Researching in schools: Ethical issues

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Researching in Schools: Ethical Issues
Deslea Konza, Edith Cowan University, WA, Australia

Abstract: Genuine contributions to a field of knowledge usually require a methodical and considered approach to research, but strict control of variables is not possible in most educational settings. Teachers and researchers must work within a data-gathering framework that allows for the realities of schools and classrooms. This paper examines a number of ethical issues that arise when researching in schools—when the “pursuit of knowledge” comes into conflict with ethical practice in schools. This can be the result of differing expectations of teachers and researchers regarding the purpose of the research; of conflicts that arise when the time commitment to the research process begins to affect planning and teaching time; or when control of variables conflicts with the need to change pedagogical practices based on student need, and the classroom as a “research site” begins to take precedence over the classroom as a place of learning. Drawing on experiences from a number of research studies across multiple school sites, this paper concludes with a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring that the best interests of students and teachers always direct the progress of research.

Keywords: Ethics in Research, Educational Research

Introduction

Researching in Educational settings can be both challenging and confronting as the competing demands of research, teaching and learning raise significant ethical issues. Children comprise a vulnerable population (NHMRC, 2007) and so are deserving of our particular care and attention when involving them in our research. Some families are at risk through issues such as disability, poverty and low literacy levels, and so are more susceptible to exploitation unless researchers are sensitive to and respectful of their rights (Konza, 2005). Teachers, too, bring their own unique perspectives to research conducted in schools (Maloney & Konza, 2011), and consideration needs to be taken of the pressures they are under and the views they bring.

This paper is not a report of research or a literature review. It rather examines a number of ethical issues that arise when researching in schools – when the “pursuit of knowledge” comes into conflict with ethical practice in schools. This can be the result of differing expectations of teachers and researchers regarding the purpose of the research; of conflicts that arise when the time commitment to the research process begins to affect planning and teaching time; or when control of variables conflicts with the need to change pedagogical practices based on student need, and the classroom as a “research site” begins to take precedence over the classroom as a place of learning.

This paper draws on the experiences of the author in a number of research projects across multiple school sites in an Australian capital city. The primary aim in each case was to support the learning of students who were struggling with reading acquisition. Secondary aims were to work collaboratively with teachers so that the researcher could gain a better understanding...
of the realities of classroom practice, and for the teachers to build their technical understanding of the reading process.

Overall, primary aims were met in each project, with significant gains made in student reading achievement (see for example Konza et al, 2010). There were, however, several consistently occurring issues which detracted from the smooth implementation of the projects. This paper is an attempt to make some sense of those issues – to analyse some of the difficulties that arose. The paper concludes with a number of recommendations aimed at increasing the likelihood that rigorous research can be conducted while maintaining the best interests of students and teachers.

The Complexity of the Classroom Context

Twenty-five years ago, Doyle (1986) identified distinctive properties that are typical of classrooms, whether they contain a kindergarten or senior class, whether the teacher is highly formal or informal in orientation and teaching style, and whether initial reading or advanced physics is being taught. Some brief analysis of these will provide a context for the ensuing discussion.

Classrooms are, according to Doyle, multidimensional. There is a complex human dimension consisting of people, usually with differing abilities, personalities, skill levels, and inclinations towards learning. Classrooms are also full of objects: furniture, resources and student belongings in varying conditions and degrees of order. Classrooms have a task dimension, with tasks differing in nature, level of demand and interest.

A related classroom characteristic is simultaneity. Many different activities coincide and/or overlap. Classroom activity may be overlaid and/or interrupted at any time by questions, messages at the door, malfunctioning equipment, the need to redirect an off-task student, or any number of other things. The teacher and students respond and react in an environment in constant motion.

This leads to what Doyle refers to as immediacy. Decisions need to be made quickly in response to the rapid pace of classroom interactions. Situations and moods can change quickly and often require immediate decision-making and action.

The immediacy of a classroom is related to its unpredictability. The potential for something unexpected to occur is high in such a multi-faceted environment. Even the best-prepared teacher cannot predict an event such as a child suddenly having a seizure and the consequent responses on the part of other students to that event.

Classrooms are also very public places. Many students witness how individual infractions, disagreements and so on are managed. The public nature of classrooms brings its own pressures and exerts particular influences on both teachers and students.

Finally, Doyle states that classrooms and the individuals within them have histories. Events, attitudes and responses are usually dependent upon events, attitudes and responses which have occurred in the past; for example, a tardy student who has never been late before will receive a very different response from that given to a chronic truant.

Each of these characteristics could pose difficulties for research, potentially affecting the administration of assessments, the fidelity of implementation of an intervention program, the reliability of data – and the willingness of teachers to persist in the face of such complexity and so many distractions. There are, however, important reasons for persisting in attempts to embed research in those environments where student learning takes place.
The Importance of an Evidence base for Educational Practice

Genuine contribution to a field of knowledge usually requires a methodical and considered approach to research. While certain quantum leaps in our understanding of the world and beyond are the result of “aha” moments, or the outcome of a single extraordinary insight, significant progress in important areas of human achievement are usually the result of the careful and incremental assessment of particular factors in order to determine their impact while controlling as many other variables as possible. These procedures have gradually built a body of knowledge that has informed the community about what works and what does not, and resulted in dramatically improved life outcomes for progressive generations. The growth of such research-based knowledge has overcome practices that have traditionally occurred (for example the practice of “bleeding” patients to reduce fever); that are the result of anecdotes (“do this because my grandmother did and she was cured”) or intuition (“I have a hunch that….”). While some hunches and traditional practices have eventually been confirmed as worthwhile as the result of careful research, many other practices have been exposed as futile or even harmful.

Educational outcomes have a great impact on the quality of an individual’s life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007; CCCH, 2004; Dugdale and Clarke, 2008; Firth & Cunningham, 2007; McWhirter et al, 2007; OECD, 2002). Education, therefore, deserves no less a rigorous approach than medicine or the sciences when determining how children should be taught. Yet educational practice has in many cases been directed by tradition (“We’ve always done it this way”); by personal experience (“I taught my child to read just by reading to her, therefore all children can be taught this way”), or by a “gut feeling” that teaching in a particular manner will bring certain benefits.

Combining research rigour and the requirements of a research paradigm with the realities of classrooms presents considerable challenges. When one considers the complexity of classroom environments, strict control of variables is not possible in most educational settings. Teachers and researchers must work within a data-gathering framework that allows for the realities of schools and classrooms. The following section explores a number of different issues that arose throughout the implementation of several classroom-based research projects – issues that provoked consideration of the ethical implications of working with teachers in schools, even when that research arises from the best of motives.

Issues Arising from Classroom-based Research

Manipulation of a Potential “Power Differential”

In their enthusiasm to convince teachers of the importance of their proposed research, zealous researchers with good language facility – the “gift of the gab” – and with the added credibility of doctoral qualifications and publications, may unwittingly take advantage of a perceived power differential between them and the teachers they are trying to convince. The clear moral purpose behind improving student outcomes can also be used to strengthen arguments for conducting educational research. Because most teachers entered the profession to make a difference to children’s lives, this can be a persuasive argument. Thus researchers must be careful not to unintentionally “coerce” teachers to participate in research that may very well be useful, but which may also cause inconvenience and other frustrations to teachers. Teach-
er “buy-in”, so important for successful school-based research, may be the initial result of a powerful and persuasive argument for the research, but is likely to waver and disappear if the project meets the researchers’ needs more that those of the teachers and their students.

**Understanding of Research Outcomes: “Incremental Learning” Versus the “Definitive Answer”**

Related to the previous point is the potential for misunderstandings around the likely outcomes of the planned project. Researchers are generally familiar with the incremental nature of the growth of new knowledge. This is not always the case with teachers. Because teachers’ daily lives are immersed in the learning experiences of their students, and facing the challenges of students who are not making progress, they are, understandably enough, searching for definitive answers to the big questions, rather than the addition of one small piece of new knowledge. Expressions of disappointment on the teachers’ behalf at the conclusion of the research that problems still remain, that the “answer” was not provided for every student, points to the fact that the unlikely appearance of the “magic bullet” for all was not made clear enough.

In their enthusiasm, researchers may overstate the likely outcomes of the planned research. Once again, this may result in initial teacher enthusiasm waning to the point of apathy or even negativity. An honest appraisal of the potential benefits must be part of any negotiation to do research in schools.

**Differing Understandings of the Importance of Data**

Discussion of this point first requires an explanation of the broad outline of the projects that provided the impetus for this paper. Five quite similar projects were conducted over three years with groups of up to 12 schools each time, with the targeted year levels varying from the first years of schooling to the middle and upper primary years. The research projects involved five staged Professional Learning (PL) days over a school year, the provision of several standardised reading assessment instruments, and training in their administration. In each case, two or three teachers attended from each school, and all were asked to identify up to six lower-achieving students in their classes who would be targeted for intervention. A typical timeline of activity is summarised in Table 1 below.
Table 1: Timeline of Research Projects

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Personnel involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PL Day 1 (Feb)</td>
<td>Introduction to project. Distribution and training in administration of standardised assessments</td>
<td>Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers conduct assessments with target students and return data to researchers. Teachers also add classroom-based and qualitative data to provide full picture of student performance. Researchers analyse data and develop draft individual programs</td>
<td>Participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL Day 2 (late March)</td>
<td>Analysed student data returned to teachers; group discussion of results. Shared discussion of interventions with redrafting based on teacher input. Provision of teaching materials and guidelines for implementation</td>
<td>Researchers and participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between sessions</td>
<td>Implementation and monitoring of targeted intervention supported by email contact with researchers and school visits when requested</td>
<td>Participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL Day 3 (May)</td>
<td>Modelling of individual and small group strategies. Sharing, feedback on program implementation. Advice re continuation of intervention program</td>
<td>Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participating teachers and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between sessions</td>
<td>Implementation and monitoring of targeted intervention supported by email contact with researchers and school visits when requested</td>
<td>Participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL Day 4 (August)</td>
<td>Sharing, feedback on program implementation. Advice re continuation of intervention program</td>
<td>Participating teachers and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between sessions</td>
<td>Implementation and monitoring of targeted intervention Post-testing early November Analysis of post-test data</td>
<td>Participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL Day 5 (late Nov)</td>
<td>Presentation and discussion of post-test data Discussion regarding Focus group evaluation</td>
<td>Participating teachers and researchers</td>
</tr>
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</table>

As explained in Table 1, the expectation on the part of the researchers was that, after the initial training day, the assessments would be administered by the participating teachers and the data returned to the researchers so that they could be analysed in time for presentation at PL Day 2. Despite a clear timeline that was explained on Day 1, and a series of reminders, return of data was frustratingly slow. In some cases data were delivered only on PL Day 2,
too late for inclusion in analysis and discussion for that day; in other cases the data never appeared. Reasons for this inevitably referred to a lack of time to conduct the assessments amid the “busyness” of the teachers’ days.

Two approaches were taken to address this issue as the successive projects rolled out, both of which had ethical implications. The first approach related to the offer of assistance in conducting the assessments, which was accepted with great enthusiasm by some teacher participants. It is of far greater value if the teachers themselves conduct the assessments as they come to a deeper understanding of their students’ difficulties and also of the reading process. The researchers, however, had a greater chance of obtaining the data if they conducted the assessments themselves. When this occurred, the understanding of the teacher participants was clearly compromised as they missed a challenging but important learning experience, but the researchers did receive their data.

Another response to this issue occurred in the next research project. Additional time for teachers to conduct the assessments – half a day per student-was built into the project. This added a significant cost but resulted in a very small increase in data return. Time was still purported to be the issue, as in several cases, plans went awry as a result of several of the factors identified by Doyle as adding complexity to classrooms. Days would be booked with a relief teacher only to have those precious hours dwindle as teachers responded to other events. In the next rollout, the time relief was extended to a full day per student. This did result in significant improvement in data return but not in complete data return. Making the decision regarding how much time was reasonable was difficult. Doubling the amount of time that an experienced researcher would take seemed reasonable but perhaps did not take into account how long it takes to become familiar with standardised instruments – and perhaps the original explanations and practice periods were not sufficient.

The frustration was compounded in those cases where the pre-test data were forthcoming but not the post-test data. By this time it appeared that the teachers had received what they perceived to be the full benefit of their involvement in the project. Delivery of the post-test data was not of importance to them, even to those who believed from their students’ performance that significant progress had been made. Friendly and jocular reminders received friendly and jocular responses – but few results. Gentle reminders of their responsibilities received apologetic responses – but few results. Reminders from their governing body, who had paid for the research, had little impact. What was the ethical response in these cases? Struggling students appeared to have made progress but the data had been compromised to such an extent that the overall effectiveness of the program was impossible to judge. Ironically, these projects were always evaluated very highly by the participants with many of the most “guilty” (i.e. those who did not deliver their data) requesting further involvement in future projects.

Focus group sessions with the teachers regarding a solution resulted in the recommendation for even more time to be allocated to assessment despite the fact that many of the teachers did manage to conduct individual assessments within half a day – and some had managed it with no additional time allocated. It is clear that researchers and teachers had very different perceptions of their individual responsibilities, and effective ways of overcoming these differences completely have not yet been established. To what extent different expectations and needs of individual teachers can be met continues to be a challenge.
Control of Variables Versus Immediate Student Needs

Another issue related to a conflict that arose between maintaining the research methodology and responding to student needs. In one project the researchers planned to work in a single school with three experimental classes and one control class over a year to evaluate the effect of a particular reading intervention. Within a few weeks, the teacher in the control group expressed the desire to adopt the experimental procedures because it appeared that the intervention was having an immediate impact on student learning. The teacher did not want her students to be disadvantaged because she had originally requested “control group” status. The research had been funded on the basis of the original methodology. The funding body strongly encouraged continuation of the original methodology with a wait-list design included, whereby the new procedures could be implemented after two terms with the control group. Thus, there were competing priorities between the funding body, who wished to maintain the integrity of the design – which was much closer to the gold standard of research than educational research usually comes-and the needs of the students, which demanded that they be given the best available instruction as soon as possible. The needs of the students were considered paramount, and the teacher of the control group began using the experimental program. The eventual results bore out the wisdom of this decision, but the research results then had more limited avenues for publication – a frustration for the funding body and to some extent, the researchers.

Recommendations in Response to the Identified Ethical Issues

The following recommendations are put forward as ways in which some of these issues may be resolved – or partially resolved. All require a commitment to consider the interests of both the teachers and students in schools above the implementation of the research. Because all projects referred to in this article were conducted in metropolitan schools in Australia, the following recommendations should be considered with that context in mind. The extent to which findings may be generalised and conclusions relevant in other contexts may be limited.

Seek Informed Consent on an Ongoing Basis

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of seeking consent on an ongoing basis in qualitative research (Cassell, 1982; Erlandson, 1993; Richards & Schwarz, 2002), but such considerations are important in all research. Most forms of consent include the assurance that participants can withdraw at any time, but there are several benefits in seeking informed progressively throughout the project. It serves the purpose of keeping the researchers “honest” – if not, participants will have multiple reminders that they can walk away from the project. Continually negotiating consent also empowers the participants by reminding them that they have the right to stay or leave. Importantly it can also provide an opportunity to remind participants of their responsibilities towards the research project.

Provide Careful Explanation of the Research Aims and Potential Outcomes

Although it was considered by the researchers in the projects referred to in this paper that the purpose of the research projects, and the likely outcomes were explained in some detail,
confusion regarding the potential benefits and the fact that definitive answers rarely emerge from single pieces of research were not communicated clearly enough. Some teachers felt that the project would solve all their problems – and while unrealistic, this attitude was prevalent enough to deduce that more effort needs to be made in ensuring that teachers understand the slow and often laborious process involved in determining the best way forward in many educational endeavours. Teachers are then unlikely to become involved in projects with unrealistic expectations and experience the inevitable disappointment when they remain unmet.

**Acknowledge more Directly the Time Commitment in School-based Research**

Many researchers, because of their distance from classrooms, are unaware of the realities of daily school life and the impact that involvement in research can have on teachers. A greater awareness of the time-and energy-commitments that research in classrooms requires, may result in more realistic costing of such elements as teacher release from classrooms. When teachers have the desire and the capacity to be more directly involved, the research endeavour of all involved can only improve.

**Consider a Mixed Methods Approach more Often**

While classroom-based research is rarely able to meet the requirements of “gold standard” research – the use of randomised trials and the selection of valid control groups (Shelley, 2005) – a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) may overcome some of the difficulties of being unable to control the many variables present in schools. Mixed methods research can do more than simply combine quantitative and qualitative analysis; it can allow for more complex approaches in all stages of a study – from problem identification to data collection and analysis, to final conclusions. Such an approach would have the potential to involve teacher participants more directly – and perhaps engage them more deeply in the research component of projects such as those described in this article.

**Conclusion**

This paper has identified a number of issues which have emerged from engaging with teachers in classroom based research in Australia. Researchers need to be aware of their responsibilities towards their partner researchers in schools, and of the need to explain carefully the potential impact of conducting research in classrooms. Researchers and teachers often have quite different expectations of the potential benefits of research, and of the importance of careful data collection and analysis. Seeking consent on an ongoing basis, acknowledging the complexity of teachers’ daily lives and the time commitment made by teachers to be involved in research, as well as exploring as many ways as possible to involve teachers as partners in research may contribute to a more mutually beneficial collaboration. Finally, it must always be the interests of the students that guide decision-making when schools open their doors to the researcher.
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About the Author

Dr. Deslea Konza

Deslea Konza has had experience teaching students of all ages with a range of special needs, including those associated with blindness, profound hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and multiple disabilities. She is currently director of the Fogarty Learning Centre at Edith Cowan University and undertakes research in the areas of reading development, particularly for those children who do not develop these skills as easily as their peers. She has published in the areas of special education policy, teacher education, hearing impairment, gifted education, and dual exceptionality. Her current research interests focus on reading disability, and developing the capacity of teachers to support the literacy development of all students.
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