ACTION RESEARCH

A GUIDE FOR THE TEACHER RESEARCHER

THIRD EDITION

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CHAPTER

5 Ethics

This chapter describes the ethical issues that confront teacher researchers and suggests a series of ethical guidelines to help ensure that your research is conducted in an ethical manner.

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

1. Clarify ethical issues involved in conducting action research.

The Use of Technology to Enhance Mathematics Achievement

CLEM ANNICE

Children learn at an early age the concept of light refraction. Peering into fishbowls, children see that the fish, rocks, plants, and toys appear larger than life, their movement, shape, and size distorted by the refraction of light. We have all been puzzled at some time in our lives by this illusion and the contradiction between what we see and what we get as we attempt to reach in and touch the inhabitants of the fishbowl. Can the same be said for the use of technology in mathematics reform? Is what we see in classrooms really what we get? Are students and teachers developing a functional and appropriate use of the technology, or are they just playing at the computer? Are teachers and students making connections between the use of technology for presenting models and the concepts that the models represent? How is the use of technology to enhance curriculum and instruction in mathematics affecting student outcomes in mathematics? It is this final question that drove the schoolwide action research project at Billabong Elementary School.

Billabong Elementary School is a large K–7 school that has embraced the use of technology as a key component of its mathematics curriculum reform efforts. Visitors to the school—and there are many—are given tours. The teachers at Billabong Elementary consider that they "teach in a fishbowl," constantly on display to the outside world. In many ways, the school looks different from traditional schools, and visitors to the school are invited to look into classrooms through the large windows that provide them with snapshots into the inner sanctum of our classrooms.

The principal of Billabong Elementary is described by his teachers as a "visionary leader," and the school has a large collection of computer hardware and software because of the principal's grantwriting efforts. One key component of the principal's vision has been the introduction of technology to the school. In large part, this technology has been made possible through school-business partnerships that he has forged. The principal is committed to the use of technology at Billabong because of what he sees as the gap between the "real world" and the "school world"; he thinks that one way to bridge this gap is to embrace technology in an effort to prepare children for the 21st century.

As a site council responsible for guiding staff development efforts in the school, we decided to focus on the impact of our extensive investment in technology on student achievement in mathematics. In particular, we wanted to know:

1. If our use of technology was successfully meeting the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards; and
2. How those Standards were being interpreted into classroom practice and student outcomes.

Our action research team decided that we would collect data by observing in each other's classrooms, interviewing teachers and children, analyzing mathematics test data, and comparing the mathematics curriculum taught in the school with the NCTM Standards. When we presented our project to the faculty, all of the teachers and the principal appeared to want to cooperate with the research team's requests for access to classrooms, curriculum materials, and so on. Our hope was to learn more about our technology intervention and how we might continue to evolve as a faculty in this area.

As you move through the halls at Billabong, there is a great deal to be seen—classrooms are open for the inquiring eye. Kindergarten through third-grade classrooms characteristically have six computers, as well as scanners, color printers, and networking with the school's library (thus having access to the extensive CD-ROM collection). The fourth- through seventh-grade classrooms have all of these resources and another six computers per classroom. In one class, all of the children are given an individual laptop computer to use for the year. Children can be seen using computers as part of their class assignments, busying themselves with creating HyperCard stacks for creative writing, "playing" math games, and so on. Math learning centers are evident, and each child is given varied opportunities to interact with a number of different math manipulatives: base 10 blocks, place value charts, construction materials, colored chips, tangrams, and geo-boards, to name a few.

However, what we saw from the inside of each other's classrooms was distinctly different from what we had seen from the outside "looking in." For example, in many of the classrooms children could be seen busily engaged with the computers playing math mazes. For the most part, however, children were engaged in low-level activities, and the purpose of the tasks was lost. Many of the children were engaged in "drill-and-kill" activities that had little relevance to their math learning. The computers had taken on the role of an electronic work sheet to keep children busy once they had completed other assigned math tasks.

Interviews with children were revealing. When we interviewed the children, we did so with a guarantee that their responses would be confidential and asked that they be honest with us—after all, our goal was to provide the best possible mathematics learning environment for them that we possibly could. Some children were brutally honest, telling in great detail the kinds of math activities some teachers used on the computers. Some activities were singled out by children as being a "waste of time," and others described some teachers as "not having a clue" about how the computers were really being used. Indeed, some of this information was confirmed by our own observations of classrooms where children had become proficient at "scribbling" on the computer screen using the mouse and a graphics program and quickly returning to the "drill-and-kill" screen when the teacher approached.

While the computers were being heavily used, the appropriateness of their use was questionable. This was no more evident than in classrooms where the calculator function had been removed from the computers. As one teacher explained, "The children are unable to mentally compute, and their basic skills have deteriorated . . . so we can't have them using calculators until they master the basic skills!" There appeared to be consensus among the teachers that there was a direct relationship between providing children with access to computers and children's lack of ability to recall basic math facts.

The interviews with teachers revealed other problems. Many of the teachers knew very little about the NCTM Standards and continued to use their old "tried and proven" curriculum, in spite of a new textbook adoption promoted by the principal. In fact, some teachers were very unhappy about the textbook adoption because no teachers had been consulted in the process—the textbook had been selected by the principal who was a good friend of the author. In return for piloting the curriculum materials in the school, the principal secured free copies of the textbook.

Compared to other schools in the district, our children appeared to be doing below average on statewide assessments. This came as quite a surprise to some teachers who felt that their children were doing well in most math strands with the exception of open-ended problem-solving and algebraic relationships. In these teachers' views the problem was with the appropriateness of the tests, not the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

The findings of our schoolwide action research effort raised some difficult ethical dilemmas for the action research team:

1. What do we do with the data that provided a negative picture of individual teachers in the school? Do we share data on an individual basis with teachers who were singled out by students? What risks do we run in sharing this information? How can we promote professional development without hurting anyone?
2. What do we do with the data that indicated a great deal of dissatisfaction with how the

principal had mandated the choice of curriculum? Do we risk alienating the teachers from the administration? Could some teachers be hurt professionally by action the principal might take?

3. How can we improve student achievement through the use of technology without hurting teachers (and the principal) in the process?

The action research team decided to adopt a "hold harmless" approach to dealing with the findings of the study. We shared the general findings of the study with teachers at a faculty meeting and invited teachers, on a voluntary basis, to meet with us to discuss the data for their classrooms. Similarly, we invited the principal to meet with us to discuss implications of the findings for future professional development opportunities.

THIS VIGNETTE PROVIDES an excellent illustration of the unpredictable events that can occur during the conduct of educational research. This vignette is not intended to frighten action researchers, but rather to provide an example of the kinds of challenges teacher researchers can face in conducting research in their own classroom and school. This chapter will help action researchers develop their own list of ethical guidelines so that they will act appropriately if and when confronted with a difficult ethical question.

The Ethics of Research

Ethical considerations are included in all research studies. Therefore, all researchers must be aware of and attend to the ethical considerations related to their studies. In research, the ends do not justify the means, and researchers must not put their need to carry out their study above their responsibility to maintain the well-being of the study participants. Research studies are built on trust between the researcher and the participants, and researchers have a responsibility to maintain that trust, just as they expect participants to maintain it in the data they provide.

Many professional organizations have developed codes of ethical conduct for their members. Figure 5–1 presents the general principles of the American Psychological Association for the ethical conduct of researchers. Note that additional and much more specific ethical standards are grouped into the following eight categories: (1) general standards; (2) evaluation, assessment, or intervention; (3) advertising and other public statements; (4) therapy; (5) privacy and confidentiality; (6) teaching, training, supervision, research, and publishing; (7) forensic activities; and (8) resolving ethical issues. You may read the full text online at the American Psychological Association's Web site (http://www.apa.org/ethics/code.html). Most other professional organizations, such as the American Educational Research Association and the American Sociological Society, have similar codes for ethical research.

In 1974, the U.S. Congress put the force of law behind codes of ethical research. The need for legal restrictions was graphically illustrated by a number of studies in which researchers lied to or put research participants in harm's way in order to carry out their studies. For example, in a study on the effects of group pressure (conducted some years ago) researchers lied to participants while they participated in and

PRINCIPLE A: BENEFICENCE AND NONMALEFICENCE

Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm. In their professional actions, psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons, and the welfare of animal subjects of research. When conflicts occur among psychologists' obligations or concerns, they attempt to resolve these conflicts in a responsible fashion that avoids or minimizes harm. Because psychologists' scientific and professional judgments and actions may affect the lives of others, they are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence. Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work.

PRINCIPLE B: FIDELITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Psychologists establish relationships of trust with those with whom they work. They are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to society and to the specific communities in which they work. Psychologists uphold professional standards of conduct, clarify their professional roles and obligations, accept appropriate responsibility for their behavior, and seek to manage conflicts of interest that could lead to exploitation or harm. Psychologists consult with, refer to, or cooperate with other professionals and institutions to the extent needed to serve the best interests of those with whom they work. They are concerned about the ethical compliance of their colleagues' scientific and professional conduct. Psychologists strive to contribute a portion of their professional time for little or no compensation or personal advantage.

PRINCIPLE C: INTEGRITY

Psychologists seek to promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science, teaching, and practice of psychology. In these activities psychologists do not steal, cheat, or engage in fraud, subterfuge, or intentional misrepresentation of fact. Psychologists strive to keep their promises and to avoid unwise or unclear commitments. In situations in which deception may be ethically justifiable to maximize benefits and minimize harm, psychologists have a serious obligation to consider the need for, the possible consequences of, and their responsibility to correct any resulting mistrust or other harmful effects that arise from the use of such techniques.

PRINCIPLE D: JUSTICE

Psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services being conducted by psychologists. Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices.

PRINCIPLE E: RESPECT FOR PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination. Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making. Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices.

FIGURE 5–1 General Ethical Principles

Source: From "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct," by American Psychological Association, 2002, *American Psychologist, 57*, pp. 1060–1073. Copyright © 2002 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

watched what they thought was actual electric shocking of other participants (Milgram, 1964). In another study, men known to be infected with syphilis were not treated for their illness because they were part of a control group in a comparative study (Jones, 1998). Studies such as these prompted governmental regulations regarding research studies.

Informed Consent and Protection from Harm

Perhaps the most basic and important ethical issues in research are concerned with participants' informed consent and freedom from harm. Informed consent ensures that research participants enter the research of their free will and with an understanding of the study and any possible dangers that may arise. It is intended to reduce the likelihood that participants will be exploited by a researcher persuading

them to participate without fully knowing the study's requirements. Freedom from harm is focused on not exposing students to risks. It involves issues of confidentiality (to protect students from embarrassment or ridicule) and issues related to personal privacy. Collecting information on participants or observing them without their knowledge or without appropriate permission is not ethical. Furthermore, any information or data that are collected, either from or about a person, should be strictly confidential, especially if it is at all personal. Access to data should be limited to persons directly involved in conducting the research. An individual participant's performance should not be reported or made public using the participant's name, even for an innocuous measure such as an arithmetic test. For example, individuals identified as members of a group that performed poorly on a research instrument might be subjected to ridicule, censure by parents, or lowered teacher expectations.

The use of confidentiality or anonymity to avoid privacy invasion and potential harm is common. **Anonymity** means that the researcher does not know the identities of the participants in the study. It does not mean, as many think, that the researcher knows the identities of participants but promises not to release them to anyone else. This is **confidentiality**. If the researcher knows participants' identities, there can be confidentiality, but no anonymity. Removing names or coding records is one commonly used way to maintain anonymity. When planning your study you must indicate to participants whether you will provide confidentiality (you'll know but won't tell) or anonymity (you will not know the participants' names) and be sure they know the difference. Sometimes researchers seek access to data from a prior study to examine new questions based on the old data. In such cases, the original researcher has the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality or anonymity promised the participants of the original study.

Two major pieces of legislation affecting educational research are the National Research Act of 1974 and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974. The National Research Act requires that, to ensure protection of participants, proposed research activities involving human participants be reviewed and approved by an authorized group prior to the execution of the research. Protection of participants is broadly defined and requires that they not be harmed in any way (physically or mentally) and that they participate only if they freely agree to do so (informed consent). If participants are not of age, informed consent must be given by parents or legal guardian.

Most colleges and universities have a review group, usually called the Human Subjects Review Board or the IRB (Institutional Review Board). By law, this board must consist of at least five members, not all of one gender, include one nonscientist, and include one (or more) member who is mainly concerned with the welfare of the participants. Persons who might have a conflict of interest are excluded.

Typically, the researcher submits a proposal to the chair of the board, who distributes copies to all the members. They review the proposal in terms of proposed treatment of participants. If there is any question as to whether participants might be harmed in any way, the researcher is usually asked to meet with the review group to answer questions and clarify proposed procedures. When the review group is satisfied that the participants will not be placed at risk (or that potential risk is minimal compared to the potential benefits of the study), the committee members sign the approval forms. Members' signatures on the approval forms signify that the proposal is acceptable with respect to participant protection.

The Privacy Act of 1974, usually referred to as the Buckley Amendment, was designed to protect the privacy of students' educational records. Among its provisions is the specification that data that actually identify students may not be made available unless written permission is acquired from the students' (if of age), or a parent or legal guardian. The consent must indicate what data may be disclosed, for what purposes, and to whom. If part of your study required obtaining information from individual elementary students' record files, you would need to obtain written permission from each student's parent or guardian, not a blanket approval from the school principal or classroom teacher. Note that if you are interested in using only class averages (in which no individual student is identified), individual consent from the principal would likely suffice. However, if you calculate the class average from individual student records, individual permission would be necessary because you have access to individual records.

There are some exceptions that may not require written consent. For example, school personnel with a "legitimate educational interest" in a student would not need written consent to examine student records. In other cases, the researcher could request that a teacher or guidance counselor either remove names from students' records completely or replace them with a coded number or letter. The researcher can then use the records without knowing the names of the individual students.

Deception

Another ethical dilemma occurs when a researcher poses a topic that, if given complete information to potential participants, would likely influence or change their responses. For example, studies concerned with participants' racial, gender, cultural, or medical orientation or attitudes are especially susceptible to such influences, so researchers often hide the true nature of the topic of study. Or a researcher might want to study how teachers interact with high- and low-achieving students. If the researcher tells the teachers what the aim of the study is, it is likely that they will change their normal behaviors more than if the researcher tells them that the study is about how high- and low-achieving students perform on oral questioning. Lying about the real focus is intended to deceive study participants. Research that plans to deceive participants must be seriously considered and should not be carried out. It is recommended that you not do your action research studies using a topic that requires deception. Your advisor and the Human Subjects Review or IRB Committee at your institution will provide suggestions about ethical ways to carry out your research plan. Note that as the teacher researcher in an action research study it is your responsibility to maintain ethical standards in the research.

The sources and advice noted in this chapter will help you conceive and conduct ethical studies. The suggestions provided do not cover all the ethical issues you are likely to encounter in your research. Perhaps the fundamental ethical rule is that participants should not be harmed in any way, real or possible, in the name of science. Respect and concern for your own integrity and for your participants' dignity and welfare are the bottom lines of ethical research.

Doing the Right Thing: The Role of Ethics in Action Research

Simply stated, the role of ethics in action research can be considered in terms of how each of us treats the individuals with whom we interact at our school setting: students, parents, volunteers, administrators, and teaching colleagues. As Smith (1990) stated, "At a commonsense level, caring, fairness, openness, and truth seem to be the important values undergirding the relationships and the activity of inquiring" (p. 260). However, values such as these invariably take on a different meaning for different people with whom we interact. Nevertheless, the success of your action research project depends on a clear understanding of the intimate nature of the research process and on not harming participants in the name of research.

The vignette of Billabong Elementary School that opened this chapter is a good reminder of why it is important to think about ethical dilemmas before they occur. And although I have seen few instances of where ethical dilemmas have threatened to stall a collaborative action research effort, the very nature of the enterprise provides the potential for conflict and harm. Considering the ethics of action research before commencing the work is one way to ensure that you are prepared to respond in an ethical, caring manner to difficult situations that may arise.

The issue of ethics in qualitative research and action-oriented research has received considerable attention in recent years (c.f., Christians, 2000; Creswell, 2002; Eisner, 1991; Flinders, 1992; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Smith, 1990; Soltis, 1990; Wolcott, 1990). Most of this literature describes mistakes made in the research process and how the ethics of the situation were addressed. What makes the subject of ethics particularly challenging for teacher researchers is the intimate and open-ended nature of action research.

Action research is intimate because there is little distance between teacher researchers and their subjects, the students in their classrooms and schools. Qualitatively oriented action research is open ended because the direction of the research often unfolds during the course of the study. This significantly complicates the ability of teacher researchers to obtain participants' "fully informed consent" to participate in the research process. **Informed consent** is central to research ethics. It is the principle that seeks to ensure that all human subjects retain autonomy and the ability to judge for themselves what risks are worth taking for the purpose of furthering scientific knowledge.

In action research the key participants in a study are often the students in our classrooms. How does the concept of informed consent apply to them? Do we need to obtain written permission from parents/guardians before collecting naturally occurring data such as test scores, observations, work samples, and so on? Probably not. But as you will see in the following discussion, it is important that you develop your own criteria for what is considered to be ethical behavior.

Ethical Guidelines

The following commonsense ethical guidelines may help teacher researchers respond appropriately when faced with ethical decisions before, during, and after an action research inquiry (adapted from Christians, 2000; Smith, 1990).

Ethical Perspective

Researchers Should Have an Ethical Perspective That Is Very Close to Their Personal Ethical Position. This may seem like a statement of the obvious except for this caveat: As teacher researchers, we may find ourselves in situations that are foreign to us. For example, in a collaborative action research project focused on the effects of a new math problem-solving curriculum on student achievement and attitude, teachers are asked to administer a student attitude survey. The surveys are then analyzed by a team of teacher researchers representing different grades or benchmark levels in the school. During the analysis, it becomes clear that one group of students is very unhappy with their math instruction and have supported their assertions with negative comments about the teacher. What will you do with the data? Should they be shared in an unedited form with the teacher? Who might be hurt in the process? What potential good can come from sharing the data? Or, perhaps the principal hears that there is a problem with one teacher and asks for access to the data so that the teacher can be placed on a "plan of assistance." How should the research team respond? What assurances of confidentiality were given to the participants prior to collecting the data? How will you respond to the principal when you are stopped in the hallway and asked for your opinion?

This scenario is not meant to scare you away from doing action research. However, these are the unexpected outcomes that occasionally face teacher researchers who have been made privy to information about their own teaching and that of their colleagues. Smith's (1990) lesson is an important one: You will potentially avoid such awkward situations if you have clarified your own ethical perspectives at the outset. This might take the form of a values clarification activity that can be undertaken individually or collectively. The point is this—be prepared to respond in a manner that is comfortable and natural for you. When you are placed in the "hot seat," there may not be time to give a well-thought out, rational response. This situation will be easier if you can respond in a personal manner.

Informed Consent

Informed Consent Should Take the Form of a Dialogue That Mutually Shapes the Research and the Results. Be clear about whether you need to seek permission from participants in the study. This may be determined by discussing the action research project with an administrator or central office person who can describe instances that necessitate written permission. For example, if you are using photographs or videotapes as data collection techniques and intend to use these artifacts in a public forum, such as a presentation at a conference, make sure that you have checked whether written permission is necessary. The answer may vary from district to district depending on how the materials are to be used.

Similarly, consider how to inform students that they are subjects in a study. For example, you may decide to interview a small group to determine how a problem-solving curriculum is being implemented in different classrooms as a follow-up to a survey or an observation. How will you ensure the anonymity of the respondents to protect their privacy? How will you protect the confidentiality of

participants? According to Flinders (1992), confidentiality is important for the following reasons:

- Confidentiality is intended to protect research informants from stress, embarrassment, or unwanted publicity.
- Confidentiality protects participants in situations where the information they reveal to a researcher can be used against them by others.

Confidentiality usually involves the use of pseudonyms to conceal identities. However, protecting confidentiality in a qualitatively oriented action research effort is sometimes more problematic than just assigning pseudonyms. For example, a team of teacher researchers who are responsible for driving a schoolwide action research effort will likely be made privy to the intimate details of their colleagues' classrooms. It will be their challenge to make sure that they protect their colleagues from stress, embarrassment, or unwanted publicity that may come from sharing the action research findings. And, of course, all of this must be balanced against their commitment to improve the learning experiences of the students in their school.

Figure 5–2 presents a cover letter written by a principal in support of a doctoral student's proposed study. Note that the student secured not only the principal's permission, but also his strong support and cooperation, by sharing the potential benefits of the study with the principal's students. Figure 5–3 presents the parental consent form that accompanied the cover letter. It addresses many of the ethical and legal concerns discussed in this chapter.

Clearly, human relations are an important factor in conducting research in applied settings. That you should be your usual charming self goes without saying. But you should keep in mind that you are dealing with sincere, concerned educators who may not have your level of research expertise. Therefore, you must make a special effort to discuss your study in plain English (it is possible!) and to never give the impression that you are talking down to them. Also, your task is not over once the study begins. The feelings of involved persons must be monitored and responded to throughout the duration of the study if the initial level of cooperation is to be maintained.

Social Principles

You Should be Able to Identify Broader Social Principles That Are an Integral Part of Who You Are as a Teacher and a Contributing Member of the Community in Which You Live. These broader social principles should dictate your ethical stance. For example, democratic processes, social justice, equality, and emancipation may be the principles that guide your ethical behavior in a given situation.

Deception

There Is No Room for Deception in Action Research (or any other research for that matter). For example, if during an interview a colleague, parent, or student confides in you "off the record," then the substance of the conversation should remain off the record. Regardless of how meaningful the comments, you have a responsibility to act with integrity and to honor your interviewees' requests for

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

BOSTON COLLEGE

January 17, 2005

Mr. Dennis Yacubian
Vice-Principal
Westside High School
Westside, MA 00001

Dear Mr. Yacubian,

The Department of Measurement and Evaluation at Boston College is interested in determining the types of testing, evaluation, research, and statistical needs high school administrators in Massachusetts have. Our intent is to develop a master's level program that provides graduates who can meet the methodological needs of high school administrators. The enclosed questionnaire is designed to obtain information about your needs in the areas of testing, evaluation, research, and statistics. Your responses will be anonymous and seriously considered in developing the planned program. We will also provide you a summary of the results of the survey so that you can examine the responses of other high school administrators. This study has been approved by the university's Human Subjects Review Committee.

We would appreciate your completion of the questionnaire by January 31. We have provided a stamped, addressed envelope for you to use in returning the questionnaire. You do not need to put your name on the questionnaire, but we request that you sign your name on the enclosed postcard and mail it separately from the questionnaire. That way we will know you have replied and will not have to bother you with follow-up letters.

We realize that your schedule is busy and your time is valuable. However, we hope that the 15 minutes it will take you to complete the questionnaire will help lead to a program that will provide a useful service to school administrators.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at 555-555-4444.

Yours truly,

James Jones
Department Chair

FIGURE 5–2 Sample Cover Letter

confidentiality. Similarly, there is no place for hidden microphones in order to capture interviewees "on tape." If you wish to tape a conversation, seek verbal and/or written permission.

Accuracy

Ensuring the Accuracy of Your Data Is a Central Concern of Action Research. It is unethical and unscientific to fabricate data in order to substantiate a personal belief or value. For example, your study may have focused on the effectiveness

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

The information provided on this form and the accompanying cover letter is presented to you in order to fulfill legal and ethical requirements for Northwest Eaton College (the institution sponsoring this doctoral dissertation study) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) regulations for the Protection of Human Research Subjects as amended on March 26, 1989. The wording used in this form is utilized for all types of studies and should not be misinterpreted for this particular study.

The dissertation committee at Northern University and the Research Review Committee of Knox County Public Schools have both given approval to conduct this study, "The Relationships Between the Modality Preferences of Elementary Students and Selected Instructional Styles of CAI as They Affect Verbal Learning of Facts." The purpose of this study is to determine the effect on achievement scores when the identified learning styles (visual, audio, tactile/kinesthetic) of elementary students in grades 3 and 5 are matched or mismatched to the instructional methods of specifically selected computer assisted instruction (CAI).

Your child will be involved in this study by way of the following:

1. Pretest on animal facts.
2. Posttest on animal facts.
3. Test on learning styles.
4. Interaction with computer-assisted instruction (CAI-software on the computer)—visual, audio, tactile CAI matching the student's own learning style.

All of these activities should not take more than two hours per student. There are no foreseeable risks to the students involved. In addition, the parent or researcher may remove the student from the study at any time with just cause. Specific information about individual students will be kept *strictly confidential* and will be obtainable from the school principal if desired. The results that are published publicly will not reference any individual students since the study will only analyze relationships among groups of data.

The purpose of this form is to allow your child to participate in the study, and to allow the researcher to use the information already available at the school or information obtained from the actual study to analyze the outcomes of the study. Parental consent for this research study is strictly voluntary without undue influence or penalty. The parent signature below also assumes that the child understands and agrees to participate cooperatively.

If you have additional questions regarding the study, the rights of subjects, or potential problems, please call the principal, Ms. Gwen Gregory, or the researcher, Ms. Joleen Levine (Director of Computer Education, Northern University, 555-5554).

_____

Student's Name

_____ _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

FIGURE 5–3 Parental Consent Form for a Proposed Research Study

of a newly adopted reading program. Although you personally like the program, the data suggest that it is not effective in improving test scores. You must be able to accept the findings of the study despite your bias toward the reading program. Any attempt to manipulate the data to support a personal position is unethical.

Flinders's Conceptual Framework for Ethics in Qualitative Research

Flinders (1992) offers a useful conceptual framework for guiding ethical conduct in qualitative research, a framework that is worth consideration by teacher researchers. Flinders provides the following conceptual framework: *utilitarian, deontological, relational*, and *ecological ethics*. In your efforts to clarify values, consider the issues raised by these four perspectives and how resolving these issues can contribute to your personal/professional ethical stance.

Utilitarian Ethics

The central tenet of **utilitarian ethics** is the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number or whether more good than harm is likely to be produced by a given decision. This principle of utility can be applied by teacher researchers who must struggle with whether the findings of their study have the potential to significantly improve the experiences of children while at the same time conforming to the concepts of informed consent, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm. We have already discussed informed consent and confidentiality, but this last concept can be a challenge to rationalize.

Avoidance of harm morally binds teacher researchers to conduct their inquiries in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study—students, teachers, parents, administrators, and volunteers. This concept is obvious in the medical profession wherein participants' physical well-being may be placed at risk by virtue of being a subject in an experimental study and receiving a radical treatment (for example, a new HIV/AIDS vaccine). This concept, however, is less obvious in an educational setting. A broader view of this concept suggests that teacher researchers need to convey with confidence to action research participants that they will not suffer harm as the result of their involvement in the research effort.

Teacher researchers must remain sensitive to their colleagues' fears of participating in an action research effort and remain vigilant in their efforts to protect participants from harm. Similarly, they must assure parents that their children are not being used as laboratory rats in some poorly conceived clinical experiment that could potentially harm them. As teachers, we typically do not administer "treatments" or "experimental interventions" to children. However, as a result of focusing on a particular problem and immersing ourselves in the relevant literature, we may design an instructional or curriculum intervention to address a perceived need.

Deontological Ethics

Simply stated, **deontological ethics** can be seen as the ethics of "duty and obligation." From this perspective, an action may bring about good results but it is not deontologically correct unless that action also conforms to ethical standards such as honesty and justice. Thus, acting ethically may be viewed in terms of "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you." For example, it would clearly be unethical to deceive participants in an action research study or to simply treat them as research pawns or a means to an end.

As you begin to clarify your personal, ethical perspective, you should reflect on how you would want to be treated as a participant in a research study. How

would you feel if you were deceived by the researchers? What action would you take? How can you prevent research participants from feeling exploited? Again, there are no simple answers to these ethical questions.

Relational Ethics

Flinders (1992) writes that "a proponent of **relational ethics** would readily accept that moral behavior often upholds utilitarian standards by leading to good consequences for individuals, communities, or society at large" (p. 106). In this view, collaboration in an action research effort would necessitate that the team members work out mutually beneficial agreements for everyone who participates in the inquiry. This would include working, talking, and debating together to help each person achieve individual and collective goals. However, the members of an action research team do not have to unconditionally accept an individual participant's teaching performance as "best practice." From this perspective, you may be faced with making a nonjudgmental assessment of colleagues' teaching and the possibility that friends and colleagues do not agree with the portrayal and interpretation of test results, surveys, interviews, and observation data, for example.

Ecological Ethics

Proponents of **ecological ethics** are culturally sensitive to the taken-for-granted aspects of our social and professional lives. From this perspective, the teacher researcher must remain attentive to the relationships between the researcher and the participants, a relationship that is determined by "roles, status, language, and cultural norms" (Flinders, 1992, p. 108). The lesson for teacher researchers who are proponents of this perspective is to pay attention to the research processes of giving information, reciprocity, and collaboration and to be sensitive to how these processes are viewed by other participants in the action research cycle. Again, this perspective forces us to confront the socially responsive characteristics of our research efforts as being democratic, equitable, liberating, and life enhancing.

The purpose of this discussion on ethics in action research has been to prepare you to think about a whole range of issues that face any researcher. Carefully consider how you will respond when confronted with difficult questions from colleagues, parents, students, and administrators. Taking time to clarify your values and ethical perspectives will help you to respond in a professional, personal, and caring fashion.

As you embark on your action research journey and data collection efforts, remember that you are ultimately condemned to freedom in matters of ethics (Eisner, 1991). There are few absolutes. Working with colleagues through issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and rational judgment in matters of ethics will ensure that you avoid potentially difficult situations that may arise in implementing your action research effort. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) summarize ethical issues as follows:

> Perhaps the fundamental rule of ethics is that participants should not be harmed in any way, real or possible, in the name of science. Respect and concern for your own integrity and for your participants' dignity and welfare are the bottom lines of ethical research. (pp. 100–101)

RESEARCH IN ACTION CHECKLIST 5–1

Ethical Guidelines for Teacher Researchers
___ Develop an ethical perspective that is close to your personal, ethical position.
___ Seek your action research participants' informed consent.
___ Determine the broader social principles that affect your ethical stance.
___ Consider the principles of utilitarian, deontological, relational, and ecological ethics in developing your ethical position.
___ Consider confidentiality and anonymity and avoid harm.
___ There is no room for deception!
___ Ensure that you accurately record data.

Remember, you will be undertaking your action research in your own classroom and school—this is the place where you will continue to conduct your professional and personal life long after you have changed your current area of focus. Attention to the fundamental ethical guidelines presented in this chapter will help ensure that, regardless of your area of focus, life in school will not be adversely affected by your quest for excellence. (See Research in Action Checklist 5–1 for ethical guidelines for teacher researchers.)

Summary

Teacher researchers should, to the best of their ability, recognize their own personal biases and develop an ethical perspective that ensures they will do the right thing when confronted with a difficult ethical dilemma.

For Further Thought

1. Revisit the Billabong Elementary School vignette at the beginning of this chapter. Consider the questions that faced the action research team including:
   a. What do we do with the data that provided a negative picture of individual teachers in the school? Do we share data on an individual basis with teachers who were singled out by students? What risks do we run in sharing this information? How can we promote professional development without hurting anyone?
   b. What do we do with the data that indicated a great deal of dissatisfaction with how the principal had mandated the choice of curriculum? Do we risk alienating the teachers from the administration? Could some teachers be hurt professionally by action the principal might take?
   c. How can we improve student achievement through the use of technology without hurting teachers (and the principal) in the process? Be prepared to justify and defend your ethical positions in light of the ethical guidelines (ethical perspective, informed consent, social principles) and conceptual frameworks (utilitarian, deontological, relational, and ecological) presented in this chapter.
2. How would you characterize your ethical stance? What is your ethical perspective, your approach to informed consent, and your sense of the broader social principles that dictate your actions?