites is a controlled activity. Researchers are not at liberty to enter a research site and conduct research without receiving permission to conduct the research. This is so for various reasons, including the need to prevent unauthorised disclosure of information and defamatory or reputational damage to the institution or organisation. The implications of such transgressions are enormous, especially within the context of a highly litigious society and of the social, economic and health concerns that it may raise. In order to access a research site, permission is needed from an authorised individual of an institution or an organisation. This is called gatekeeper's permission. In order to obtain gatekeeper's permission, the researcher needs to write formally to the authorised individual or office for such permission, giving full details of:

- the research agenda
- the nature of participation of the organisation or institution
- issues of disruption that may be experienced by the institution or organisation as a result of the research being conducted at the site
- the rights of the organisation or institution
- who the participants will be
- what kinds of information will be elicited from these participants or the organisation or institution
- how the data will be managed
- how the data will be used.

The institution or organisation must be given the right to grant or decline permission for the use of its site for the research without any implications to them. The

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 441 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

gatekeeper's permission needs to acknowledge that they understand the nature of the research to be conducted at their site, their rights and the nature of the permission they are granting for the research to be conducted.

Consent letters are participant-specific, meaning that each participant must consent to taking part in the research process with the understanding of his or her roles, responsibilities and rights within the research process. Each identified participant must be provided with a letter clearly indicating:

- the research focus and purpose
- the process of data collection
- the management of the data
- the nature of the participant's involvement in the data collection process
- the implications of participation
- the protection of the participant's anonymity and rights, including the right to refuse participation or further participation as the research unfolds without any consequences to him or her.

This information letter must include the contact details of the researcher, the supervisor of the research and the affiliated institution. These contact details are used for verification by the participant as well as to lodge any complaints or concerns or report any transgressions that may occur during the research process. This information letter must be handed to the participant for his or her reference. Accompanying the information letter is a consent form that the participant completes, signs and hands over to the researcher as a record of informed consent by the participant. This means that the information letter and the consent form must be on separate pages. The consent letter is a declaration that the participant understands the research process and his or her rights, including the right to refuse participation or to withdraw from the study without any consequences.

Other considerations in the ethical process

Research is conducted to produce knowledge. Hence, the dissemination of research findings and its implications is a crucial step in the research process. The dissemination process is, however, subjected to ethical scrutiny. The process of disseminating the research findings among the research participants is an ethical obligation of the researcher. This ethical obligation is to maximise the benefit emanating from the research process. Hence, statements about the dissemination process are required in the ethical clearance application process.

Some research may propose or result in post-research interventions. In such cases, the process of post-research intervention must be indicated so that research findings are not thrust onto participants or communities without a participatory process. Then there are also other considerations, including impact analysis, the benefits or conditions of funders and funder biases in the research process.

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 442 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM

Conclusion

Research ethics are crucial components of any research process. No research can be carried out without ethical clearance approval. This chapter set out to present some theoretical insights into research ethics, with a view to providing a rationale for why research ethics are crucial to any research process.

In this chapter, some ethical dilemmas that researchers have been faced with were presented, with some suggestions on how to engage with these dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas are a common feature of research, and often unfold when data are being collected, when data are being organised and analysed, when research reports are being written and when the research is being disseminated. Where there are no clear guidelines on how to resolve these ethical dilemmas, consultation with experts and supervisors would be needed.

Ethical clearance application processes may differ across institutions. There are, however, some core issues and processes that need to be followed in making ethical clearance applications. This chapter presented insights on and an account of what is expected from applicants on these core issues. Ethical practice commences from the conceptualisation of the research process to beyond the dissemination of the research findings (sometimes decades after the research process was completed). Hence, researchers are cautioned to consider issues of ethics beyond just the confines and duration of the research project, as these could have latent implications.

Education Studies for Initial Teacher Development.indb 443 11/10/2016 9:44:14 AM