

Notes taken at the NZARE ethics workshop on 4th November

NB these notes are in draft form only. They were taken as the workshop progressed, by Bronwen Cowie & Rosemary De Luca, and are in no way to be taken as an official record. They are for the general information of members only.

Changing views of ethics in educational research in New Zealand

Points raised included:

- the impact of the Cartwright report and the changing political and social context for educational research.
- the expectation of greater teacher involvement (practitioner research by school and university based teachers/lecturers)
- the influence of PBRF
- cultural considerations
- the role of technology (e.g. in data-gathering)
- the influence of contract research – the impact of the Ministry of Education’s dominance of research funding on the focus and design of research; issues of research questions and methods, what is reported, how and to whom – and so on
- the influence of debates around quantitative/qualitative/mixed methods and ‘gold standard’ research.

Issues around current practice: emergent themes

Over the course of the day participants reiterated the view that ethics should be an ongoing process that involves ongoing review, not a form-filling exercise. Ethics is a process that is ongoing and responsive. It is closely bound up with overall research ‘quality’ and/or ‘integrity’ and should not be a ‘tick box’, compliance exercise. The researcher is responsible for ethical practice throughout the study up to and including the reporting. Some discussion around the notion of a ‘definition of ethics’ as a principle-based decision making process, not an overlay. Ethical decisions are embedded in the design of research right from the start.

Ethical practice as involving tensions between, for example, trust vs distrust, opening up and closing down. Even within the formal process there appear to be tensions around whether the focus is on conversation or compliance. There was evidence of considerable variation in practice across the institutions/ groups present. For example (from discussions):

- Where is the committee located? – a central committee or a group based in a School of Education - with implications for the models and interests that those on the committee bring to ethics and the process of educational research.
- Some institutions have a two-tier system with different processes for high risk and low risk projects
- Frequency of meetings
- Whether and who it is acceptable to consult before submitting a proposal
- The processes used to give feedback - who takes responsibility for granting final approval (a designated individual or the whole committee)

Issues raised:

- Are concerns around risk to the institution leading to ‘boring research’, ‘safe’ but not very useful and/or interesting research, research that ‘makes a difference’, contributes to the wider social ‘good’?
- Has the balance tipped too far towards prevention of harm, leading to a reduced concern for benefit? Participants discussed questions such as, ‘What is benefit?; Who benefits? Do we focus on a local good/ a greater good/ a long term good? What is expected of an educational researcher/ or of the educational research enterprise itself? What principles frame educational research, and subsequently educational research ethics?
- What counts as research?
- How do evaluation, benchmarking, quality assurance fit into this?

- What is the link between research and professional development?
- What is the link between research and evaluation?
- What is the link between research and supervision?
- What are our ethical responsibilities in our non-researcher roles, such as when we are supervising student teachers collecting data on teaching practice, or supervising Masters and PhD students
- How are we responding to the ethical issues that come with our use of technology digital video, the Internet, student blogs e.g. with respect to the other uses this information could easily be put to...

Research design: What is the place of ethics in research design

The following issues were raised

- The use of gifts, incentives, koha
- What is it acceptable to ask of participants in terms of time, disclosure, action, the focus of the research?
- The need to consideration of different cultural processes and preferences
- Reporting back to participants – how, when and to whom?

Participants

In terms of Ministry of Education professional development and contracts it was noted that professional development/resourcing sometimes comes with an in-built expectation of involvement in research and/or evaluation – are schools aware of this expectation? What are the issues for researchers when schools refuse to participate in studies when they have, in theory, agreed to being researched. (This could also apply to intervention studies)

Access to school participants – issues of need (or not) to work via BoTs, of a principal who declines on behalf of teachers/ parents

Issue of communicating research process and goals to children of different ages and when working with people from cultural backgrounds which are different from those of the researchers'. Challenges around multiple interpretations of language.

Understanding and meeting local community expectations re research, especially cultural considerations.

Issue of keeping participants, especially children, informed of progress throughout a study (ongoing and final reporting back)

Issues around reporting, publication and dissemination

Considering the needs of the contractor in reporting

Ownership of data –what are the implications of participants owning the raw data for our longer term use? The ongoing use of research data including quotes and images as people's circumstances and opinions change. Consent into the future for use of data – immediate and longer term in a new context and also potentially unregulated via the web especially for images.

Use of the Internet of as a forum for publishing – issues, challenges and opportunities
How to manage what happens when others have final control over reports/reporting to a wider audience

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Other points made

- What support is there for non-institutional researchers (private companies and individuals/collectives)?
- What role might NZARE play for them? The argument was made that ethics is embedded in whole quality assurance process, and so can't be done in an 'auditing' capacity by an outside group not connected with the research project. No one 'right answer'. The counter argument was the need for access to expertise and the value of this for participants. Conclusion was that. in the end, the responsibility for research quality lies with the researchers themselves.

Need to review the NZARE Ethical Guidelines to provide non-institutionally-based collective principles for shared consideration and guidance by/for educational researchers in all sectors.