

Research ethics case studies

Classroom observation for ‘insider’ teacher-researchers

AUTHORS: MATTHEW COURTNEY & DANIEL MUIJS

ANNOTATED WITH REFERENCES TO:

BERA'S *ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH* (FIFTH EDITION)

ABOUT THIS SERIES

SERIES EDITORS: SIN WANG CHONG & ALISON FOX

BERA's Research Ethics Case Studies complement BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fifth edition (2024) by giving concrete examples of how those guidelines can be applied during the research process. For a full account of ethical best practice as recommended by BERA, researchers should refer to our *Ethical Guidelines*, which these case studies are intended to illustrate without themselves offering guidance or recommendations. Annotations in the right-hand margin of this document indicate where, among the numbered paragraphs of BERA's *Ethical Guidelines*, readers can find full advice on the issues raised. Extended versions of the case studies will feature in a forthcoming book to be published in 2025 in partnership between BERA and Bloomsbury, *Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Research*.

Background

Sarah has been a primary school teacher for 10 years. Alongside her teaching commitments, she is also completing a part-time master's degree in educational assessment at a local university. As part of her studies, Sarah is exploring teachers' use of formative assessment and feedback to improve pupil outcomes. She is particularly interested in ways in which primary practitioners provide feedback to children about their writing. The research question for her small-scale study is: 'How do primary school teachers use written and verbal feedback to improve children's writing?'

Sarah conducts interviews with primary school teachers to understand their perceptions of their use of feedback to improve children's writing. She then observes each participant teaching a writing lesson to see this in action. Sarah also collects anonymised samples of pupils' work, some of which include written feedback from their class teacher.

Sarah has received ethical approval from her university for the study. She follows the consent procedures required by her university and provides all potential teacher participants with an information sheet outlining the aims of her study and what their participation involves. Sarah successfully recruits 12 teacher participants from her own school and other schools within the same local authority. Headteachers are provided with a gatekeeper consent form and information sheet that outlines the expectations of taking part in the study. Participants are provided with an information sheet that outlines how responses from the interviews and notes from the teaching practice observed will be treated confidentially and, when disseminating findings from the research, names and revealing characteristics of teachers, school staff and pupils will be altered to ensure anonymity.

After successfully recruiting 12 teachers, Sarah provides an information sheet to the parents of pupils in their classes. Sarah obtains opt-in consent from the parents, in line with the consent procedures required by her university.

The ethical dilemma

One of the participants, Tom, is a year 2 teacher working at Sarah's own school. As part of her study, Sarah incorporates lesson observation as a research method. In preparation for the research, Sarah considers the complexities of teacher observations, pre-thinks possible scenarios of distress or harms to the participants and how they can be minimised, and describes such information in the project information sheet to clarify expectations (34). When observing him teaching a writing lesson, Sarah notices that the majority of Tom's class appear not to be listening to his feedback. Several children are displaying disruptive behaviour, which includes talking over Tom and not following his instructions to discuss the feedback with their peers.

One child then leaves their seat and begins intentionally ripping the lettering from a display board and discarding this on the floor. Tom tells the child to stop and the child refuses. The noise level in the class continues to rise and Tom says that the entire class will be missing their playtime, contradicting the school's behaviour policy. Tom appears visibly stressed during this interaction.

Sarah is concerned about the children's behaviour and the manner in which Tom attempts to manage this. Based on her own experience as a practitioner, Sarah feels Tom needs support to develop effective strategies to manage behaviour in his classroom which will enable the class to focus on Tom's teaching. She is also concerned for Tom's wellbeing. During the observation, Tom appears to be under a significant amount of stress. Sarah finds it difficult to draw firm lines between her researcher role and her everyday capacity as a colleague of Tom.

However, in both her written and verbal communication to the participants, Sarah has highlighted that the aim of the study is to observe teaching to support her understanding of current practice for providing feedback on writing in primary classrooms (9). She has stressed, verbally, that she is not there to make a subjective judgement on the quality of the teaching and learning she observes.

*BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (fifth edition), **paragraph 34**: 'Ethical research design and implementation aim to put participants at their ease and to avoid making excessive demands on them. In advance of data collection, researchers have a responsibility to think through their duty of care in order to recognise potential harms, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise.'*

Paragraph 9: 'Researchers should do what they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they are able, what is involved in a study.'

The participant information sheet has also made it clear that Sarah's notes from the teaching practice observed will be treated confidentially and that participant anonymity will be ensured. She worries that taking any action to support Tom or raise her concerns with the school's leadership team would undermine this and may negatively impact on his career (37).

Sarah is also concerned that her role as a primary teacher and an insider supported the recruitment of colleagues. She worries that they may have consented to their participation in part because they positioned Sarah as a fellow practitioner and trusted colleague. She worries that voicing her concerns to Tom's leadership team may damage their professional relationship (19). Sarah is concerned that raising this issue with the school's leadership team may cause damage to her professional relationships, her status in her workplace and the trust between herself and her colleagues after the research is complete.

Course of action

Sarah is concerned about the situation and is unclear if it warrants breaking the terms of consent with her participant, by making a judgement on the quality of the teaching practice she has observed and sharing this with the school's senior leadership team. In line with her university's ethical guidance, Sarah decides to raise this issue with her master's supervisor (48).

Sarah's supervisor praises her for voicing her concerns, highlighting the importance of researcher self-care. Her supervisor reinforces the importance of researcher wellbeing and of sharing any distress or potential distress brought about by the research process (82). Sarah's supervisor advises her not to report her judgement on the quality of teaching and classroom management to her school's senior leadership team. Her supervisor reminds her that she was present in Tom's classroom in the capacity of a researcher and not as a member of staff. Although her dual roles of researcher and member of the staff team could potentially introduce tension into this decision, the participant information sheet and Sarah's verbal communication with Tom made her role as a researcher, and not as a teacher, in this study very explicit (19). Sarah is reminded that she was only present in Tom's classroom because of his consent.

Sarah's supervisor highlights that no one present in the classroom was in danger and that she did not have any concerns related to safeguarding. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to break the terms of consent agreed with Tom as a participant. However, Sarah's supervisor agrees that the situation appeared to be stressful for Tom and was perhaps made more so with Sarah's presence in his classroom. Given Tom and Sarah's effective professional relationship, Sarah and her supervisor decide it would be appropriate for Sarah to discuss the incident with Tom in a supportive manner.

Sarah speaks to Tom and explicitly states that she is talking to him as a supportive colleague, rather than in her role as a researcher. Sarah raises her concerns about Tom's wellbeing during the lesson she observed. Tom tells Sarah that his class's teaching assistant was unwell and absent on the day of Sarah's classroom observation, which he feels significantly contributed to the children's behaviour in the lesson and his feelings of

Paragraph 37: 'Researchers should consider the impact of their research on the lives and workloads of participants'.

Paragraph 19: 'An important consideration is the extent to which a researcher's reflective research into their own practice impinges upon others – for example, in the case of power relationships arising from the dual roles of teacher/lecturer/manager and researcher, and their impact on students and colleagues. Dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality.'

Paragraph 48: 'Researchers should seek advice from a relevant responsible person before proceeding to disclosure if and when appropriate (for example, a student undertaking research should seek advice from their supervisor[s]).'

Paragraph 82: 'Safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of researchers is part of the ethical responsibility of employers and sponsors, as well as of researchers themselves. In general, there should be an ethics of care for researchers, including self-care.'

Paragraph 19: 'An important consideration is the extent to which a researcher's reflective research into their own practice impinges upon others – for example, in the case of power relationships arising from the dual roles of teacher/lecturer/manager and researcher, and their impact on students and colleagues. Dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality. These may be addressed appropriately by, for example, making the researcher role very explicit'.

stress as a result of this behaviour. Tom assures Sarah that the behaviour she witnessed, and his response to this behaviour, was out of the ordinary. Sarah reminds Tom that his colleagues, and the school's senior leadership team, are there to support him if needed. Tom thanks Sarah for having a supportive, professional discussion with him.

Alternative courses of action

Sarah could have spoken to the school's senior leadership team about the teaching practice and classroom management she observed in Tom's classroom. This may have negatively impacted on Tom's career and the senior leadership team's perception of his competence (37). It would also constitute a break in both the terms of consent with her participant and the ethical approval obtained from her university. After discussion with her supervisor, Sarah felt this would not only be an unethical way to proceed, but it would also be a break in trust between herself and Tom that would likely impact negatively on their professional relationship as colleagues. This may have led to damage to her standing with her colleagues across the school after the research was complete.

Paragraph 37: 'Researchers should consider the impact of their research on the lives and workloads of participants'.

Sarah could have decided not to recruit participants from her own school. This would have allowed Sarah to protect herself from the conflict of interest that arose from her insider status due to her dual roles of researcher and member of staff within the school (30). Deciding not to recruit participants from her own school would have also provided an extra safeguard to ensure that potential participants were in a social position vis-à-vis Sarah, as the researcher, that would have enabled them to give voluntary informed consent (20).

Paragraph 30: 'Researchers should not undertake work in which they can be perceived to have a material conflict of interest'.

Conclusion

This case study highlights some of the ethical dilemmas involved in insider research. Teacher-researchers, and other researchers with dual roles such as lecturers and managers, need support to think through and anticipate potential conflicts of interest which may arise when conducting insider research. This includes support to ensure their role as a researcher is made explicit in written and verbal communication with participants, potential participants and other key stakeholders.

Researchers with dual roles also need support to understand their responsibilities to their participants and other stakeholders when working in the capacity of researcher and support to anticipate where potential tensions between their roles may arise.

Paragraph 20: 'In some cases, potential participants may not be in a social position vis-à-vis the researcher that enables them to give voluntary informed consent. This can occur, for example, when the researcher and potential participant are family members, or if the researcher is the participant's teacher/lecturer. Researchers need to consider carefully how to deal with such situations and, if possible, should reassure potential participants that non-participation is entirely acceptable.'

Questions for discussion

1. Did Sarah strike the right balance between considering and accommodating the wellbeing of the various stakeholders in her study?
2. Should Sarah's supervisor have done more to prepare her ahead of her fieldwork? What might this additional preparation have included?
3. What were the benefits and drawbacks of Sarah recruiting participants from her own school?

4. What actions could Sarah have taken to protect herself from the tensions that arose during her research?
5. In what circumstances would it be acceptable for Sarah to break the terms of her consent with Tom and discuss his practice with the school's senior leadership team?

Further reading

Bryan, H., & Burstow, B. (2017). Understanding ethics in school-based research. *Professional Development in Education*, 44(1), 107–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2017.1361464>

Fancourt, N., Foreman-Peck, L., & Oancea, A. (2022). Addressing ethical quandaries in practitioner research: A philosophical and exploratory study of responsible improvisation through hermeneutical conversation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 116, 103760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103760>

Lewis, M. J., & Quinnell, R. (2024). Telling tales out of school: Considerations of 'insider' research in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2024.2354263>

Malin, M. (2003). Competing interests between researcher, teacher and student in the ethics of classroom ethnography. *Westminster Studies in Education*, 26(1), 21–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0140672030260103>

Poulton, P. (2021). Being a teacher-researcher: Reflections on an insider research project from a virtues-based approach to research ethics. *Educational Action Research*, 31(3), 575–591. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2021.1962379>

Citation

If referring to or quoting from this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is as follows:

Courtney, M., & Muijs, D. (2024). Classroom observation for 'insider' teacher-researchers. In S. W. Chong, & A. Fox (Eds.), *Research ethics case studies*. British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/research-ethics-case-studies-2024-classroom-observation-for-insider-teacher-researchers>

This document is published under creative commons licence
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

For commercial use, please contact publications@bera.ac.uk.

The case study is annotated with references to: BERA. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.). <https://www.bera.ac.uk/ethical-guidelines-2024>



British Educational Research Association

Elizabeth Meehan Suite | Regent House | 1–6 Pratt Mews | London NW1 0AD

Charity number: 1150237

www.bera.ac.uk |  @BERANews