2 Ethics

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

2.1 Clarify ethical issues involved in conducting action research.

2.2 Recognize the challenges and procedures for obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

2.3 Recognize the ethical obligations that educational researchers have and describe the codes and procedures they follow to ensure they adhere to them.

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.

The Use of Technology to Enhance Mathematics Achievement

Geoff Mills

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 grant-writing 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 twenty-first 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 the following:

1. *Whether our use of technology was successfully meeting the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) Standards*
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.

What we saw from the inside of each other's classrooms, however, 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 nowhere 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. It is intended not 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 chapter will also provide guidelines to help action researchers obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

The Ethics of Research

All research studies involve ethical considerations. 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. Two overriding rules of ethics are that participants should not be harmed in any way—physically, mentally, or socially—and that researchers obtain participants' informed consent, as described in the following sections.

To remind researchers of their responsibilities, professional organizations have developed codes of ethical conduct for their members. The general principles from the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct

adopted by the American Psychological Association (June 1, 2010) provide guidelines and contain specific ethical standards in 10 categories, which are not limited to research: (1) Resolving Ethical Issues, (2) Competence, (3) Human Relations, (4) Privacy and Confidentiality, (5) Advertising and Other Public Statements, (6) Record Keeping and Fees, (7) Education and Training, (8) Research and Publication, (9) Assessment, and (10) Therapy. You may read the full text online at the website for the American Psychological Association (http://www.apa.org).

The American Educational Research Association (AERA) approved a code of ethics in February 2011 (for a comprehensive discussion, see *Educational Researcher*, 40(3), 145–156). The code of ethics of AERA outlines a set of values on which educational researchers should build their research practices. Included in the code of ethics are five principles and 22 ethical standards. The principles are intended to serve as a guide for education researchers in determining ethical behavior in various contexts and include (a) Professional Competence, (b) Integrity, (c) Professional, Scientific, and Scholarly Responsibility, (d) Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity, and (e) Social Responsibility. The 22 ethical standards set forth the rules for ethical conduct by education researchers and, while not intended to be an exhaustive list, aim to cover most situations encountered by education researchers. The list is as follows:

1. Scientific, Scholarly, and Professional Standards
2. Competence
3. Use and Misuse of Expertise
4. Fabrication, Falsification, and Plagiarism
5. Avoiding Harm
6. Nondiscrimination
7. Nonexploitation
8. Harassment
9. Employment Decisions
10. Conflicts of Interest
11. Public Communications
12. Confidentiality
13. Informed Consent
14. Research Planning, Implementation, and Dissemination
15. Authorship Credit
16. Publication Process
17. Responsibilities of Reviewers
18. Teaching, Training, and Administering Education Programs
19. Mentoring
20. Supervision
21. Contractual and Consulting Services
22. Adherence to the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association

Of particular importance to action researchers is the ethical standard of informed consent, and AERA provides considerable guidance for how and when informed consent with children should be sought (cf. pp. 151–152). This will be discussed further in the section on ethical guidelines later in the chapter. Action researchers should consider membership of AERA and, in particular, membership of the Action Research Special Interest Group (SIG), that provides a forum for experienced and novice action researchers alike. Membership information and benefits can be found at aera.net.

In 1974, the U.S. Congress put the force of law behind codes of ethical research and passed the **National Research Act of 1974**, which authorized the creation of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. This commission was charged with developing an ethical code and guidelines for researchers. 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 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). Incidents such as these prompted governmental regulations regarding research studies, and today, most universities, research centers, and medical centers adhere to ethical guidelines that prohibit such methods. Most universities have a review group, usually called the *Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)* or *IRB*.

Institutional Review Boards and Action Researchers

Teacher researchers conducting action research as part of a university program of study face unique challenges associated with obtaining IRB approval and must meet standards that go beyond what most schools and school districts require as part of their own research protocols. IRBs are charged by universities to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects. The key issue for teacher researchers studying their own practices and, hence, collecting data based primarily on student outcomes relates to the fact that they are acting not only as researchers but also as the change agents who have the power and authority to bring about change in their classrooms. According to Nolen and Vander Putten (2007), "These potentially conflicting roles can confound the individual's primary objective in the classroom or school: student learning" (p. 402). Given this potential conflict, Nolen and Vander Putten raise a number of questions, the answers to which provide guidance for action researchers seeking to obtain IRB approval:

- At what point does teaching become research?
- Where does the accountability for this research lie?

- Are teachers properly trained to see the possible ethical pitfalls in such research?
- How are the rights and freedoms of the research participants (the students) protected?

Given the emancipatory nature of action research (and the definition of action research used in this text), it is clear that the answer to the first question is that teaching and research are intertwined. For action researchers studying their own practices and their impact on student outcomes, the inquiry lens of action research pervades the teaching process: Teacher researchers are the data collection instruments constantly monitoring what is going on in their classrooms.

The accountability for this research lies not only with the teacher researcher but also, in a university context, with the researcher's mentor/teacher, who must ensure that proposed action research studies are ethical in their conduct. As such, it is the responsibility of the university instructor to teach neophyte teacher researchers about the potential ethical pitfalls associated with classroom/school-based action research. It is the responsibility of the IRB to ensure that action researchers address potential ethical challenges in their written proposals and (when called for) in supplementary oral presentations.

In many ways, the most complex issue action researchers face is how to safeguard the rights and freedoms of the students in the classrooms. How do teachers negotiate informed consent with students (and their parents)? Are students really in a position to opt out of any research their classroom teachers are conducting? Similarly, this question raises concerns about the role of power and authority in a classroom environment and whether students can reasonably be expected to opt out of a study without being concerned about possible censure by the classroom teacher. It should be noted that these kinds of concerns are not new to action researchers or any other qualitatively oriented community-based researchers. IRBs (which are often populated by quantitatively oriented researchers) often struggle with social science research proposals that invariably focus on "insider" research, where the research process is inherently open ended and intimate. Teachers are active participant observers of their classrooms, continually monitoring and adjusting their teaching based on formal and informal observations of their students. Nevertheless, IRBs have been condoning this kind of research for many years, and action researchers should not be intimidated by the prospect of answering important ethical questions, even if the accompanying frustration of "these quantitative researchers really don't understand what we do" threatens to sideline the research.

Given this context, I offer the following recommendations for action researchers wishing to obtain IRB approval (adapted from Nolen and Vander Putten, 2007):

- Action researchers should provide IRBs with all the necessary university-based IRB requirements (which vary slightly from university to university).

- Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with data collection plans that clearly minimize data sources that could be construed as providing evidence that could be used in a coercive manner.
- Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with cover letters that explain their studies and include statements about the dual role of teacher and researcher and the sensitivity it takes to conduct research into one's own practice.
- Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with parental consent forms that clearly state how they will guarantee that students will be protected from harm, that is, that students will not be penalized for not participating in a study.
- Action researchers should include in all data collection instruments a final "yes or no" option, such as "Please include my answers in the study," which unobtrusively allows the student to opt out of the study while appearing to participate.

It is the burden of the action researcher to provide the IRB with evidence that the proposed study clearly addresses issues of informed consent, protection from harm, student autonomy, and the potentially coercive nature of action research.

The National Research Act of 1974 was also 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 requires 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. If you calculate the class average from individual student records, however, 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. Again, this adherence to providing anonymity offers other instructional challenges for the teacher researcher who wishes to use formative and summative evaluation data to develop specific instructional interventions designed to meet students' needs.

It is also worth noting that some IRBs do not require IRB approval for action research conducted as part of a university course. Be sure to check with your

Voices from the Field

Institutional Review Boards and Action Researchers

The teacher researcher in this video vignette was a student teacher who was conducting action research as a coursework requirement. At this student's university coursework assignments were not required to have IRB approval. However, the student was proactive in notifying the parents of children in his class about the research that was being done and providing assurances of confidentiality and anonymity through the use of a cover letter. The student also sought informed consent from the students in his class. Given that this research was being done as a coursework assignment, the student should have also checked with the local school district to determine if there was a policy covering classroom based research and whether any IRB and/or informed consent requirements existed.

ENHANCEDetext video example 2–1
The researcher in this video discusses submitting his research materials for review, but he does not mention an Institutional Review Board. How might a classroom teacher who is not affiliated with a university seek a formal, unbiased, and timely review of his or her study design?

instructor and/or IRB to determine if IRB approval is required at your university. Sometimes the determining factor in this decision relates to whether the outcomes of the proposed study will be published or presented at a professional conference.

The sources and advice offered in this chapter will help you to conceive and conduct your research ethically. 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 Nolen

and Vander Putten (2007) contend, "Like the physician and the counselor, the teacher cannot abandon the role of practitioner but must always exercise professional judgment and skill in the best interest of the student" (p. 403). Similarly, 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 (and as part of your IRB approval) 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 (cf. Christians, 2000; Creswell, 2015; Eisner, 1991; Flinders, 1992; Mills & Gay, 2016; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; 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 students' "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? As stated previously, it will depend on whether you need to obtain IRB approval in addition to meeting the local school district protocols. But as you will see in the following discussion, regardless of the kinds of mandatory research approvals, it is important that you develop your own criteria for what you consider 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.

Informed Consent and Protection from Harm

Informed consent should take the form of a dialogue that mutually shapes the research and the results. 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. Be clear about whether you need to seek permission from participants in the study. For example, if you are using photographs or video recordings 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 and university to university 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? In the case of Billabong Elementary School (from the opening vignette), the action research team wrestled with the issue of informed consent. When they initially presented their project to the faculty at the school, 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. The research team had not collected data without their knowledge. Still, the team wondered if they had done enough. Would the presentation of their data harm the teachers, especially if the teachers had expressed disapproval of the principal? Were the teachers adequately prepared for the risks? After debate, the researchers resolved to share the general findings of the study rather than singling out any individual teacher's comments. That way, the researchers could protect the confidentiality of participants while at the same time sharing the themes that emerged from the study.

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 anonymity or confidentiality 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. On the other hand, confidentiality is when the researcher knows the identities of participants but promises not to release them to anyone else. 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 (students and parents) whether you will provide confidentiality (you will know but will not tell) or anonymity (you will not know the participants' names) and be sure they know the difference. Clearly, this is a challenge in action research when the focus of the research is on the outcomes of students in the teacher researcher's classroom.

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. Of course, all of this must be balanced against their commitment to improve the learning experiences of the students in their school.

Figure 2–1 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 2–2 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. To maintain your participants' initial level of cooperation, monitor their feelings and respond as necessary.

figure 2–1 ▪ Sample Cover Letter

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

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

figure 2–2 ■ Parental Consent Form for a Proposed Research Study

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

Voices from the Field

Informed Consent and Protection from Harm

The teacher researcher in this vignette asserts that because she was using "regular test data," it was not necessary to seek informed consent from the parents and the students. Furthermore, she claims that the students were not fearful that their test results would be published in the local newspaper. Informed consent can be a moving target throughout the action research process, and given the context in which this teacher researcher was working (student teacher), an argument could be made to the student that seeking informed consent from students in the form of a signed letter should be considered standard operating procedure and a necessary step in protecting students from any harm. Further, teacher researchers should always check local school district policies covering the conduct of research in classrooms.

ENHANCEDetext video example 2–2
In your view, did the researcher in this video do the right thing by not directly seeking student consent?

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

Personal 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

Voices from the Field

Deception

This teacher researcher was clearly trying to deceive the school principal by not wanting to share the purpose of her action research. It appears as though the teacher researcher was fearful that she would not be allowed to conduct the research if she shared the purpose of her study focused on the use of basal readers and the inherent gender bias in these materials. The context of the teacher researcher as a student teacher completing a coursework requirement is not an excuse for failure to seek informed consent, especially if the researcher intended to disclose the findings of her study. The conduct of any research with the intent to disclose the findings to a wider audience requires that the teacher researcher seek informed consent and work within the local school district's policy for school-based research.

ENHANCEDetext video example 2–3
Was the researcher in this video engaging in deception? What is the relationship between deception and disclosure of the findings?

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 before 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 kinds of 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 (see Task 1 at the end of

Voices from the Field

Personal Ethical Perspective

This teacher researcher did not seek informed consent and argued that the practice of making sure all data collection was anonymous was analogous with informed consent. The teacher researcher embraces a core ethical value of avoidance of harm as an integral part of her classroom life. While this core value/personal ethical perspective is critical to the successful conduct of classroom-based research, it does not protect the teacher if faced with an unanticipated ethical dilemma. There are no circumstances under which informed consent is a bad idea.

ENHANCEDetext video example 2–4
Notice how the researcher in this video made efforts to conduct her research in a way that fit with her own personal ethical perspective.

this chapter). 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.

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.

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 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.

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,

RESEARCH IN ACTION CHECKLIST 2–1

Ethical Guidelines for Action Researchers

_____ Determine whether you require IRB approval and/or school district approval.

_____ If necessary, obtain IRB approval.

_____ Seek your action research participants' informed consent.

_____ Consider confidentiality, anonymity, and avoidance of harm.

_____ Deception is unacceptable.

_____ Develop an ethical research perspective that is close to your personal, ethical position.

_____ Determine the broader social principles that affect your ethical stance.

_____ Ensure that you accurately record data.

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. Mills and Gay (2016) 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. (p. 23)

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 2–1 for ethical guidelines for teacher researchers.)

SUMMARY

The Ethics of Research

1. 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.
2. Many professional organizations have developed codes of ethical conduct for their members, such as the American Psychological Association (APA, updated June, 2010) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA updated February 2011).
3. The National Research Act of 1974 requires that, to ensure protection of participants, proposed research activities involving human participants be reviewed and approved by an authorized group before the execution of the research.
4. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are charged by universities to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects.
5. The key issue for teacher researchers studying their own practices and, hence, collecting data primarily based on student outcomes relates to the fact that they are acting not only as the researchers but also as the change agents who have the power and authority to bring about change in their classrooms.
6. Teachers are active participant observers of their classrooms, continually monitoring and adjusting their teaching based on formal and informal observations of their students.
7. Action researchers should provide IRBs with all the necessary university-based IRB requirements (which vary slightly from university to university).
8. Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with data collection plans that clearly minimize data sources that could be construed as providing evidence that could be used in a coercive manner.
9. Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with cover letters that explain their studies and include statements about the dual role of teacher and researcher and the sensitivity it takes to conduct research into one's own practice.
10. Action researchers should provide IRBs, school district administrators, and parents with parental consent forms that clearly state how they will guarantee that students will be protected from harm, that is, that students will not be penalized for not participating in a study.
11. Action researchers should include in all data collection instruments a final "yes or no" option, such as "Please include my answers in the study," which unobtrusively allows the student to opt out of the study while appearing to participate.

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

12. 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.

13. Action research is intimate because there is little distance between teacher researchers and their subjects: the students in their classrooms and schools. This significantly complicates the ability of teacher researchers to obtain students' informed consent to participate in the research process.

Ethical Guidelines

14. Perhaps the most basic and important ethical issues in research are concerned with participants' informed consent and freedom from harm.
15. Informed consent should take the form of a dialogue that mutually shapes the research and the results.
16. 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.
17. The use of confidentiality or anonymity to avoid privacy invasion and potential harm is common.
18. Anonymity means that the researcher does not know the identities of the participants in the study.
19. Confidentiality is when the researcher knows the identities of participants but promises not to release them to anyone else.
20. There is no room for deception in action research.
21. Researchers should have an ethical perspective that is very close to their personal ethical position.
22. 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.
23. Ensuring the accuracy of your data is a central concern of action research.
24. 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.

TASK

1. Using the ethical guidelines provided in Research in Action Checklist 2–1, determine what remains to be done to address all possible ethical dilemmas in your study.