IDENTIFYING ETHICAL ISSUES IN SELF-STUDY PROPOSALS*

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Abstract

The origins of this chapter lie in persistent reports of difficulties that proposals for practitioner research in education encounter with institutional review boards (IRB) and the frustration of teacher researchers at the inappropriateness of the ethical protocols for their genre of research. The discussion is restricted to what is defined as insider research and to the ethical issues associated with IRB processes. The chapter analyses the ethical issues in different forms of practitioner research in education and contrasts these with those that are important in the bio-medical domain in which many standard protocols originate. The starting point for this analysis is the ethical parameters that already exist in the workplace of teachers and teacher educators. These provide a basis for a discussion of consent issues that facilitates decisions about what should and should not be part of the consent process. The discussion considers separately the ethics associated with the intervention, data collection and data reporting phases of practitioner research. In most cases, the ethical problems and dilemmas are associated with the last of these. The chapter concludes with a set of questions designed to provide a framework for decision-making in this area.

This handbook is a result of increasing interest in and recognition of the importance of the kinds of wisdom that can come from self-studies by teachers and teacher educators. These sorts of studies have had to battle for their place in the sunny fields of legitimised research. Debate continues as to whether or not they should and could be regarded as belonging to one or more separate and distinctive genres of research and, if so, what cannons would be used to

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define excellence. What is clear is that they routinely raise ethical issues, problems and dilemmas that are, “ambiguous, context-sensitive and therefore resistant to generic regulations” (Zeni, 2001, p. xi). The principal motive for writing this chapter is the persistence of reports of problems that research proposals in this area encounter when submitted to university ethics committees (hereafter referred to as Institutional Research Boards, or IRBs) for approval. A constant theme in these reports is the inappropriateness of the protocols used by IRBs for identifying potential ethical problems in practitioner research in education. Protocols that are well established and appropriate in bio-medical research, where the researcher is positioned as a neutral outsider, are often criticised by those involved in practitioner research as being inappropriate when applied to the insider research that is the focus of this handbook.

A spectacular example of this was reported at a roundtable on ethics at the 2003 International Conference of Teacher Research. A teacher, who had submitted a proposal for a 12-month study in her classroom, was asked by her IRB: “How will you ensure that, at the end of the research, your subjects [her students] will be returned to the state they were in when the research began?”

As someone who spent 17 years with a role as a secondary classroom teacher researching his own practice, 19 years with a role of leading and supporting groups of teacher researchers in my own and other schools and 10 years with a role in nudging research grants and Masters and Doctoral proposals through our ethics committee, I share this dissatisfaction.

The following relatively recent case brings out some of the issues and dilemmas in this area.

Case 1: Jill

Jill was a science teacher in a very low socio-economic area, very high permanent unemployment, parents with very low levels of education, students with very low aspirations and expectations. She was concerned that large numbers of students were entering Year 7 each year excited by the idea of doing science, but with very low literacy skills. By mid-year, they commonly were alienated from science, partly, it seemed, because of demands for writing. Jill wanted to do two things. One was to develop approaches to Year 7 Science that involved good science, but minimal perceptions of writing. The second was to monitor students’ reactions to and opinions of different activities during the year to find out more about which sorts of activities were engaging/not engaging and why. She was particularly interested in the data from the low-achieving students most likely to be alienated by mid-year.

One form of data was ‘fortune line’ graphs where students rated their enjoyment of individual activities and (separately) of science overall on graphs. Jill had two Year 7 classes and intended to (separately) aggregate the graphs of students in each class; looking for highs and lows in individual activities as well as overall trends during the year. To supplement the graphs,