



Teachers and Curriculum

Journal website: <http://tandc.ac.nz>

ISSN 2382-0349

Published by the [Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research](#)



Volume 19, Issue 1, 2019

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Editor: *Kerry Earl Rinehart*

To cite to this article: Briggs, S. (2019). Ethical research in the secondary school classroom. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 19(1), 61-66.

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v19i1.332>

To link to this volume: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v19i1>

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ETHICAL RESEARCH IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Two key ethical principles of research in the secondary school classroom are *voluntary participation* and *informed consent*. Voluntary participation is the principle that participants should be able to freely choose whether or not they participate in the research, in any way, big or small (Mutch, 2005). Informed consent is the principle that the participants should be thoroughly and accurately informed of the purpose, processes and dissemination of the findings of the research, and give their consent accordingly (Mutch, 2005). Ethical principles have been established by research institutions, such as universities, to ensure that participants in educational research are not treated as passive objects by the researcher (Snook, 2003), and so that no personal harm results from the research process. This article will discuss these two ethical principles, and examine two research scenarios in secondary schools where ethical dilemmas arise. Potential ways to address these ethical concerns and minimise risk are explored, with a view to encouraging teacher reflection and consideration of research situations that may require the voluntary participation and informed consent of secondary school students in classrooms.

The consent process in secondary schools

Both teachers and researchers gather information about students, to support rich and meaningful teaching and learning in the classroom (Mutch, 2005; O'Neill, 2008). Cullen (2005) argues that all educational researchers appear on an insider-outsider continuum; at the 'insider' end of the continuum, a teacher or group of teachers research their own teaching practices. At the 'outsider' end of the continuum, research is designed and conducted by external researchers. In the middle of the continuum, research is carried out as a collaboration between teachers and external researchers. The power dynamics between researcher and participants, and between teachers and students, however, can mean that for teachers, researching in the classroom can become problematic. Student participants should feel able to choose whether or not to participate in research; they should not feel coerced in any way. However, the relative status of adult researchers and younger participants makes it difficult for young people to refuse involvement, especially if the researcher is an insider, that is, a teacher at the school, and particularly if that person teaches the student-participants. Teacher requests of students in the everyday secondary school classrooms are more often mandatory than they are optional, and students are used to complying with them (Alton-Lee, 2001; Locke, Alcorn & O'Neill, 2013).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, formal ethical processes require informed consent for research. In a secondary school classroom with student participants, aged 13-17, consent must be sought from both the students and their parents/guardians. This process is usually formalised through an information sheet that outlines the purpose and processes of the research, and a consent form for the participant and their parents or guardians to sign. Is this enough to ensure genuine voluntary participation and fully informed consent? Arguably, such formal documentation has the potential to lead to coercion. Tuhiwai-Smith (2008) declares that the "consent form makes power relations between researched and researcher concrete" (p. 131). By the nature of their role, the researcher is positioned as an 'expert' on the topic of research, and this power relationship between researcher and participants – in this context, students – and a sense of importance about the research itself, is heightened by the information sheet and consent form (Finch, 2005). Researchers, and in particular teacher-researchers, must, therefore, find additional robust avenues for ensuring that they have truly voluntary participants and that their participants are fully informed about the nature of the research, to genuinely consent to it.

In terms of voluntary participation, if the researcher is also the students' teacher, then students may feel that they have to participate because non-participation could affect their relationships with the

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ISSN: 2382-0349

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teacher, and subsequently their grades (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Thus, students may give their consent, despite not really wanting to do so. For a teacher-researcher, it is important to maintain the professional teacher-student relationships that have already been established, as tension may arise between the teacher's professional role and that of the researcher. The question of whether teacher-researchers can remain impartial when utilising their own students as participants is an important one, as their dual-role creates a potential conflict of interest for the teacher (Cullen, 2005). Teachers need to clearly distinguish for themselves and their students when they are acting in a research capacity, and how they will protect the rights of student participants.

Power relationships within families can also have a potential impact on how 'voluntary' the participation in classroom research really is. Just because a parent consents to their child taking part in a research project, and a form is signed by a parent and the student, it does not mean that the student has been able to freely choose whether they participate or not; parental consent does not "constitute a proxy for students consent" (Alton-Lee, 2001, p. 92) as children have a comparative lack of power within families (Finch, 2005), as well as within the classroom.

Some secondary school students may not always fully understand the full significance of what they are agreeing to when they give their consent to being involved in research (Cullen, 2005). Many students will never have participated in any research before, and, as well as any potential language issues, may have very little understanding of research processes and purposes or the possible implications of any publicity that might occur as a result of the research, be it through academic avenues, mass media, or social media. In addition to this, Finch (2005) argued that researchers need to "avoid seduction" (p. 63) when seeking informed consent from participants, for example, by providing inducements such as thank-you gifts. Participants' consent must be 'educated' (Cullen, 2005); researchers need to be honest with participants, and clearly explain the research process and purpose, ensuring that both sufficient information and time to allow opportunities for questions and clarification have been provided. Alton-Lee (2001) argues that researchers should find a "developmentally appropriate way to obtain informed consent" (p. 92). Therefore the researcher, in order to ensure fully informed and educated consent from secondary students, will need to do more than just distribute information sheets and consent forms; they should initiate interactions with the students about the research (Finch, 2005). With secondary school students, this can create opportunities for discussions about power imbalances; for example, the researcher could discuss the reasons why we have ethics around research, and explore some of the things that student-participants might potentially feel pressured by. In some cases, researchers have provided students with leaflets, undertaken activities with the students, or shown them example videos of simulated research procedures (Cullen, 2005; Finch, 2005).

Part of educated and informed consent is that students are made aware of their right to withdraw from the research during the process, and that they feel able to do so at any time. The negotiation of informed consent also needs to be an ongoing process, to ensure that both the course of the research as well as its conception are ethical (Alton-Lee, 2001; Locke et al., 2013; Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Some researchers ensure students are able to "exercise their agency" (Finch, 2005, p. 67) by giving them the ability to turn recording equipment off and on during the research process. Students must have the freedom of choice at all points during the research process, and a duty of care for young people and their families is required to ensure that participants are treated respectfully (Cullen, 2005; O'Neill, 2008).

Teacher-student relationships are clearly a central ethical concern when carrying out research in the secondary school classroom. Teachers form professional relationships with their students; students' ideas and contributions are respected and valued in the classroom, and in turn, students respect and value their teachers and consequently trust them as their learning leaders. Carrying out research in the classroom should in no way hinder these relationships. Tuhiwai-Smith (2008) argues that ethics in research is about "establishing, maintaining and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships" (p. 128). In particular, teacher-researchers need to be aware of disparities between themselves and their student-participants, including age, cultural and socio-economic differences (Snook, 2003). Historically, Western researchers have controlled research on indigenous and marginalised populations, leading to culturally insensitive and exploitative research (Tupuola, 1994). Researchers

and teacher-researchers therefore need to engage in the concept of Ako, in which the power is shared as learners (Cullen, 2005; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008). For example, ethical classroom research should involve open collaboration with Māori and Pasifika student-participants.

Rigorous practitioner research - that is, research in which “the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and the practice itself is the focus of study” (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 503), - should observe the same ethical principles, protocols and processes as any other forms of educational research. Teacher inquiry fits neatly into this definition of practitioner research, with secondary school teachers most often carrying out inquiries into the teaching and learning that is happening in their own classrooms. Collaborative inquiry approaches, such as Spirals of Inquiry (Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014), and individualised cycles of inquiry, such as Teaching as Inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2009), are seen as ways of transforming teaching and learning through innovation and change in the classroom (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014). One criticism of practitioner research, and Teaching as Inquiry in particular, however, is that it is often utilised simply as a form of professional development for individual teachers (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Earl & Ussher, 2016). It is therefore uncommon that the students who are involved in teacher inquiries in the secondary school classroom in Aotearoa New Zealand are consulted with beforehand; neither informed consent nor voluntary participation is usually sought from students or their whānau. Similarly, larger initiatives carried out in Aotearoa New Zealand by the Ministry of Education, such as the Secondary Literacy Project (SLP), and those funded through the inquiry-focused Teacher-Led Innovation Fund (TLIF), did not prioritise voluntary participation and informed consent from the students involved. Both of these projects focused on teacher professional development by improving pedagogical knowledge.

Scenarios

Ethical dilemmas can arise for teachers from their involvement in research and inquiries, either as insider researchers, or when collaborating with outsider researchers (Cullen, 2005). This section explores two scenarios in a secondary school setting, discusses the ethical dilemmas that emerge in each scenario, and addresses how to minimise risk for each situation.

Scenario 1 – Teacher research/inquiry in one’s own classroom

Video recordings are an easy way for teachers to keep an accurate record of what is occurring in the classroom, however, ethical lines become blurred when video footage is potentially used by anyone other than the classroom teacher. If a teacher videos students in class as evidence of completion of a particular task, and to keep a record of students’ progress. then the teacher forewarns the class at the beginning of the year that they will be videoed from time to time for these purposes. After a particular lesson the teacher then decides that they would like to use the video for their Teaching as Inquiry project that they are undertaking as part of an external course for teachers run by the Ministry of Education. This will involve showing the video as evidence to a small group of teachers from other schools in the region that are completing similar Inquiry projects. The teacher explains to one of the pairs of students that were filmed that they are undertaking an Inquiry project and asks the students permission to use the video for their project. The students agree, thus giving verbal consent.

The dilemma here is whether or not the students were able to freely choose if they should participate in the teacher’s Inquiry project. The power relationship that the teacher has with them means that they may have felt coerced to consent. It is also doubtful that the consent the students gave was truly ‘informed’ – a five-minute conversation is not necessarily sufficient for the students to have a clear understanding of who sees the video, and why. The significance of consent has been downplayed by the teacher. Because the sharing of the video is with other teaching professionals in a cluster, it is most likely to be considered ‘normal professional teacher activity’; however, even if the video recording is used for the purposes of teaching and learning only, the video could be disseminated beyond the boundaries of the school.

To minimise risk in this situation, the teacher needed to seek both the students’ and parents’ voluntary participation and informed consent at the outset of their inquiry project, in order to use the video

outside of the school (Cullen, 2005; Starkey, Akar, Jerome, & Osler, 2014). The teacher needed to discuss the research process in more depth with the students and emphasise student choice so that they can opt out if they wish. They also needed to make it clear to students that particular videos made during class time could potentially be viewed by teachers and professionals from other institutions. A possible risk here is that the students and the school could be identified by anyone who sees the video; they would have no anonymity. The school is also identifiable if the students are wearing school uniforms. Students, teachers and the school should ideally be guaranteed anonymity if the video recordings are to be used by anyone for any other purposes, for example, for further analysis by an external advisor. An alternative way to ensure anonymity is that the researcher could instead transcribe any salient conversations, and the students could choose aliases for themselves; this would remove the need to show anyone else the video. A more feasible option in this situation is that the teachers establish a protocol of confidentiality within the professional cluster, which is to be maintained within the group. This way students can be assured that the video will not be seen beyond the group, and not be made available to anyone else for any other purposes.

Scenario 2 – Teacher research in one’s own school

Two senior staff members undertake a project in collaboration with an outside consultancy to learn more about their students and to better understand how they can address their learning needs. A group of ‘priority learners’ are selected across the junior classes; priority learners are identified groups of students who have historically not experienced success in the Aotearoa New Zealand education system (Ministry of Education, 2016). A significant number of the priority learners chosen are Māori and Pasifika students. The teachers of each junior class are then asked by the researchers to instruct their classes to create an A3-size reflection about their learning; this involves answering a number of personal questions that are answered on paper in written and visual form. The reflections stay in class, however, the reflections of the priority learners are electronically scanned and analysed further by the two teacher-researchers and emailed to the outside consultant. The priority learners are not informed of this.

This situation involves a mix of insider and outsider researchers, and numerous dilemmas emerge. Firstly, voluntary participation and informed consent is not sought in any way from the students, nor from parents. Secondly, the teacher-researchers instruct less senior staff members to gather data for research purposes; teachers could feel coerced to provide this information due to the hierarchical power relationships between management and teaching staff. Thirdly, the priority learners are predominantly Māori and Pasifika students, and the content of their work is of a personal nature which they are sharing specifically with one of their classroom teachers. And finally, the teacher-researchers are removing student work from the school for analysis and potential dissemination off-site.

In this situation ethics of care, such as respect for persons, truthfulness and confidentiality, are breached by the lack of clear research processes. Established relationships between the teacher-researchers, the teachers and the students are put at risk. The request for teachers to pass the priority students’ work on to the researchers exploits the power-relationship that the senior staff members have with the teachers, as well as the power-relationships that the teachers have with their students. The students have been deceived; they do not even know that they are participants in research, and therefore the students and their families have no power or say whatsoever in the process. The risks are highest here for the students and their parents, as students’ personal reflections are being shared with an outsider. The students’ work could potentially be disseminated widely without their knowledge, denying them of any confidentiality and anonymity. Ironically, the researchers’ intention is to address the learning needs of Māori and Pasifika students, yet they are inadvertently reinforcing power structures and contributing to indigenous and marginalized peoples and communities of Aotearoa New Zealand being treated as simply ‘Objects’ of research (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008).

To minimize risks in this research project, the researchers need to seek voluntary participation and informed consent from both the students and their whānau/family at the outset of the research; this way they can ethically gather information and use it outside of the school with the consultancy.

Students need to be made aware of the potential uses and audiences of the research results. A culture of respect and reciprocity could be created and encouraged if the researchers take the time to engage with and inform both the students and whānau about the purpose and processes of the research, and emphasise the choice to participate, as well as the right to withdraw. This would allow students some power and agency in this process, and give them a genuine voice in the research. It would also mean that the classroom teachers will not feel pressured to pass on information to the researchers, as the researchers themselves would be gathering it with the informed consent of the students. If the teacher-researchers aim to openly collaborate with the students and their whānau, then unnecessary deception and potential harm can be avoided.

Discussion

The ethics of educational research are not just the domain of academic researchers (Cullen, 2005). Secondary school teachers may be centrally involved in making ethical decisions about educational research in the classroom (Cullen, 2005); this is often the case when teachers carry out Teaching Inquiries that involve sharing video evidence or student work with colleagues from other schools, as in the first scenario, or with researchers based outside of the school, as in the second scenario. Teacher-researchers need to consider carefully the implications of the research process on the relationships that they have with student-participants. Professional teacher-student relationships that have already been established need to be sustained throughout the research. Consequently, one could argue that a focus on relationships is just as important as the ethical principles of voluntary participation and informed consent when carrying out research in a secondary school context; this is because so much of what teachers do in the classroom is about establishing relationships with students (Cullen, 2005).

Ethical care in research also includes sensitivities to diversity; research should give students and families of indigenous and marginalised communities the opportunity to communicate their needs and aspirations, rather than exploiting their knowledge for the sole purposes of the researcher (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008; Tupuola, 1994). When research is undertaken with secondary school students that belong to such communities, such as Māori and Pasifika in Aotearoa New Zealand, it must be built on respect, meaningful partnerships, collaboration and consensus (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008; Tupuola, 1994).

Conclusions

Ethical practice is an important aspect of any profession; teachers, therefore, need to behave ethically in any research they carry out, be it a large-scale collaborative project, or a smaller Teaching as Inquiry project. Recognising the complexities of the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent is an important step in producing research that is ethical and culturally sensitive. Researchers in the secondary school classroom must seek genuine voluntary participation and educated informed consent for their research to be ethically sound. Teachers should put the students' right to decline participation in any form of research above their own research needs. It is also important that they take into full consideration the design and processes of research projects and inquiries at the outset, anticipating the potential further uses of video or written evidence from the classroom is a priority. Teachers must first and foremost protect the students. Respectful relationships between teacher-researchers and participants that integrate collaboration and transparency into the research process will help to ensure that the research is both as productive and as ethical as it possibly can be.

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