



Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board

ETHICS CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS' RESEARCH WITH STUDENTS IN THEIR OWN CLASSROOM

This memorandum is intended to provide guidance to graduate students and other researchers at the Faculty of Education on the ethical issues surrounding the conduct of research using their own students as research subjects. For example, an M.Ed. student might be interested in examining her own Grade 2 students' constructions or perceptions of gender identity. (S)he is interested in how their own understandings of gender might be influencing the way they respond to a particular story-book. Is (s)he able to conduct this sort of research given the highly asymmetric power relationship that exists between a teacher and her/his own students? The answer is a qualified yes. With proper planning and consideration, a teacher may be able to use the students within her/his own class as study participants, provided (s)he is able to avoid both the reality and appearance of coercion, and in particular, coercion to participate in the study.

All research involving human participants conducted by any member of the university community **must** meet the university's ethical standards for research involving human subjects which in turn are derived from the *Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (for full text see <http://pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/tcps-epc>). Thesis and directed research project supervisors are responsible for ensuring that their students are aware of and meet these ethical standards.

Research on one's own students can be a legitimate knowledge-creation exercise when it is carried out ethically, but doing so requires special attention to the coercion issue. Conducting research on one's own students poses several significant ethical challenges which have major implications for the ethical review process.

STEP 1: The first step when thinking about your research project is to distinguish between activities that constitute “research” and those that fall under the practice of “professional development”.

Personal Professional Development:

Systematic critical examination of teaching practice for personal professional development is not “research on human subjects.” As professionals, teachers have a responsibility to examine their pedagogical practices and curriculum implementation, in short, to be “reflective practitioners.” Where a particular teacher activity is aimed solely at examining that teacher’s pedagogical practices to improve her professional practice (and not for publication or for presentation at a public meeting/conference or for a directed research project or thesis—remember these are both public documents) it is not “research on human subjects” and would not have to be reviewed by any Research Ethics Board (REB). Data that are collected, analyzed, reported and shared by teachers, educators and professional developers without the need to be approved by an ethics board must be reviewed by the university ethics board when these are done for research purposes by a university investigator. Refer to the TCPS for additional detail on what is or is not research.

Research

Research with human subjects at UWO is governed by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. The Research Ethics Board needs to take the following ethical issues into consideration when reviewing teachers' research with their own students.

Ethical Issues (From the TCPS)

1. “*Respect for Free and Informed Consent*: Individuals are generally presumed to have the capacity and right to make free and informed decisions.”

“*Voluntariness* (Article 2.2) Free and informed consent must be voluntarily given, without manipulation, undue influence or coercion. ... Undue influence may take the form of inducement, deprivation, or the exercise of control, or authority over prospective subjects. Voluntariness is especially relevant in research involving restricted or dependent subjects... For example, the voluntariness of ...students may be restricted because their institutional context implies undue pressure.”
2. “*Respect for Vulnerable Persons*: Respect for human dignity entails high ethical obligations toward vulnerable persons—to those whose diminished competence and/or decision making capacity make them vulnerable. Children, institutionalized persons or others who are vulnerable are entitled, on grounds of human dignity, caring, solidarity and fairness, to special protection against abuse, exploitation or discrimination. Ethical obligations to vulnerable individuals in the research enterprise will often translate into special procedures to protect their interests.”
3. “*A subject-centred approach* ... researchers should take into account that potential subjects who are asked to participate in research by, for example, ..., [their] teacher ... may be overly influenced by such factors as trust in the researcher or the hope for other goals—more than by assessment of the pros and cons of participation in the research. A ... student [may hope] for better marks. This places extra demands on the researcher for accuracy, candour, objectivity and sensitivity in informing potential subjects about proposed research.”

STEP 2: *The second step in planning research on one's own students is to decide how you will avoid both the reality and perception of coercion.*

From the point of view of those responsible for ethics review, the dilemma is between facilitating ethical research and protecting participants from harm—including the “harm” of coercion, especially coercion to participate in research. Ethics review involves balancing risks and expected benefits. A potential “risk” in these studies is being coerced into participating in a study in which one does not wish to participate (or parents similarly feeling obligated to allow their children to participate to avoid offending their child's teacher-researcher).

STEP 3: The third step in planning for research on one's own students is to create a plausible plan for avoiding coercion in your ethics submission. This can be done by the the researcher

putting themselves at arm's length from the research either by time or person. The following are possible alternatives for teacher-researchers. This is not an exhaustive list. If researchers are able to provide other alternatives that avoid coercion, they are welcome to submit them to the REB for review (some types of data, for instance anonymous online questionnaires, might by their very nature leave a teacher blind to which of their students actually participated in his/her study and thus potentially be non-coercive and thus acceptable).

1. The teacher-researcher may choose not to study his/her own students and rather to study students in another school or another classroom.
2. The teacher-researcher may choose to have another person (normally a neutral "third-party," however, not a co-investigator in the research study) explain the study to students, provide letters of information, collect consent forms, and keep them *until the final grades for this class have been submitted*. Only then would the teacher-researcher learn the identity of students whose parents or guardians consented to their participation and only then would she be free to use for research purposes assignments, test marks, and so forth for which consent has been obtained. It follows that a teacher-researcher would not be able to interview students, at least until after she ceases to be their teacher, since she cannot know who agreed to participate until after the school year or semester is over.
3. The option of using another teacher for collection and storage of consent forms might be taken a step further by having a third party, perhaps another teacher at the school or a fellow graduate student, come in as a research assistant and conduct the interviews and/or lead discussions for research purposes (e.g. focus groups) and report back to the teacher/researcher. This third party, however, should not be someone that the students will recognize as a friend or close associate of the teacher/researcher. The teacher-researcher, moreover, would need to remain "blind" to the identity of participating and non-participating students.
4. If a teacher-researcher were to interview all his/her students for purposes of self-evaluation (it would be important that such self-evaluation be an authentically valued objective on the part of the teacher, not a sham to conceal her intent to use such data for research purposes) but have a neutral third party recruit students for participation in a parallel research study (same questions, same issues, etc.) with the understanding that the teacher-researcher would remain blind to which students and parents consented to *the research use* of the interview data until after the researcher ceased to be the teacher of the students in question, coercion would be averted (assuming both students and parents, of course, were aware that the teacher would not know who consented to the research use of the data and who did not until she ceased to be the teacher of the potential participants).
5. The teacher-researcher may choose to investigate and reflect systematically upon his/her teaching practice. (S)he might, for example, record in a diary (or similar tool) her/his own perceptions of the effects of a teaching method on student learning. The diary, or the portions that the teacher proposes to use for research purposes, however, must not contain references to her reflections upon individual students or must be fully anonymized. The research thus would be restricted to the teacher's reflections of the general responses to the teaching method.

Applicants to the Research Ethics Board who follow these suggestions, or design other means to satisfy the TCPS, stand a good chance of having their proposals pass the ethical review process. Proposals which do not clearly and directly address the possibility of coercion in research on the applicant's own students, however, are likely to encounter difficulties.