RESEARCH ETHICS: SIGNIFICANCE, APPLICATION AND OBLIGATION TO THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH

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Abstract
The following article draws upon literature to define the term “ethics” and its application to the practice of educational research. It reflects on ethical obligations that a researcher can take on generally and more particularly for research study specifically on children.

Concept of “Ethics”
The Oxford English Dictionary (1976) defines “ethics” “relating to morals; morally correct, honorable, set of principles of morals, science of morals, moral principles, rules of conduct, whole field of moral science” (p.355). Longman’s Dictionary (1971) defines it as “a system of morality, a scientific study of morals,” and “ethical” means “being in accordance with a moral code.” Bogdan and Biklen (1998) contend that the term “ethics” is emotionally charged and surrounded with evocative and hidden meanings...while the word conjures up images of supreme authority and absolutes, ethics in research are the principles of right and wrong that a particular group accepts at a particular time. (p.42)

Therefore, the term “research ethics” signifies a moral enterprise between the researcher and the participant(s). It is a “unanimous agreement that researchers should avoid unethical behavior... All of us prefer a virtuous relationship with others... and the idea of deceiving others violates our personal moral code” (Eisner, 1998, p. 213).

Application of Ethics to Research
The assumption that Eisner (1998) holds, that the aim of educational research is the achievement of a virtue: the creation of knowledge which enlarges our understanding of education and leads to its improvement. Although educational research may further the careers of researchers, its public aim is to further the public good. However, this in no way means that in order to achieve social good, the researcher may harm others. Thus there is a strong need for the application of ethics

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to research. As Christians (2000) postulates, “moral frameworks are as fundamental for orienting us in social space as the need to establish our bearings in physical space.” (p.147)

The Belmont Report was signed into law in Washington, D.C., in 1979 thereby creating the protection of human subjects in all fields of research. Its basic ethical principles are the respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Its applications are in assessment of risk factor, selection of human subjects, and the nature of informed consent. These broad ethical principles provide a basis on which specific research ethics may be formulated, criticized and interpreted.

The principle of respect for persons holds two ethical assumptions: first, that individual should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection. Respect for the immature and the incapacitated may require protecting them while they mature or while they are incapacitated. Respect for persons demands that the participants enter the research voluntarily and with adequate information.

The principle of beneficence deals with acts that go beyond those of strict obligation. The expression of beneficent actions in this sense is not to harm the participants. Two general rules are to avoid harm by maximizing possible benefits and minimizing possible harm. The problem posed by these imperatives is to decide when it is justifiable to seek certain benefits despite the risks involved, and when the benefits should be foregone because of the risks.

The principle of justice is one of equality among the selection of participants. This process has to be scrutinized in order to determine whether some classes are being systematically selected simply because of their easy availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability, rather than for reasons directly related to the study.

With these underlying principles, research becomes an ethical venture. If researchers treat participants as “objects,” they learn only physical movements; if they treat participants as “organisms,” they then learn only about basic needs and reflexes of behavior; but if they treat them as “persons,” then the researchers are more likely to uncover understandings which are relevant to the human condition, and therefore containing practical value (Hunt, 1992). If research is to be authentic and relevant, researchers must first accept their own personhoods and co-participation in this human venture. Researchers can check this acceptance by placing themselves in a position to gauge their own intention in the research. Knowing one’s own intentions makes research a moral act.

Prior to the beginning of any kind of educational research, ethical approval for this moral act is of primary importance. Gaining ethical approval requires talking with participants prior to the final development of the design, describing the research, and asking how the findings can be presented so that participants will find it potentially valuable. This type of negotiated entry may serve, I feel, three purposes: the researcher becomes a learner, the participant(s) is motivated, and there is a negotiated, mutually satisfactory arrangement. Researchers may assume that participants who sign such a consent agreement are fully informed about what they
have consented to prior to the study (Eisner, 1998). However, the researcher may not be in a good position to inform the participants of what to expect. I believe that “field relationships” (Glesne, 1999) continually undergo informal renegotiation as respect, interest, and acceptance grow or wane for both researcher and participant. How much consent is needed continues to be a dilemma. Because “moral commitments, and existential meanings are negotiated dialogically” (Christians, 2000), fulfillment can never be achieved in isolation. However, the researcher must ensure that participants enter research projects voluntarily, understanding the nature of the study and the dangers and obligations that are involved.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that although participant consent meets a university’s requirement technically and legally, it also needs to be ethical in terms of relational matters. Ethics is not something that a researcher can forget or neglect once the demands of the institutional Review Boards and other gate keepers of research conduct are satisfied (Glesne, 1999). Ethical considerations are inseparable from the researcher’s everyday interactions with research participants and data collection. While it is important to think carefully about one’s ethical and political strategies at the beginning of the research process, it is not possible to make all of one’s ethical and political decisions once and for all at the start, and then stick to them for the duration of the project (Mason, 1996). I believe, ethical and political issues arise or take shape contextually throughout the research process, and need to be dealt with in ways which are informed and situated rather than formal and abstract.

In a developing country such as Pakistan research is a rare commodity. Hence, it is likely that participants may be misused such as being manipulated and deceived. Thus in Pakistan, a sense of cooperation and partnership in research may be more relevant to the ethical obligation than whether or not “informed consent” forms are signed. These forms may not hold any legal weight anyway. I feel that three fundamental questions need to be answered by any researcher before commencing a study: Who bears the responsibility for ethical research? What principles are required to protect the innocent from research abuse? And, does the regulation and control of ethics make research more ethical? (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998) In spite of binding regulations from research committees, research also requires a personal code of ethics (Punch, 1986) and self-inquiry before planning the research (Hatch, 1995), so that the researcher is prepared for any consequences.

Personal ethics requires critical reflection considered by some (Howe, 1986; Sirotkin; Strike & Soltis, 1985; Strom, 1989) to occupy a “central place” in ethical inquiry. Bull (1993) suggests that this reflection, based on theories of teaching and of moral theory in general, be “infused” into teacher education (p.81). Reflection is indispensable because in “the process of getting to know a teacher [participant]... [Understanding] deepens during periods of reflection” (Jackson, 1992; p.406). Therefore, researchers need to reflect regularly on their work and their actions. When writing the research text, researchers should be reading and re-reading several times the data collected so as to develop their understanding of the ethical implications.
associated with social and educational investigation (Burgess, 1989). Only then may a researcher make sound interpretations based on evidence and moral judgment.

Glesne (1999) identifies several roles that researchers easily assume: exploiter, reformer, advocate, and friend. She states that each role is accompanied by different ethical dilemmas. Questions of “exploitation” may tend to arise when the researcher becomes so immersed in gathering rich data that he or she neglects the required responsibility of reciprocity then suddenly feels guilty that he or she has given so little back in exchange for so much received. Thus the researcher may need to question and reflect upon whether or not he or she is “using” the participant only for personal gain. On the other hand, the researcher must not commit or make unreal promises to give certain things to the participants. The extent to which promises can be made and kept needs consideration and reflection based on value judgment and personal ethics.

The researcher as “reformer” attempts to “right” what he or she assumes to be “wrong.” Ethical dilemmas arise when the researcher unknowingly uncovers “dangerous” knowledge or inappropriate behaviors that are “outside the rules” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). How far is the researcher justified intervening, and should the researcher’s decisions be based on contextual elements or personal compulsions? Should the researcher tell a principal about poor teaching and incompetency observed? The reformer should be aware of their ethics and relationship to the ethical dilemmas of the research.

As an “advocate,” the researcher must have the sensitivity to advocate for a change only if findings are contextualized and framed within the realities of participants’ lives, and only if, once conceptualized, the findings are meaningful and just and will help to foster change. As a “friend,” the researcher must be able to discern how information is received: in the context of friendship or of research. I believe it is deceptive to cultivate rapport and even to express more friendship than a researcher actually feels, simply to inspire confidence and further the researcher’s own ends. Using friendships for self-serving motives is an unethical act.

However, at the center of a good working relationship in qualitative research is the development of “trust.” If relationships are not based on trust, then invariably there may be concealment of information or participants who give information simply to “please” the researcher with what he or she wants to hear (Cheek, 2000). Bassey (1999) refers to this quality as “trustworthiness” in qualitative research; something that ensures “validity of findings” by stating the truth of what happened (p.75). In everyday life, the nature of friendship and acquaintanceship differs, especially in a given context; therefore, the role of the researcher becomes one of conscious, moral action and responsibility to the kind of relationship that he or she enters. No research is conducted in a value-free, neutral context. Therefore, researchers need to be aware and alert to the ethical implications that emerge from the data of narratives or descriptions of experiences. The promise of participant anonymity in the final report is also an ethical consideration.

People who tend to volunteer for research are more inclined to be powerless in society. Educational participants whose status is not recognized often volunteer
under pressure from the administration: some may be subject to peer pressure, while others may feel obligated to participate because they feel unable to refuse. Only a few volunteer for personal gain and benefit in the way of guidance and assistance in their classroom. The application of ethics to research requires the researcher to be honest in telling the participants what the study entails and how much benefit they can expect from it, especially in cases where financial benefits are involved.

One of the biggest challenges for any researcher may be to understand what participants really “mean” by what they say. Things may not “be” as they look to an outsider’s eyes. A researcher should not impose his or her own values or introduce disruptive ideas when performing a research role in a culture or context outside of his or her own. Conducting a study outside one’s context raises some fundamental questions which researchers should always keep in mind. As a research student, I am deeply concerned about research ethics and I agree with the following questions raised by Tajik (2001): (a) is there any universal set of ethics that a researcher could carry and practice everywhere in the world? (b) what if the set of ethics which a researcher has promised to respect, does not resonate with the set of ethics that the participant is culturally, socially, personally, or religiously bound to abide by? (c) Can the researcher understand personal subjectivity as a safeguard to break the ethical boundaries of the study? (d) Do researchers work to bridge the gaps that exist in the contemporary knowledge frames about a phenomenon, or do they research to verify their own pre-conceived image and knowledge of the phenomenon? (e) Why do researchers choose the one example that supports their pre-conceived image and leave out many examples that do not support?

Researcher’s Ethical Obligations

The focus here is on researching young cluster which is distinct in researching adults. Therefore, certain factors need careful consideration. They become moral obligations as children are often considered young and immature (Goodlad, 1985). It is important to use the “I” to remind ourselves that children research is a moral commitment. For example, as a researcher with young participants aged five to six, ethical responsibilities become greater. When a researcher is given access to intimate details of day to day life in the young children’s setting, as Spodek, Saracho and Pellegrini (1998) agree, an ethical and moral obligation not to exploit those children that one is studying, becomes imperative as young children are especially vulnerable to all kinds of adult exploitation because of their lack of experience and power. Unfortunately, adults who teach and care for children are also at a disadvantage because of their relatively weak status and power, especially in a western society. However, in a developing country like Pakistan, adults, especially teachers and heads of schools, have more authority and power. Therefore, it must be ensured at all times that children are not used to meet one’s own ends, and thus term them as the “voiceless others” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). Above all, the children must come to no harm. A researcher has an obligation to give children a legitimate opportunity to say that they do not want to participate in the research; their rights should neither be violated nor questioned. A researcher may have passed through the stages of
childhood and motherhood, or fatherhood and may or may not have experienced schooling in the same way as the research participants. Therefore, the researcher must not believe that s/he has greater knowledge of children’s culture than they themselves do. Such a belief may pose an obstacle to conducting research successfully, and may cause one to interpret findings through their past frames of reference. Nor must one assume that the children’s social meaning is the same as the researcher’s social meaning.

In case an occasion arises when the participant children have no one in authority present, a researcher’s judgment to intervene as appropriate should depend on the situation. If children are placing themselves in serious physical danger or injury and a school authority is not present at the time, then in that case a “moral obligation to assist them in a way that is “protective”, becomes necessary. In other cases when circumstances are not physically dangerous, but instead reveal behavior that is “condemned” in society, the researcher’s decision to intervene may become a difficult and complex decision to make in the rush of events. A researcher’s personal ethical standards may rise, making it necessary to subordinate them to the researcher role in the interest of research.

Corsaro’s (1985) study (cited in Fine & Sandstorm, 1988) suggests letting the “children accept you, and slowly-re-actively-enter their world in the role they prescribe.” (p.42). For Corsaro, this is a “middle of the road” approach, to be a friend and a fellow player but not to push matters. The decision of the researcher’s role is left to the children to be prescribed; this is what Corsaro terms “reactive.” I feel this overt approach does not lead to deception in data gathering. When the researcher gains acceptance to the children’s hidden world that is the key indicator of acceptance. However, some things children may still choose not to tell because they recognize there are things not to be shared with another.

Reflecting on research relationships, I strongly emphasize that the researching of children’s private conversations raises particular ethical issues, especially in the case of the very asymmetrical relationship of power between the researcher and the researched. One may not be able to ask children to listen to tape recordings and indicate what they don’t want included; this would be impracticable. Children are vulnerable and willing research subjects, particularly in the school context where they are in a sense “held captive.” They are usually delighted to receive extra adult attention and a change from normal routine. They may thus speak without any inhibitions. However, if they request a researcher to answer their questions about his or her research trying to answer children’s queries as fully and clearly as possible is important to satisfy children’s curiosity. The researcher has an ethical obligation to treat participants with respect, patience and sensitivity, as Van Manen (1998) reminds us that the “researcher has to be a guardian and a defender of the true nature of the subject.” (p.20)

In synthesizing the raw data into research accounts, another ethical obligation arises. At every stage in the lengthy data collection period, review of the raw data is essential so that the full essence of the meaning is made as a whole and not in fragments. In order to obtain authentic and reliable interpretation analysis with the
participant(s) before writing the final accounts, must be shared especially if a commitment has been made to share the data before publication. Although critics may argue about the authenticity of children’s voices, but I believe this rests on the researcher to report in a “truthful” manner and with little distortions as possible. Connolly (1997) enforces “a need for researchers to be critically reflexive ... rather than appeal to a simple form of relativism.” (p.163). This may help researchers in developing more grounded claims about their research findings and also effectively yield a wealth of “honest” information.

However, says Van Manen, (1998), exposure of a case through publication or other means of dissemination poses several risks: the danger of presenting the case in a manner which is offensive to the participants. This includes violation of anonymity, subjecting, unwelcome publicity, exposing people to sanction because of behavior revealed must be considered ethically. Any publication demands that the involved participants have full knowledge so that no harm comes through publicly sharing the research. Any item to be published after the initial research will need prior permission from the participants. Research instruments and documents such as informed consent letters, field notes, and research texts must be kept in a confidential and secure place to be shared only with the individual(s) concerned or for an official review when required. The data must not fall into the hands of people with power who may misuse or misrepresent the contents.

Conclusion

This paper defines “ethics” generally and in its application to educational research. It examines the concept of research ethics, its principles, characteristics, issues and dilemmas. Some insights into the researcher’s moral obligations during his or her planned research study is given. However, no amount of consideration of a researcher’s role can cover all eventualities as, all ethical responsibilities and moral obligations lie with the individual researcher, the main determiner of ethical standards. As Christians (2000) reminds us, “moral obligations must be articulated within the fallible and irresolute voices of everyday life.” (p.20). I believe that researchers need to examine their own moral beliefs, values, intentions, and practices before, during, and upon completion of their research. Only by becoming aware will researchers be better equipped to deal with moral and ethical concerns as they emerge.

References