

# Just How Important is Ethics within Early Childhood Research and Professionalism

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**ABSTRACT:** In our centre, which specialises in early childhood care in a UK Higher Education Institute, we have developed an approach to student research that ensures that it is purposeful, caring, sensitive and, above all, ethical. Recently, a colleague challenged this by suggesting that ‘ethical practice’ was not necessarily synonymous with ‘good practice’ as it was something that was not even considered by Ofsted, the Government body which assesses the quality of educational provision in the UK. In this discussion piece, I explore the role that ethics plays in both Early Childhood research and professionalism and argue that the absence of a term from a Government policy is no indication of its value. I also raise the question of how we might prove a causal link between ethical approaches and quality practice.

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood, Higher Education, research ethics, quality*

**\*Short papers**

## Introduction

As with most Higher Education (HE) degree courses in the UK, our Early Childhood (EC) degree students need to complete an extended piece of research in their final year. This piece of research is necessary for the ‘honours’ element of their degree, so that they can graduate with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours (abbreviated to BA (Hons)). In order to pass this research component, an ethical approach *must* be taken to the research project. Students can make mistakes in other areas of their research projects, but any breach in the ethicality of their approaches will incur instant failure. Within our centre an ethical approach is not restricted to a paper trail of ethical procedures, it also includes evidence

of meaningful and respectful relationships created with the research partners (the schools, nurseries and various early years settings that our students carry out their research in). Positive relationships, a collaborative approach and ‘giving something positive back to settings’ are all vital elements of a successful research project as judged by the expectations of our centre.

I have been recently challenged by a colleague to question why ethical approaches are such a valued feature of research within our centre, when this is not a requirement of our students’ future careers. An ethical approach to practice is not something that is assessed by Ofsted, our government systems that monitor quality within early years in the UK. This is the reason why I was questioned about prioritising a skill which is not actually transferable to our students’ future careers. My colleague also suggested that perhaps we were adding an unnecessary caveat to our students’ studies. In this piece, I consider two key areas in response to this: first, the extent to which ethics should take priority within the research projects that our early childhood students carry out; and second, what impact (if any) the development of ethical approaches has upon their developing professionalism.

## **Developing an ethical approach to research**

In my centre (previously Early Childhood, now the Centre for Children and Families), we have drastically modified our approach to students’ dissertations, or as we call them, Independent Studies (IS). When I first took responsibility for this area eight years ago, I was generally uncomfortable with the tone that many of the students took. A large number of studies were written in a way that was superior and judgemental. They found fault in their placement settings and made recommendations to the professionals whom they had researched with setting out what the professionals should be doing in order to improve their practice. The approach taken by these students called to my mind Silverman’s (2000, 198) “philosopher king or queen”, who swanned into the research setting, knowing better than all of those whom they researched with. I was ill-at-ease with the nature of these studies, especially as so many of them seemed to lack any notable impact in terms of the students’ own practice. But beyond that I was unable to really articulate what exactly it was that troubled me.

A conference that I attended around the same time fortuitously provided the lexicon that I needed to articulate my discomfort. At this conference Professor Stern (2011) spoke about the need for research to be sensitive, caring and respectful toward those with whom we research. He added that just because something may be a fact, it does not always need to be said. Even if we do find what we perceive to be fault, we do not *have* to share that

with others. (I should add here that this does not apply in cases where children's safety is concerned). Stern's talk explained that research should nurture, not demean. This approach brought into sharp focus all that I felt uneasy about with our students' studies. Since our profession is one of nurture and care, this should be reflected in interaction with others and in our approaches to research. At this time most of our students' work was some distance away from this compassionate approach. Although the students' studies mechanistically followed ethical procedures in the forms of consent letters and anonymity, in many cases the judgements being made were insensitive and disrespectful to the individuals involved. They were made from a position of authority, which our relatively inexperienced students could not rightly assume. Professor McNiff (2011), speaking at the same conference, suggested a feasible solution to this positional problem that had now become so clear. She suggested that meaningful practitioner research was not about identifying areas for improvement in *others*, the focus was upon the *self*.

Similar to Silverman's 'philosopher king or queen' mentioned above, McNiff (2011) described a 'balcony' approach to research whereby the researcher was above and looked down upon their research subjects from a position of elevated superiority. McNiff suggested that for research to be meaningful to the researcher, those positions needed to be reversed. In McNiff's (2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) approach to action research, the individual carrying out the research is the focus of development. After identifying an area that needs improving in one's own practice, or as McNiff (2014) describes it an area that 'troubles' the trainee practitioner, the researcher then seeks the support of knowledgeable others in practice to help improve their understanding and skills within that area. The role of the researcher is flipped, from expert casting judgement on the other, to a novice who is learning from the other. The researcher humbles themselves, because, as Palmer (1998, 108) advises, this is "*the only lens through which great things can be seen.*" This made perfect sense for our students. By changing the focus from the improvement of the 'other' to their own development, the settings that they researched in became the seats of knowledge and support, and the students quite rightly adopted the position of novice practitioner.

## **Respectful relationships/ Beyond ethical procedures**

When I proposed this shift to my EC team, there was no objection. The approach fitted perfectly within our course (and core) values of reflection, humility and self-improvement. The next challenge was enabling our students to develop this different way of doing research. When the research module was re-written, ethics became foregrounded, making up the content of the first two sessions. Contrary to the students'

expectations, no permission letters or confidentiality were discussed during the first week, instead the session focused upon the responsibilities of students in their *relationship* with the setting, based around a number of key texts. The first of these were Bogolub (2010) and Bloor's (2010) short articles, which discuss the obligation of social researchers in the field to 'bring about good.' These theorists explained that as practitioners in a caring profession, we have a responsibility to provide for the basic needs of research participants above and beyond our need to obtain 'valid' research results. These readings empowered the students, in that they gave 'permission' to keep their colleagues', children's and families' welfare as their first priority, and to accept that there may be imperfections in their research as a result. The ideas of Munford et al (2008, 64) added to these, suggesting that that research should not only be about 'avoiding harm' whilst we extract the evidence that we require, but that it should also be about "*discovering how to make a positive difference*". The students embraced this responsibility readily because it related to their caring roles in a way that a positivist, experimental approach to research did not.

Having established this need for a compassionate approach, the next focus was on how the students should develop positive research relationships with settings. It was important that the students understood that however sensitive their approach was, their research would impact upon the setting in some way, even if only through the conversations that it raised. To explain this, McNiff (2010) uses the analogy of one tiny plant being introduced into a garden affecting the biosphere even if only in an almost imperceptible way. We therefore encouraged students to adopt Costley, Elliott and Gibbs' (2010, 14) suggestions that they employ a 'caring' approach that "*refram[es] the research project as a mutual activity which has personal consequences.*" The emphasis was upon researching *with* as opposed to researching *on* so, that both student and setting could benefit. (This benefit is discussed further shortly). The final theoretical approach that we adopted was one of appreciative inquiry (Cooperider & Whitney, 2005), which has a focus upon what works well and why. By adopting this approach, the students were encouraged to focus upon the positives within their research settings with a view to further build upon them rather than seeking to find fault.

Concrete examples, such as those shown below, provided a very simple and effective way to consider the different perspectives of those involved in the research. The students were prompted to position themselves as a nursery manager and consider how they might feel upon receiving the following two research proposals from students:

(1) *I would like to investigate the practitioners' views about using the outdoor area here, because I can see that it is not being used enough. I'd like to find out what is stopping practitioners from using the outside area. I would like to help them improve*

*their understanding of how beneficial the outdoor are is, in order to encourage them to use it more.*

*(2) I would like to investigate ways in which practitioners use the outside area as this is an area in which I have little experience. I'd like to explore how practitioners use the outdoors to promote learning, and find out whether this approach could be used more, across all subject areas.*

By using these or similar examples, the students were able to 'put themselves in colleagues' shoes or to view situations through different lenses (Brookfield, 1995). Invariably these examples helped them recognise the emotional and relational factors involved in proposing a research area without prompting. Students are eager to share why they would not be happy to receive the first proposal. Students also readily recognise how both of these examples embody improvement and development, so that impact is not lessened by a more positive approach.

As the result of these combined approaches, our students were encouraged to embark upon their research projects as learners open to new ideas rather than as experts. This makes also the experience far less daunting to them as novice researchers. McNiff's (2010, 106) suggestion to "*always hold your knowledge lightly, and be aware that what you know today may change tomorrow*" has now become something of a mantra within our centre frequently used by both staff and students. It emphasises that it is okay to be wrong. But some do struggle to see how research as self-improvement can bring about change. Students will ask 'But how can research that is so personal have a positive impact upon the setting?' The answer is simple: as the student practitioner improves their own understanding and skills, they are able to provide both a positive example for colleagues and an improved experience for children and families. McNiff (2010, 132) says that "*If you can make your action enquiry public, and produce an account to show how you tried to improve one small aspect of your work, you stand some hope of influencing the thinking of someone somewhere.*"

Part of the reframing of research within our centre is highlighting the importance of feeding back to the setting about what has been discovered through the research. In our research module, we explore a number of ways of demonstrating how the data collected from research participants has been used and communicate those through thank you letters (including details of findings), leaflets, posters, power point presentations or photo books of evidence are just some examples. These are intended as a way of saying thank you to those who have been involved in the research for their support and to show that their input was respected. They also serve to share the learning that has taken place for the benefit of others. What is never suggested (and runs contrary to many of the students' experience on their Foundation Degrees) is giving the setting a copy of their study and a list of recommendations. As inexperienced trainees, that is not their place.

## Understanding ethical procedures

By emphasising the ‘caring sharing’ side of the students’ research studies, the procedural aspect of ethicality is by no means overlooked. Far from it, as a better understanding of the underpinning values of ethicality enables students to appreciate the importance of formal ethical procedures. These are explored subsequent to research relationships and, again, through using a very simple and concrete examples. In order to recognise the vital role that the British Educational Research Association (2011) Ethical Guidelines plays, we watch some of Jane Elliott’s *Class Divided* (easily accessed through You Tube). This demonstrates how children in the 1970s were being deceived as part of an experiment that causes them emotional and even indirect physical harm. The students are shocked by some of the things that they see in the video which run contrary to our strict safeguarding expectations. Without ever having read them, this video provides a springboard for the students to introduce most of the language of the BERA guidelines (such as informed choice, deception, withdrawal) into the discussion themselves. This has been an extremely effective precursor to the basics of permissions and assent.

The final stage of embedding ethicality within the students’ research projects, is highlighting its significance within the marking criteria. All students are expected to have gained full ethical approval via an application form that the student develops in collaboration with their supervisor before collecting any data. Without gaining consent, a student’s empirical research project fails. Additionally, the marking criteria also requires that the student does the following:

- Chooses a topic that has the potential for positive impact upon the setting;
- Consults with and shows sensitivity toward the setting;
- Progresses consent to collaboration with research partners;
- Considers the ethical implications of their data; and
- Is empathetic and sensitive as to how they provide feedback findings to their setting.

Providing inadequate evidence of any of these areas could result in a significantly lowered mark or even failure.



## Are we prioritising a non-transferable skill?

This shift in culture, which elevates ethical approaches from being simple bureaucratic procedures to sitting at the very heart of our research projects, has been positively received by both colleagues and our external examiners alike. This is why it came as a surprise to be challenged upon it. As it was touched upon in the introduction, a colleague asked whether, irrespective of the clearly ‘moral’ aspect of our research approaches, we were actually prioritising something within our students’ studies that had no real application to their future professional lives. The colleague went on to suggest that we might be doing our students a disservice by this emphasis upon ethical approaches as nowhere in the Ofsted (2015) Common Inspection Framework an ‘ethical approach’ is mentioned as a marker of quality. He asked why having an ethical approach then should decide whether they will pass or fail a module when it will have no value in terms of the measure of quality they bring to their future profession. That is true. Neither the word ethics, nor ethical, are anywhere to be found in the entire Ofsted document. There is advice that settings employ “*robust self-assessment, taking account of users’ views, and use the findings to develop capacity for sustainable improvement*” (Ofsted, 2015, 12). There is no stipulation placed upon the ways in which data should be collected. In fact, despite the many requests for evidence to be collected to support the self-evaluation data required for the inspection process (Ofsted, 2015, Self-evaluation form), not once is there any prerequisite advising how the data should be collected. There is no mention of respect, sensitivity, permissions, confidentiality or care. Perhaps increased time spent upon data manipulation or statistical representation would be of more value to our students than learning to carry out genuinely caring and respectful research? Perhaps those formal approaches to research, tick boxes and permission letters, were, after all, enough.

But then, I also searched for the words ‘reflection’ or ‘reflective’ within the Ofsted (2015) documents and there is no mention of those, either. Yet any early childhood practitioner knows that without reflecting upon practice, upon our own skills, the processes that we have in place and the development of the child, no evolution in quality practice would ever be made. The first specific skill identified in the QAA (2014, 10) subject benchmarks for the early childhood practitioner is the ability to reflect. Improvements cannot happen without reflection and they cannot be augmented without collaboration. The practice of reflection returns us to Palmer’s (1998) notion of being humble enough to learn through observing those who are more experienced and to McNiff’s (2010) willingness to accept that we may be wrong, or that there may be better ways. And, therefore, we return to those qualities of care and sensitivity needed for an ethical approach to research. I argue that being ethically sensitive is a core characteristic needed for an effective early years practitioner, the same way that being reflective is.

## Ethicality as central to all Early Years Practice

As far back as 1987, Grace (1987, 217) commented upon the “*steady erosion of teacher’s professional autonomy*” which has continued for the last thirty years. I would argue that this erosion in autonomy is linked to a wearing away of practitioners’ capacity to bring about ‘good’ in the moral sense, or the “*ethic of concern for persons that forms the very essence of education itself*” (Jarvis, 1995, 25). ‘Good’ teaching in the UK has now become based upon teachers’ ‘performativity’, or as Harris and Ranson (2005, 573) refer to it, “*the twin pillars of accountability (inspection, test scores, league tables) and standards (target setting, monitoring, raising achievement plans)*”. Early childhood education also has become embroiled in a competitive field where schools and early years settings “*spend time, money and energy on impression management, marketing and promotion*” (Ball, 2006, 12) in order to ‘sell their wares’. The value of a setting is measured according to Ofsted ratings, but where is the concern for the developing professional in all of this? Is there a place for meaningful reflection and sensitive, ethical and quality practice? Or are we simply part of a process and product?

I would argue that more-so within early childhood, than other age phases of education, caring practitioners have endeavored to stay true to their ‘moral enterprise’ (Dadds, 2002, 12) despite the external pressures of accountability. Early educationalists in the UK have developed their own code of ethics based upon values, respect and positive relationships (Early Education, 2011). These are seen as the basis of a quality experience for each child. The third version of the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics actually states the importance of ‘the spirit of collegiality and professionalism through collaborative relationships based on trust, respect and honesty’ (ECA, 2016). This encapsulates the very essence of our approach to ethical research within our own EC centre at the university. The National Association for the Education of Young Children in America has its own Code of Ethical Conduct (Feeney, Freeman, & Moravcik, 2016), which is based upon ‘high moral standards’. James, Davison and Lewis (2005) suggest that those who teach must have a ‘good character’ if they are to shape the character of the young. I think that we often take these huge demands that are placed upon trainee professionals for granted. Because the demands of this “*moral agency role*” (Campbell, 2003, 30) can be confusing and daunting for our students, I would argue that any way to exemplify this, such as the steps that we have taken to considering and being sensitive to ‘the other’ within our approach to Independent Studies is beneficial to them.



## Conclusions

As we train our next generation of early years professionals, it is important that we do not assume that the ethic of respect and care, that is so important to the role, is innate in our students. It is also important that we do not expect our students to understand the best or 'right' ways to behave through educational osmosis. We need to be explicit with our students about what exactly it means to behave in a caring and sensitive way and to be able to genuinely listen, and to respectfully work alongside others. We need to debate those behaviours that are 'good' or 'right' and to explore the values that underpin them. We need to explore ethical dilemmas with students and discuss how they, as professionals, might deal with them. Cummings and his colleagues' research in the USA (2001) discovered trainee teachers were more likely to have lower levels of 'moral reasoning' than those majoring in any other subject areas. This was explained by teaching courses being more "*skill oriented and devoted to technical competence*" so that students did not sufficiently explore "*more abstract, theoretical content requiring students to stretch themselves cognitively*" (Cummings et al., 2001, 153). I suspect that the UK system would give very similar results. Despite values and positive relationships being central to young children's development, there is very little space to explore this aspect of their experience in a results driven system. As early years specialists, we need to continue to challenge this narrowing of focus.

Just as reflective practice is recognised as core to effective early childhood education and care (QAA, 2014), I argue that highly sensitive and respectful ethical research approaches should also be acknowledged as a key aspect of early childhood professional training. In answer to the challenge of my colleague, I argue that although ethics is not an aspect of the formulaic measures of quality implemented by Ofsted within EC settings, through a deeper understanding of ethical research approaches (as opposed to 'procedures'), our students significantly develop their understanding of collaborative working, respectful relationships, sensitivity and humility, all of which are central to successful partnership working in the early years, and to the quality of practice. True to the values of our centre, our next step is to speak with our professional partners in settings in order to hear their views on our students' research. As McNiff (2010, 106) advises, we will "*hold [y]our knowledge lightly*" and be prepared to modify both our understanding and our practice if necessary, as a result of really listening to and reflecting upon their perspective.

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