

Conducting and Reporting Research: Original Papers

An Invited Paper

Planning, Undertaking and Disseminating Research in Early Childhood Settings: An Ethical Framework

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This statement is intended to guide academic researchers, teachers, postgraduate students, managers, licensees and any other persons who may be involved, who plan to conduct or participate in research in early childhood settings. The framework is distinguished from professional codes of ethics for teachers which do not focus specifically on research or teachers as researchers. It identifies some questions, issues and dilemmas that may arise throughout the research process.

In recent years there has been an increase in research activities in the early childhood community in New Zealand. Lecturers in academic positions have been upgrading to doctoral qualifications. Early childhood teachers are proceeding to postgraduate studies and carrying out research to meet postgraduate requirements. The concept of action research has entered professional discourse. Teachers may also be asked to participate in a range of outside research projects funded by the Ministry of Education as part of its early childhood initiatives, and academic research led by tertiary partners. The annual NZ Early Childhood Research Symposia and the range of articles in New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education reflect the rapid growth of the early childhood research culture. Whether as participant or researcher, an awareness of ethical considerations should guide responsible decision making about research activities. The growth of qualitative research, in particular, has challenged researchers to acknowledge the ethical tensions that permeate the research process. Participation in formal ethics review procedures does not negate the researcher's responsibility to engage in on-going ethical decision making.

This framework focuses on ethical dilemmas and issues specifically related to research in early childhood settings. It should be read in conjunction with guidelines and codes of ethics for researchers developed by universities, research associations and other organisations that take account of the responsibilities of researchers and provide some protection for participants by ensuring a process of ethical clearance. These reflect ethical principles such as:

- respect for persons
- minimisation of harm and maximisation of benefits
- informed consent
- voluntary participation
- respect for privacy and confidentiality (or credit where appropriate)

- avoidance of unnecessary deception
- avoidance of conflict of interest
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi considerations
- social and cultural sensitivity
- justice

The framework applies to research that may be conceptualised on a continuum from 'insider' teacher research to 'outsider' university/contract research. Ethical considerations related to teacher reflective practice and self-review may overlap with this statement although specific examples of these activities are not included.

Ethical decision making can be guided by two perspectives: universal ethical principles and a focus on relationships (or whanaungatanga). Ethical principles underpin the issues and considerations outlined in the framework. The framework also reflects a focus on the relationships involved in a research setting. A relationships perspective is particularly important for small scale qualitative studies in a single setting, and when action research and other methodologies involve researchers and participants in more than one role.

The framework is structured according to the processes of planning, undertaking and disseminating research and poses issues for:

- teachers intending to carry out research as part of their professional role, for postgraduate research requirements, or as participants in government-funded projects;
- teachers who have been asked to participate in research by colleagues;
- teachers who have been asked to participate in research by outsider researchers (e.g., academic researchers, postgraduate researchers, contract researchers), and;
- outsider researchers who wish to approach centres to participate in research.

Each of the three parts (Planning, Undertaking, Disseminating) is based on issues relating to the unique aspects of working in early childhood settings, that is, researching with under five year olds, researching in a team environment and relationships with parents, families, whānau and communities. General requirements that arise from the ethical principles above, for example, for informed consent, are not covered as these are covered in generic codes of ethics for researchers.

Part A. Planning the Proposed Research: Research Questions, Design and Procedures

1. Researching with Under Fives

Questions:

- Are the research topic and questions appropriate for the age group?
- Are the data gathering procedures appropriate for the age group?
- Are the children able to give consent/assent?
- Do the procedures make good use of children's time?

- Who benefits from the research?
- Has the outsider researcher considered the time involved in building a relationship with the children to ensure authentic findings?
- How will non-participant children be excluded from records/data (e.g., fieldnotes, photographs, videos, audiotapes etc)?
- Have Māori communities, and other cultural groups, been consulted, about the appropriateness of the research topic for their children?

Considerations: Particular research topics may be quite inappropriate to research with children under five and/or particular cultural groups. Some research plans that involve children in activities that are age inappropriate or that might damage self-esteem need to be reconsidered. Researchers must be sensitive to the needs of the children, e.g., privacy, fatigue, interests, safety, and acknowledge that the research may not always be the priority for these reasons. Teacher researchers and outsider researchers should plan ahead for their response to such situations and be aware of the non-verbal and verbal means through which children may 'withdraw consent'.

2. Researching in a Team Environment

Questions:

- Do all staff need to agree to participate? Is the research feasible if one staff member does not want to participate?
- Is voluntary participation of staff constrained by a power relationship (e.g., head teacher-colleague)?
- Does the involvement of one staff member impinge on the roles and responsibilities of others?
- Is the research or presence of a researcher likely to change team roles or team dynamics?
- Will the research be affected if a member of staff changes during the course of the research?
- Is the research focus appropriate (e.g., appraisals and self-review)?
- How much personal time will teachers be expected to contribute to research activities?

Considerations: All research activity must be good use of teachers' time and have benefits for the centre. Team roles and dynamics should be considered when agreeing to participate in both teacher research and outsider research. In a team environment individual participation may have unexpected outcomes for the whole team, and subsequently the centre's programme and children. Potential conflicts of interest between teacher roles and researcher roles should be identified.

3. Relationships with Parents, Families, Whānau and Communities

Questions:

- Are there cultural beliefs and practices that affect access decisions and processes?

- Do parents/caregivers understand the full implications of the research questions and processes?
- Do parents/caregivers understand the distinction between the research and the centre's normal teaching programme?
- Are informed consent procedures in place for each specific research project, or part of the project (e.g., taking photographs)?
- Have parents/families been informed about storage of data?

Considerations: Generic approval from parents/guardians to observe children does not exempt researchers, including teacher researchers, from the use of specific informed consent procedures for research projects. Informed consent procedures should consider cultural beliefs and practices and may require prior consultation within the community/ies.

Part B. Research Processes: Undertaking the Research

1. Researching with Under Fives

Questions:

- Is there ongoing negotiation and sensitivity with regard to consent/assent and voluntary participation?
- Is the researcher sensitive to the reality of the everyday teaching and learning processes?
- What is the effect of the research (e.g., time taken) on the teaching and learning environment?
- Are the data gathering techniques working as planned? Do they need modification to account for young children's participation?
- What happens for the research when original participants leave and new children join the group?

Considerations: Wherever possible, researchers should ensure that research activities do not disrupt children's routines or play. Moreover, when young children are involved the research activity may not be top priority. Researchers must be prepared to intervene in situations where children's well-being is compromised. Researchers must be sensitive to the needs of the children, for example, privacy, fatigue, interests. Researchers must be aware that children may be trying to please the researcher by remaining involved and be alert to differing participation levels from day-to-day. Consider that children may be 'withdrawing consent' through non-verbal as well as verbal means. If the approved research activity is additional to the normal environment, the amount of time children are involved in the research must be monitored. Teacher researchers must be aware of a potential conflict of interest in their dual roles.

2. Researching in a Team Environment

Questions:

- Is there ongoing negotiation and sensitivity with regard to consent and voluntary participation?

- Is the ability to withdraw from the research until a particular point clear?
- Who will monitor and take responsibility for any changes that occur in team dynamics?
- What is the effect of the research (e.g., time taken) on the teaching and learning environment?
- Does the researcher have a responsibility if s/he observes unacceptable practices?
- What happens if the researcher/s change during the time-span of the research?

Considerations: A first consideration is to distinguish the use of reflective practice for evaluative/teaching purposes compared with research purposes. Reflective practice/inquiry/research are likely to be on a continuum of activity, each with their own ethical considerations. There is potential conflict of interest when the researcher is a teacher in the centre. Colleagues may feel pressured to continue with the research even when they are uncomfortable with changes in team dynamics or the effect of the research on the learning and teaching environment.

3. Relationships with Parents, Families/Whanau and Communities

Questions:

- Where outsider researchers are involved, what role do teachers have in enlisting participants?
- Is there ongoing negotiation and sensitivity with regard to consent and voluntary participation?
- Is the ability to withdraw from the research until a particular point clear?
- Are parents/families/communities informed or negotiated with when research questions and processes are modified?
- How are new parents and families that join the centre informed about the research? Do they feel pressured to join existing projects?

Considerations: Researchers must consider ways that parents, families, whanau and communities can be involved in ongoing and legitimate decision making with regards to research participation and research processes. In addition, there may be stages of consent applied in a long-term project. The researcher has ultimate responsibility for research processes and should not put undue pressures on parents and families who may have other priorities.

Part C. Disseminating Data and Findings

1. Researching with Under Fives

Questions:

- How will visual data such as photographs and videos be used in presentations and publications? Are there issues of anonymity/confidentiality? Is the use of visual data fair and equitable for all participants?

- Has consent been negotiated for visual data to be used in PowerPoint presentations and lectures?
- Are parents aware of the ethical issues in consent procedures regarding the use of visual data?
- Is there a time limit on the use of visual data?
- Can parents assist researchers by reading transcripts to children or discussing other data with them as validation processes?

Considerations: Researchers need to consider ways that children can be empowered to participate in validation and dissemination processes. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that children are not reduced to ‘cuteness’ in the dissemination of research findings. As participants in the research process children have the same rights as adults who are involved in the research. Use of photographs and video footage should be carefully stored and not included in copies of presentation material given to conference or seminar participants.

2. Researching in a Team Environment

Questions:

- Can the teaching team use outsider researcher/s’ data for other purposes? Has this been negotiated?
- Whose knowledge is valued in presentations and publications?
- Can researcher and teacher interpretations co-exist?
- What procedures will be used to validate findings?
- What happens if teachers disagree with a researcher's findings?
- What will happen if there are negative implications/findings?

Considerations: Researchers and teachers need to have thought through the use of data for curriculum documentation, ERO documentation, spin-off projects and suchlike. Researchers have an obligation to be transparent in the ways that they interpret, validate and disseminate research. They also have a responsibility to ensure that participants are supported to act on findings.

3. Relationships with Parents, Families/Whanau and Communities

Questions:

How will parents/families/communities be informed about the results and findings of a study?

- Have procedures for sharing data (e.g., videos) with parents/families been considered?
- Can a second round of consent processes be used to approve use of visual data in presentations and publications?
- Whose knowledge is valued in presentations and publications?

- What will happen if there are negative implications/findings?

Considerations: Researchers have an obligation to be transparent in the ways that they interpret, validate and disseminate research. In particular, researchers must consider ways that parents, families, whanau and communities can be involved in ongoing and legitimate decision making with regards to research dissemination.

Part D. Some General Concerns

1. Mentoring and Research

Research mentors need to have a clear contractual arrangement with teachers. Questions to ask include:

- Who is responsible for finding time and funding for the research?
- Who has control over the research?
- Whose responsibility is it to obtain ethical clearance and to whose organisation?
- Given the considerations in the above framework, when does a mentor step in when s/he perceives problems exist?

2. Conflicts of Interest

Early childhood teachers and researchers work within a small community in New Zealand and may have multiple roles (e.g., teacher, parent, postgraduate student, academic researcher, member of community/professional groups, student or associate teacher) that could impact on the research. Questions to ask include:

- Do subtle pressures to participate arise from the close networks in early childhood education?
- Do access procedures allow time for potential participants to independently consider the project and its implications for all participants?

3. Postgraduate Research

Postgraduate researchers may need to meet institutional research requirements that may not be required by the participating settings. Questions to ask include:

- Have all interested bodies/people been consulted prior to approaching participants (e.g. centre management and/or relevant association or other umbrella body)?
- Have all institutional requirements been explained, including the requirement to inform Ethics Committees of any changes to procedures, following initial approval procedures?
- Do participants understand that they may perceive an academic report to be negative or threatening if issues are raised by researchers? Theses and academic publications require an analytical style that could be seen to criticise participants and settings.
- Who holds ownership of the data? Employers and tertiary institutions may have their own rights to ownership.

Conclusion

Undertaking research with human participants, and especially with children aged under five years, is a privilege. Ethical issues permeate all aspects of qualitative research and require close attention to decision-making about research topics and choices of methodologies, methods and dissemination of findings. Researchers have a responsibility to act in the best interests of their participants. This framework aims to focus those researching in early childhood settings on ethical principles and processes to consider throughout the research activities that involve children, teachers, parents, families and communities.

Note

This framework revises an earlier 2005 version published online at www.childforum.com

Ethical Guidelines that Complement this Framework

Anae, M., Coxon, E., Mara, D., Wendt-Samu, T., & Finau, C. (2001). *Pasifika research guidelines*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. Retrieved April 21, 2009 from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/pasifika_education/5915

Health Research Council. (2008). *Guidelines for Researchers on Health Research Involving Māori*. Auckland: Health Research Council. Retrieved April 21, 2009 from <http://www.hrc.govt.nz/assets/pdfs/publications/MHGuidelines%202008%20FINAL.pdf>

New Zealand Association for Research in Education. (1998). *Ethical guidelines*. Retrieved April 21, 2009 from http://www.nzare.org.nz/pdfs/NZARE_ethical_guidelines.pdf.

Further Reading about Ethics of Research

Bishop, R., & Glynn, T. (1999). *Culture counts: Changing power relations in education*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.

This book has an important focus on the Māori concept of whanaungatanga (relationships), particularly chapter three re addressing power and control issues in educational research.

Bishop, R. (2005). Freeing ourselves from neocolonial domination in research: A Kaupapa Māori approach to creating knowledge. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 109-138). New York: Sage.

Discusses researcher power and positioning in relationships with Māori participants. Provides critical questions for researchers to consider before and during research activity related to five issues of power.

Bone, J. (2005). Theorising in progress: An ethical journey: Rights, relationships and reflexivity. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 30(1), 1-5.

A researcher reflects about challenges to ethical procedures, from children and adults in three different early childhood settings.

Coady, M. M. (2001). Ethics in early childhood research. In G. MacNaughton, S. A. Rolfe & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: International perspectives on theory and practice* (pp.64-72). Buckingham: Open University Press.

A clear introduction to ethical aspects of research.

Cullen, J. (2005). The ethics of research in educational settings. In P. Adams, K. Vossler & C. Scrivens (Eds.), *Teachers' work in Aotearoa New Zealand* (pp. 252-261). Southbank: Thomson Dunmore Press.

Discusses two perspectives on ethics: principlist and relationships; and the outsider-insider continuum of research.

Danby, S., & Farrell, A. (2005). Opening the research conversation. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 49-67). Maidenhead, Berk: Open University Press.

Focuses on children having the right to be fully informed about research. Discussed using evidence from research conversations with children about the process of having given consent to participate. Includes an example of a consent form.

Degotardi, S. (2008). Looking out and looking in: Reflecting on conducting educational research in a child-care nursery. *The First Years: New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 10(2), 15-19.

Discusses tensions that arise in an observational research project in a long day-care nursery, extending ethics discussion into research with infants.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). Trusting children's accounts in research. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 5(1), 47-63.

Examines ethical principles and processes using two studies involving children in the context of Queensland, Australia. Highlights the complexity of ethical issues and the commitment required of researchers to ascertain, analyse and report children's perspectives.

Flewitt, R. (2005). Conducting research with young children: Some ethical considerations. *Early Child Development and Care*, 175(6), 553-565.

Reflexive account of ethnographic study of four three-year-old children in home and centre settings, particularly in relation to informed consent and use of visual data.

Goodfellow, J., & Hedges, H. (2007). Early childhood practitioner research "centre stage": Contexts, contributions and challenges. In L. Keesing-Styles & H. Hedges (Eds.), *Theorising early childhood practice: Emerging dialogues* (pp. 187-210). Baulkham Hills, NSW: Pademelon Press.

Discusses continuum of practitioner inquiry and research, and associated methodological and ethical issues.

Goldstein, L.S. (2000). Ethical dilemmas in designing collaborative research: Lessons learned the hard way. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 517- 532.

An honest appraisal of the ethical dilemmas encountered by a university researcher when researching collaboratively with a classroom teacher.

Greig, A., Taylor, J. & Mackay, T. (2007). *Doing research with children* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Chapter 8, "Consultation and participation with children in research" is helpful for considering a range of appropriate methodological approaches in relation to children's participation. Chapter 9, "Ethics of doing research with children" considers ethics broadly and provides a table of good practice guidelines with useful questions.

Guo, K. (2009). Embedding self, others, culture and ethics in intercultural research. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 12, 141 - 152

Describes dilemmas experienced when attempting to marry institutional ethical principles and cultural sensitivities in an early childhood research setting.

Hedges, H. (2002). Beliefs and principles in practice: Ethical research with child participants. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 5, 31-47.

Describes, examines and problematises efforts to empower four-year-old children's participation in research activity.

Hill, M. (2005). Ethical considerations in researching children's experiences. In S Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experience: Approaches and methods* (pp. 61-86). London: Sage.

Provides an overview of ethical principles and decision-making processes. Provides a table of ethical issues with useful questions for researchers to consider. Lists matters that ought to be included in participant information provided to children. Examines different types of confidentiality such as public, social network and third-party.

Meade, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Riding the waves: Innovation in early childhood education*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

This collection includes thoughtful accounts of the research experiences of teacher-researchers, including relationships between teachers and research associates. Refer also to *Catching the Waves* (2005) and *Cresting the Waves* (2007), in the *Innovation in Early Childhood Education* series of reports, for descriptions of the research.

Moss, J. (2008). *Researching education: Visually digitally spatially*. Rotterdam: Netherlands: Sense.

A collection that addresses issues concerning research and ethics in a visual/digital world.

Podmore, V. (2006). *Observation: Origins and approaches to early childhood research and practice*. Wellington: NZCER.

Considers ethics in relation to assessment and research methodologies and practices.

Stephenson, A. (2009). Horses in the sandpit: Photography, prolonged involvement and 'stepping back' as strategies for listening to children's voices. *Early Child Development and Care*, 179(2), 131-141.

A thoughtful, reflexive account of methodological and ethical issues related to naturalistic observations and accessing children's understandings.

Tolich, M. (Ed.) (2001). *Research ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Auckland: Pearson Education.

Commentaries from established New Zealand researchers on aspects of ethical research; including chapters on Māori research, interviewing children and families, classroom research.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joy Cullen was formerly Professor of Early Years Education at Massey University College of Education, Palmerston North. She is now retired and living in Australia where she continues to publish in early childhood education.

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