Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 7

7-1-2001

Teacher/Researchers in Early Childhood: Ethical Responsibilities to Children

Helen Hedges
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Teacher/Researchers in Early Childhood: Ethical Responsibilities to Children

by Helen Hedges

Helen Hedges is a former secondary and early childhood teacher, and most recently spent eight years as an early childhood teacher educator in Auckland, New Zealand. She is currently a full-time post-graduate student.

Introduction

The 'teacher as researcher' model has been extensively described in other education sectors (eg. Fueyo & Koorland, 1997; Henson, 1996). This model considers the teacher as a researcher in terms of advancing systematic, professional inquiry (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) by focusing inquiry on teaching and learning practices (Keyes, 2000) and problem-solving (Henson, 1996). Knowledge generated by practitioners will be owned by them and perhaps be more likely than formal research to bring improvement to the profession. Teacher/researchers have a vested interest in the outcome of the research, and are likely to continue to review, evaluate and improve practice after the research is complete.

This research note focuses on teachers researching children in the early childhood education settings in which they work. Ethical principles to be considered by teacher/researchers are identified and discussed in relation to their application in an early childhood context. Examples from my recent experience as a participant-observer are offered for consideration in relation to practitioner research.

Involving early childhood teachers in research

One of the consequences of a division between teachers and researchers is that children may not benefit from improved educational practices based on research findings. My previous experience in both the professional and academic worlds suggests attitudes within the academic community about practitioner research still need addressing. Zeni (2001a, p. 107) supports this: "universities have traditionally seen applied research as lower in status". However, practitioner research contributes much to the knowledge base of education, while university-based research has often been criticised as discussing educational problems in isolation from settings, children and teachers.

For teachers, evidence has shown that involvement in research increases teachers' commitment to developing their teaching and keeping up-to-date with new information. Teachers become more open to learning about teaching and feel positive about themselves and research. Teachers become more analytically critical about their own beliefs and assumptions and self-efficacy is increased (Henson, 1996; Keyes, 2000). For the profession and the academic community, useful and relevant new knowledge about teaching and learning is created.

Practitioner research has much in common with qualitative approaches to research. MacNaughton (1996) argues that such approaches blur the boundaries between research and practice and alter the roles of the participants and the researcher. Positive relationships between teachers and young children reflect a commitment that involves trust, involvement, warmth and sensitivity. These attributes are often associated with ethnographic and interpretive research. Interpretive research that connects to participants' emotions can be rich in results if a high degree of rapport has already been achieved (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). Teachers of young children may therefore have an advantage because of their existing relationship with children. This adds a dimension of rapport and openness that enhances the research relationship and consequent findings. A long-term relationship where the researcher knows participants well makes authenticity more likely. However, this also assumes that the emotional involvement does not negatively affect research and that teachers do not take advantage of their relationships with children or their parents.

I have recently completed a period of participant-observation in a kindergarten for a research project that adopted an interpretivist methodology. The opportunity to spend an extended length of time in the kindergarten allowed for participation in the daily events and routines, including conversations and interactions with children, parents and teachers. This accustomed the children, teachers and parents to my presence. I knew all the children and many parents by name by the time the project was explained and participation invited. I saw my situation as similar to an insider-researcher in terms of building trusting relationships and earning the confidence of the teachers, parents and four-year-old children before gaining informed consent.

My position in writing this research note is that of an advocate for young children. Recently, young children have been given 'voice' in research rather than being researched through the eyes of adults. I believe this should be extended by challenging the common practice of seeking parental consent as proxy for young children's participation in research. To be respectful of children, their rights ought to be considered carefully when teachers carry out research in the early childhood education settings in which they work.

Codes of research ethics

Codes of ethics provide researchers with a set of general ethical principles and practical rules to guide practice. The intention is to ensure that the researcher is committed to the welfare of the profession and the research participants over all other considerations. The dual role of teacher/researcher can lead to a conflict of interest due to the different agendas of these roles (Hammack, 1997). However, teacher/researchers commonly agree that the teaching is foremost (eg. Mohr, 2001).

Jane Zeni (2001a; also *Networks, 4 (1*))has extensively considered practitioner research ethics. Her principles for guidance in decision-making responsibility, accountability, credit, reputations, cultural sensitivity and informed consent remind me of the three 'R's I try to base my research relationships and decision-making on - respect, reciprocity and responsiveness. This is also where Zeni (2001b) sees practitioner research conversations heading "to issues of responsibility, relationships and respect". The contributors to Zeni's book (2001a) consider ethical situations

and issues specific to their research and context as indeed all research projects ought. Their combined wisdom contributes much to the discussion about practitioner research ethics.

I wish to add two further issues to the dialogue. The first is the situation of researching children under seven years of age and the second that of working with and adapting institutional codes of ethics (and educating academics to see ethics as a more inclusive process) rather than using these to devise a separate code for practitioner research as Zeni appears to advocate. Institutional codes of ethics seem to have their origins in quantitative research, so need to be adapted for all types of qualitative research, including common methods of practitioner research. For my project, the institutional principles I attempted to address for four-year-old children in ways similar to practitioner research were informed consent, minimising harm, voluntary participation and privacy.

Informed consent

Principles of informed consent usually state that consent must be gained at the level of comprehension of the participant. This is certainly appropriate for children as participants, as consent relies upon participants having sufficient knowledge of the research project and their role in it to understand what will be required of them. In the case of young children, the ability to give consent is therefore problematic; but it is possible. With young children, consent is often gained on behalf of them by agreement with parents. This assumes that parents act in the best interests of children and, like the children, are not compromised by their existing relationship with teachers. Although such consent may be justifiable, this proxy consent does not truly meet the requirements of informed consent on the part of actual participants. I also challenge the commonly accepted practice of early childhood settings gaining global permission for research on enrolment forms. I consider that each project should be explained appropriately to parents and children before consent is sought. While time-consuming, this is respectful and in line with both Zeni's and my principles.

It is possible to underestimate children's abilities to understand what is said to them. Hughes and Helling (1991) argue that researchers do not make an effort to obtain consent from children by making them informed research participants. However, the purposes and procedures of a study can be explained in concrete terms related to the child's immediate environment and personal experiences, and at their developmental level. For my project, I explained that we were learning about sea creatures, going on a trip to see some, and then would talk about the trip and what they learned afterwards. I asked the children if they would let me watch them with their friends and the teachers, take photos, write stories about them in my notebook and tape-record our discussions. The latter produced the most excitement as children enjoyed listening to themselves through the earphones during prior familiarisation and during the interviews.

When I prepared my application to the research ethics committee of the institution supervising my research, I included consent sheets for the children (see appendix). I was told these were unnecessary as the children were under seven. I responded that seeking their consent was a sign of respect and in line with current early literacy practices and was given permission to proceed. I sought the children's consent after obtaining parental consent. Parents commented that the children felt special and important about being asked to sign a consent form. One boy refused

me, further vindicating my explanation that I wanted to seek consent from children as a sign of respect. He doesn't mind if I take a photo of him, but, nah, he doesn't want to talk to me about anything. My explanation also linked to early literacy principles. One child, as I began to explain the consent sheet told me "Oh, Mum's already told me about this. She said I have to write my name is it here?" (and pointed to the right place). A girl told me she's happy to sign her name, but she can't do all the letters, so she'll "just sign the ones I know". One boy says you can't read people's signatures so he'll just scribble a few letters. These four-year-olds demonstrated a wealth of early literacy knowledge!

Minimising harm

A feature of many early childhood education settings in New Zealand is that there is often a wide variation in the educational backgrounds and qualifications of staff. Although new or inexperienced researchers should undertake adequate preparation, it is also only by undertaking research, initially under supervision, that researchers learn about research. Professional development to assist teachers to develop the researcher role, partnerships between tertiary institutions and practitioners (which may also assist wider dissemination of findings), and a process of peer review or clearance procedures may be helpful in providing appropriate support for teachers and protecting children's involvement. This is important where practitioners have limited knowledge and experience of research techniques. Currently in New Zealand, unless the practitioner's research is part of study for a qualification, it is unlikely that the project is submitted for an ethical review process. Snook (1997) suggests that schools may require ethics committees to supervise research I support this suggestion for early childhood settings to ensure ethical principles are carefully thought about.

Of special consideration is that the younger the child, the more care must be taken not to disrupt the normal environment of teaching and relationships during the research process. Young children are vulnerable, as they may be unable to distinguish between the teacher and researcher roles. The children in my research clearly saw me as a teacher after the first two weeks. Only one child gave an indication that she knew I did not quite fit the organisational systems the teachers operated under, but in other interactions, she, too, surmised that I was a teacher. Given that a researcher must be accepted by children, a teacher is in a unique position to blend in with children during research (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986), if it is conducted during the normal play context of early childhood settings rather than by means of an unfamiliar procedure such as testing, which may potentially create harm. For the interview component of my research, I interviewed children in small groups less threatening than a one-to-one situation during their normal small group teaching time at the beginning of the day. Instead of attempting one-hour interviews (as were completed with the teachers and parents), I carried out four approximately fifteen-minute interviews.

When interviewing children, the place and process of the interview can be negotiated with them. Because the children I was researching chose to do drawing and writing activities at the same time, they chose to group around a table used for this purpose. They agreed anyone could speak when they wanted to and monitored each other's turn-taking at times. Eliciting free narrative, where children recall everything they know or remember with minimal prompting from the interviewer, is a useful way to start. This gives children control and the confidence that the

researcher is genuinely interested in their views. I asked children to tell me about their kindergarten experiences and later their prior knowledge of sea creatures. After the excursion, free narrative was animated and detailed, with little input from me apart from some stimulated recall using photographs. To follow up, the use of open questions is useful as the process and direction of the interview can be developed depending on children's responses and interests, rather than by researcher-generated questions or hypotheses. This also reduces the risk of suggestibility - ways in which children's responses can be influenced by social and psychological factors which is a particular concern with those under five (Wilson & Powell, 2001).

Voluntary participation

Participation in research should be voluntary. Therefore, since the teacher/researcher is in a position of power over children as participants in research, it is essential that children feel free to withdraw participation. It is possible that some young children may find this concept difficult to understand. Also, young children may choose to walk away or not answer a question for some reason but may not understand the consequences for their participation in the research. Action research, a common technique used in early childhood settings, may be particularly problematic in this regard. The key problem here with young children is that they may not understand what it means to be involved in research, and simply want to please the teacher by being involved.

In practitioner research, children may be unaware that they are participating and be unable to exercise the right to withdraw from the research. In the case of action research, children may be unaware that they are participating at any particular moment, either because parents have given global consent or because of the very nature of action research. They may therefore be unable to exercise the right to withdraw from the research. Teachers/researchers, because they know the children well, are however more likely to be attuned to children's wishes to withdraw from research. On the other hand, young children may feel obliged because of the existing relationship to persist with research activities. In an interview or testing situation, they may give safe or misleading answers, or what they think the researcher wants to hear or see, in order to please the teacher. Children can also be accused of being unreliable informants as they frequently change their minds (Hatch, 1990).

My experience was that, having established trusting relationships, four-year-old children were quite capable of indicating verbally and non-verbally when they had had enough. It was important for me to be sensitive to this and to allow them to leave to play elsewhere. We had agreed, prior to interviewing, that anyone could leave when they wanted to or ask for the taperecorder to be turned off. I also found that I knew the children well enough to realise when they were trying to give a response in order to please me, and reassured them that "I don't know" or "I'm not interested" were acceptable replies. After children had spoken, I repeated or summarised their contribution so they could correct any misunderstanding or misinterpretation immediately. Children were provided with transcripts and their parents asked to read these with them for further verification. The children were told their parents would read the transcripts so there was no breach of confidentiality or privacy.

Privacy considerations

In publicly reporting research from one specific setting, it may be difficult to assure participants of confidentiality or anonymity. Moreover, when research is undertaken in order to improve children's individual educational experiences, it may be appropriate that children are identifiable in some way. In this instance, the ethical consideration may be to ensure those who handle the data are aware of their responsibilities with regard to confidentiality. There may also be occasions when it is respectful to share ownership of the research results Zeni's principle of credit. I originally gained consent as an outsider and allowed participants to choose their own pseudonyms the children's choices ranged from Frankenstein to Orca and demonstrated early peer pressure with Penguin 1, 2 and 3! However, after I have negotiated the meaning of my data with the participants and discussed the results with them, I intend to ask them if they would like acknowledgement of their contributions by using their real names. Again, parental consent will support children's wishes, not replace them.

Research or educational practice?

Teacher/researchers often use research techniques such as action research or participant observation. This raises the question of what is research and what is normal practice in terms of educational planning. Good teaching practice has always required close observation and experimentation (Hammack, 1997). Evaluations of educational practice and implementation of new curricula offer much to the profession - there is no clear guidance as to where this line is drawn. Zeni (2001a, 2001b) argues that research tends to involve more systematic documentation and data gathering, more-self-reflection in writing and more audience than teaching. Elliott (1990) asserts that teaching and research are "two aspects of a single process" (p. 7) whereas Murray and Lawrence (2000) suggest "the emergent notion that teachers can be, and should be, both teachers and researchers" (p. 7) should be debated. These discussions reinforce my argument that, with regard to ethical considerations, heightened sensitivity towards the conflict of interest potentially inherent in the dual roles is appropriate. "How we treat our students and colleagues is a measure of the quality of both our teaching and our researching" (Mohr, 2001, p. 5).

Conclusions

Teachers who have been involved in research have frequently commented on improvements to their practice, as they become more reflective, critical and analytical of their teaching. In encouraging more teachers to undertake research, it should however be noted that the role of the teacher/researcher in early childhood education is a complicated one. The complex interaction of ethical principles to be considered in order to address the problems which occur when teachers research children for whom they are responsible, demonstrates clearly the necessity of applying ethical guidelines to a particular context and project. Applying existing institutional research ethics principles, for teacher/researchers in early childhood education settings, highlights that issues of what constitutes informed consent and voluntary participation for child participants, and attention to relationships, confidentiality and privacy, rate high consideration.

I hope these thoughts stimulate further dialogue about practitioner research ethics. The ethical treatment of participants in research leads to greater trust in researchers and respect for the

professionalism of the field. Both are clearly important to early childhood education, still establishing itself internationally as a profession and developing its research knowledge base.

Note:
The project referred to in this article was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee PN Protocol 01/38.

References

1. Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical*. London: Falmer Press.
2. Elliott, J. (1990). Teachers as researchers: Implications for supervision and teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 6* (1), 1-26.
3. Fueyo, V. & Koorland, M. (1997). Teacher as researcher: A synonym for professionalism. *Journal of Teacher Education, 48* (5), 336-342.
4. Graue, M.E. & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics.* California: Sage Publications.
5. Hammack, F.M. (1997). Ethical issues in teacher research. *Teachers College Record 99* (2), 247-265.
6. Hatch, J.A. (1990). Young children as informants in classroom studies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 5,* 251-264.
7. Henson, K. T. (1996). Teachers as researchers. In J. Sikula, T. Buttery & E. Guyton (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education (2nd ed.),* (pp. 53-64). New York: Simon & Schuster.
8. Hughes, T. & Helling, M.K. (1991). A case for obtaining informed consent from young children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 6,* 225-232.
9. Keyes, C. (2000). The early childhood teacher's voice in the research community. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 8* (1), 3-13.
10. MacNaughton, G. (1996). Researching for quality: A case for action research in early childhood services. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 21* (2), 29-33.
11. Mohr, M. (2001). Drafting ethical guidelines for teacher research in schools. In J. Zeni (Ed.), *Ethical issues in practitioner research,* pp. 3-12. New York: Teachers College Press.
12. Murray, L. & Lawrence, B. (2000). *Practitioner-based enquiry: Principles for postgraduate research.* London: Falmer Press.
13. Snook, I. (1997). Schools and the right to privacy. *Access: Critical Perspectives on Cultural and Policy Studies in Education 16* (1), 1-9.
14. Tammivaara, J. & Enright, D. (1986). On eliciting information: Dialogues with child informants. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 17,* 218-238.
15. Wilson, C. & Powell, M. (2001). *A guide to interviewing children: Essential skills for counsellors, police, lawyers and social workers*. London: Routledge.
16. Zeni, J. (Ed.). (2001a). *Ethical issues in practitioner research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
17. Zeni, J. (2001b). The IRB, the HSR and the ethics of insider research. *Networks: An On-line Journal for Teacher Research, May*. Available on-line at http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~ctd/networks/journal/Vol%204(1).2001may/note.html