



# Action Research in Education: Addressing Gaps in Ethical Principles and Practices

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Action research in education has gained increasing attention in the past 20 years. It is viewed as a practical yet systematic research method that enables teachers to investigate their own teaching and their students' learning. However, the ethical issues unique to this form of insider research have received less attention. Drawing on several professional associations' principles for research practice, the authors identify a series of potential ethical issues inherent in action research in K–12 schools and the corresponding difficulties that action researchers encounter with the policies and procedures of institutional review boards. The authors conclude with recommendations for future practice addressed to three groups: institutional review boards, K–12 school professionals and teacher educators, and national professional and representative organizations.

**Keywords:** action research; ethical practice in research; insider research

Action research was first introduced as a methodology in education research in the mid-1950s (Corey, 1953). It has gained traction and legitimacy in the United States with the teacher quality movement of the past 20 years, and at the same time, many leaders in the field have attempted to redefine teaching as a practice centered on inquiry (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1991; Grossman, 2005; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1999;) and to redefine teachers as teacher researchers. In response to this movement, preservice teacher education programs have included action research methodology courses and experiences in both undergraduate and graduate professional programs (Price, 2001; Valli, 2000), with the result that new teachers are able to study and analyze classroom practice to develop either a deeper understanding or a plan for action or change.

Action research as a methodology surfaced in response to the growing need for more relevant and practical knowledge in the social sciences: It bridged the gap between academic research and day-to-day applications (de Zeeuw, 2003). Traditionally employed across many practitioner-related disciplines in the health and social sciences, action research has garnered particular attention in the field of education. Educators see it as a practical yet systematic research method to investigate their own teaching and their students' learning in and outside the classroom. Examining the normal schooling process has valuable advantages

in informing what is known about teaching, learning, and content and curriculum design.

## Action Research as a Method of Inquiry

Mills (2003) defined action research<sup>1</sup> as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process, for the purpose of gathering data about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how students learn. Expanding on this concept, Suter (2006) effectively outlined the potential contributions of action research by teachers and asserted that classroom teachers who conduct such research are “reflective practitioners” who can make exemplary contributions to instructional improvement.

Artifacts of the increasing visibility of action research in education include a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal, *Action Research*, currently in its fifth volume with Sage Publications. Graduate programs in many schools and colleges of education have developed entire courses devoted to the methodology, whereas before it was given only a cursory discussion in a general research methods course. As a consequence of the growing market for action research resources, publishers such as Sage, Prentice Hall, and Harcourt Brace have been publishing more textbooks on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) has contributed to the legitimacy of action research by supporting a members' special interest group that focuses on the subject and by publishing a number of articles that use action research as their method of inquiry, as well as articles about the method itself, in its journals and compendiums.

However, the ethical issues unique to this form of insider research have not received consideration proportional to the growing interest in the methodology. An inspection of the textbooks devoted to action research methods published in the past 4 years yields little direction for the researcher beyond that outlined in the Belmont Report. Formally titled *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*, the Belmont Report was created by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) under the direction of the former U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (later renamed the Department of Health and Human Services). This document identifies and explains three unifying ethical principles for all human subject research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. These principles have been adopted as the standard for universities, research institutions, and many school districts in

the United States, guiding the practice of human participants research. They are enforced by district or institution-wide institutional review boards (IRBs). Our contention is that these principles, with their corresponding guidelines, provide an inelegant fit for action research by its very nature, thus creating gaps in practice and procedure.

IRBs clearly share the burden of responsibility for ensuring the ethical conduct of action research involving human participants; however, we contend that more time and effort should be spent on educating researchers about the complex ethical issues unique to action research. The conversation must transcend the immediate Belmont Report language that is commonly included in introductory graduate-level methods courses and generic institutional training programs designed for researchers across academic disciplines. It should focus specifically on researchers' ethical responsibilities when conducting action research in educational settings.

When discussing action research, one must distinguish between joint projects, conducted by a school and an academic researcher, and truly indigenous, insider projects, conducted by a teacher or administrator within a school. In the former instance, an academic is contracted as a consultant. A formal contract is created that delineates roles, tasks, outcomes, costs, payments, and ownership of data. In such a study, the role of the researcher is explicitly discussed and negotiated. The ethical issues that arise in such a study typically are anticipated and thoroughly addressed by a university's IRB. However, the latter kind of project, in which an insider takes on the role of researcher without academic collaboration, is of concern. In a school setting, the school professional (teacher, librarian, principal, counselor, or the like) is acting not only as the researcher but also as the change agent (Hammack, 1997). These potentially conflicting roles can confound the individual's primary objective in the classroom or school: student learning. Examining organizational behavior in industry, Mirvis and Seashore (1982) noted that most ethical dilemmas in such studies arise "not because roles are unclear, but because they are clearly in conflict" (p. 87).

### **Ethical Issues in Action Research**

Designing action research projects raises complex ethical issues that are not present in traditional research. Nevertheless, such projects are valuable when conducted by skilled practitioners with established knowledge, working relationships, access, and credibility within schools. A rich source of data, research using this method can be useful to schools, academics, and the community. But questions remain: 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?

The principles addressing the ethical behavior of researchers—respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979)—clearly apply to all education researchers. We contend that the specific implementation of the first of these principles—respect for persons—is likely to raise practical difficulties for action researchers in applying for ethical approval of their research plans, arising from a unique practitioner-researcher duality. For example, the National Research Council (2003) presents

this principle as including the "obligation to treat individuals as autonomous agents whose decisions on whether or not to participate in research are to be respected and not overridden by a researcher" (p. 81). Such an obligation takes on additional and complex meanings when considered in the context of students as a protected research group in a K–12 classroom. These minors are asked to decide whether to participate in research being conducted by their teachers or other school professionals. In addition to being unable to formally consent to research study participation, minors are unlikely to possess the maturity or independence necessary to decline participation in studies conducted by researchers on whom they are dependent for their grades, access to resources, and enriching experiences while in school. Another issue to consider is the freedom of the student to choose whether to participate in research that is part of the normal schooling process. If the research is not clearly defined apart from what the student would ordinarily be required to do in the classroom, then the student will have difficulty making an informed decision and freely choosing (or choosing not) to participate.

### *Informed Consent of Participants*

Informed consent is one of three applications of the principle of respect for persons in the planning and execution of research projects. The ethical standards published by AERA (2000) clearly state the requirement that "participants, or their guardians, in a research study have the right to be informed about the likely risks involved in the research and of potential consequences for participants, and to give their informed consent before participating in research" (section II.B.1). Obtaining informed consent prior to the collection of data from participants can be quite problematic in the context of K–12 education. At issue is the extent to which participants can give truly informed consent, when the nature of the proposed change is unknown and will be determined by an emerging research protocol. Consent centers on participants' willingness to take part in the project as it is conceptualized at that point and their acceptance of the teacher as researcher. From the perspective of the teacher researcher, informed consent is often viewed as a significant burden because parental consent is also required for minors to participate in research studies. The task of creating complete documents for informed consent that explain sometimes complicated and emerging research protocols at an appropriate reading level to a general audience is laborious and also adds to the anticipated timeline (Mohr, 2001). The time delay can dampen researcher enthusiasm for investigating a quickly emerging educational problem or issue.

Finally, informed consent for action research is further complicated by the matter under investigation. For example, daily classroom management practices may be the subject of a proposed study. In such a case, if the school's practices have already been separately consented to under guidelines negotiated and agreed on by the teachers, students, parents, and school or district, the following issues may arise:

1. The university or school district IRB or ethics committee may not have the ability or authority to alter the daily classroom management practices of a classroom or school.
2. Prior consent by a student, parent, school administrator, or teacher to certain activities and to monitoring on a normal schooling basis does not automatically extend to research undertaken around those activities.

3. Schools or districts may conduct quality assurance and evaluations that have been consented to as part of the culture of accountability, but that consent does not necessarily extend to research activities.

### *Protecting the Confidentiality of Participants*

A second application of the principle of respect for persons involves confidentiality. A breach of confidentiality, commonly understood as failure to maintain the security of data that may identify individual participants, can occur at various stages of a research project, including data collection, processing, storage, and dissemination. The recent emergence of Internet-based research and the increasing role of technology significantly complicate efforts to protect participant confidentiality (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003). School professionals who conduct action research and possess a limited understanding of technology may have trouble accurately assessing levels of risk in data collection, data storage (e.g., server security), and data transmission (e.g., wireless network security). Finally, because action research is directed at solving school and community problems and therefore is disseminated in the school and among community members, great care must be taken with the identities of participants so that parents are not left worrying, *Could this be my child described in this report?* (Zeni, 2001). Confidentiality may be compromised merely by the fact that the teacher researcher can easily be associated with a particular class of students during data collection, and therefore many people within the community are likely to be able to identify key players and informants. This makes reporting the research particularly difficult even with the use of pseudonyms and vague descriptors.

### *Autonomy of Participants*

A third application of the foundational principle of respect for persons involves the intertwined issues of the teacher researcher's prior relationships with the participants and, more important, the participants' perceptions of the voluntary nature of participation in the research study. To give consent freely, it is necessary that students, particularly those in the classroom of the teacher conducting the research, feel no implicit pressure to participate. A student's decision not to participate must be fully respected and must not lead to any adverse consequences.

Ongoing teacher-student relationships may have either positive or negative histories and involve power differentials between the teacher researcher and the student participant. Hence the student's freedom to participate or decline is not likely to be clearly definable. The constraint on freedom felt by the participants based on the positive or negative history of prior relationships may affect not only the ethical issue of consent but also the accuracy or validity of the data collected and the quality of the findings.

In elementary and secondary school classrooms, with compulsory student attendance and frequent teacher evaluations of student performance, these intertwined issues often emerge, and a high degree of potential exists for exploitation of research participants. Hammack (1997) identified the inevitable ethical problems for teachers resulting from their dual relationship with students (teacher-to-student and researcher-to-participant) and predicted that such problems would increase. In a thorough discussion of the intersection of practitioner research and IRBs, Pritchard (2002) asserted:

Practitioners may have a right to devote their own time and effort to research, but they do not have a right to demand the cooperation of others. In American society practitioner researchers do not have a right to compel people—including their students—to cooperate in their research. They have the academic freedom to air their own opinions, but they do not have the freedom to air other people's opinion if they have promised not to do so. (p. 5)

These issues may vary and grow in complexity as the roles of teacher researchers become more complex. Complexity is the inevitable result of these school professionals' relationships with others in the school or district, particularly with the gatekeepers who provide entrée (e.g., superintendent, principal, school board, counselor, team leaders, teachers, and other school staff). The complex relationships that exist prior to, during, and after the study are unique to action research and further underscore our concern that the principles and practices of traditional, positivist methodologies that shape IRB policies do not gracefully apply to action research. When the researcher is a member of and plays a role in the system under investigation, issues surrounding role definition, role ambiguity, and role conflict are often significantly greater than when a researcher enters the school as an objective outsider with the explicit purpose of conducting the study. Where the researcher is an existing member of the system, in this case a teacher, and may have multiple roles in the school context, then his or her roles related to research tasks, data collection, and data analysis cannot be clearly defined. Critics of action research may suggest that the risks are too great and thus advise against the conduct of research by an insider. Such a view, however, belies the important contributions that qualitative indigenous projects and action research methods offer to education research as a field.

### *Ethical Standards Related to Discipline*

A number of major research associations have published discipline-specific documents related to responsible conduct of research with human participants. Among these are the American Psychological Association (2002), AERA (2000), and the American Medical Association (AMA, 2001). Common themes emerge in these three documents. All refer to the history of the development of ethical standards, and all cite and define the three basic principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, both in the abstract and more specifically as each principle relates to the discipline.

Several practitioner-related professional organizations take extra care to explain these principles in light of an existing practitioner-researcher duality. For instance, the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs is a standing committee whose role is to develop ethics policy for the AMA, the primary representative association of the medical field. In a report regarding a proposal to amend the Declaration of Helsinki,<sup>3</sup> this council specifically identified the distinction between therapeutic and nontherapeutic research (AMA, 2001)—that is, between clinical investigation where the primary intent is treatment and clinical investigation where the primary intent is the accumulation of scientific knowledge. In identifying this distinction, the AMA is sensitive to the role of physician relative to the role of researcher: "The physician cannot abandon the role of clinician and must exercise professional judgment and skill in the best interest of the patient" (AMA, 2001, Opinion 2.07). The American

Counseling Association (ACA) has also distinguished the role of counselor or clinician from that of researcher. In the *ACA Code of Ethics* (n.d.), the primary role of the counselor is “to respect the dignity and promote the welfare” of clients (p. 4). The code goes further to assert that the welfare and treatment of the client should supersede the goals of any research program; the role of researcher must always defer to that of counselor or clinician.

Apparent as the differences are between the fields of medicine, counseling, and education, one can draw parallels among their respective ethical codes. 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. Comparing the ethical standards of AERA with those of AMA and ACA, the guiding standards and principles are the same: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Acknowledging that “educational researchers come from many disciplines, embrace several competing theoretical frameworks, and use a variety of research methodologies” (Foreword), AERA (2000) made its standards broad enough to accommodate such diversity. Unlike AMA and ACA, it provides no specific language acknowledging or addressing a practitioner-researcher duality. Thus it is fair to say that the AERA standards assume more traditional forms of research, where the researcher derives data from participants who are external or at arm’s length from the researcher. Intentionality, informed consent, oversight, and a specified time frame on the part of the researcher are assumed.

National teacher organizations also have neglected to develop language on ethical principles and policies that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of the teacher as researcher. In action research, the teacher researcher may have difficulty in meeting many of the requirements of traditional research models because he or she is never removed from the phenomenon being studied and remains in situ both before and after the study. Moreover, a teacher researcher often indicates an intention to collect data on a problem after data have been collected for some time without explicit authorization. This practice can be viewed as an institutionalized form of gaining entrée to a research site, and traditional methods of informed consent and free will of the participant cannot be easily applied. As a result, the practitioner-researcher duality is made even more complex for teacher researchers and the IRBs that must review their proposed research.

## Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are intended to imply a shared responsibility among the various agents involved in and responsible for overseeing the ethical conduct of teacher researchers. Among the agents are IRBs that approve research projects according to the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice; K–12 school professionals and teacher educators responsible for modeling of and training in best practices in action research; and national professional and representative organizations that provide voices of guidance and professionalism to teacher researchers in the classroom.

### *Recommendations for Institutional Review Boards*

Although IRBs are charged with ensuring that research conducted in the behavioral and social sciences complies with overarching ethical principles, many of the procedures were initially established for traditional pathways of academic research and

designed to fit experimental or scientific research paradigms (Holian & Brooks, 2004). Oakes (2002) attributed the poor fit between IRB regulations and social science research methods to the fact that “regulations on which IRBs rely were written for and by biomedical researchers trying to protect subjects from the physical risks of surgical and pharmacological experiments” (p. 447). Given the biomedical origins of the procedures used by IRBs, it is easy to understand the difficulties encountered by social and behavioral scientists seeking IRB approval. Lincoln and Tierney (2004) identified three specific contexts in which such difficulties often emerge: funded research projects, student research for dissertations, and courses in qualitative research methods. Pritchard (2002) analyzed a fourth context: action research conducted by teachers.

*Conflicts With Institutional Review Boards.* DeTardo-Bora (2004) recently outlined the role of IRBs and the impediments to action research that IRB requirements and procedures can pose, particularly when an IRB demands highly detailed information on participants (e.g., the number of participants or their names), on interview protocols, or on the instruments used to collect data. She warned that if IRB policies do not change, insider or action research will not thrive because of the difficulty in gaining approval. As a result, the rich description and local knowledge that can be accessed through this method will be lost.

Ferrance (2000) asserted that “action research is not about doing research on or about people” (p. 2). However, any action research conducted for the purpose of improving instructional quality inevitably involves human participants. These two statements exemplify one area of conflict between action researchers and IRBs. On a broad scope, Lincoln (2005) attributed researcher-IRB conflicts to new federal regulations regarding the protection of human participants and to increased IRB scrutiny of unconventional forms of inquiry, including action research.

*Responsibility of Institutional Review Boards.* Pritchard (2002) offered several recommendations for IRBs regarding the ethical issues of action research. In Pritchard’s article, the burden for accommodation is placed squarely on the shoulders of the IRB, which is cast as an obstacle that researchers must overcome to proceed with their research. Hemmings (2006) picked up on that theme in an essay suggesting how to bridge the ethical gaps between IRBs and action researchers, again placing the onus on the IRB. She suggested that IRBs need to be better informed of action research practices and methods. The consensus across the literature addressing this ethical divide is that the reform must focus on IRBs (Brydon-Miller & Greenwood, 2006; DeTardo-Bora, 2004; Eikeland, 2006; Hemmings, 2006; Pritchard, 2002).

We contend that it is ineffective to place the burden of reform solely on review boards. Nevertheless, we offer the following recommendations to IRBs to encourage them to develop greater sensitivity and elasticity in the review of protocols with nontraditional research methods, such as action research where the researcher is the insider:

1. Revise protocol submission forms for research in the social and behavioral sciences to require a description of the tangible measures that will be used to minimize a coercive atmosphere for those invited to participate in proposed action research projects.

2. Establish and publicize a participant age level below which researchers are required to use informed assent documents designed specifically for minors. For example, a university IRB might establish 14 years, 0 months or younger as the participant age range for which researchers must use the informed assent documents for minors.
3. Invite teacher researchers to serve as internal, external, and community members of university IRB committees. In this way, teachers and university faculty can bring their specific disciplinary expertise to the review of IRB protocols involving action research. Teacher researchers will acquire a better understanding of the interdisciplinary peer review process, deepen their knowledge of policies and practices for the responsible conduct of research, and have a chance to participate in IRB-related professional development.

### *Recommendations for K–12 School Professionals and Teacher Educators*

After examining the major principles and tenets of action research, we have developed recommendations that address many of the ethical issues discussed here. These recommendations are intended not only for K–12 school professionals as researchers but also for teacher educators as they model this form of nontraditional research for their students and develop curricula ensuring their students' induction into the professions as knowledgeable and prepared teacher researchers:

1. Teacher researchers can (a) revise consent and assent documents to repeatedly clarify that there is no penalty for refusing to participate and that student grades will not be affected by the decision to participate; (b) be sensitive to the dual role of teacher and researcher and invite another school professional to collect action research data to minimize any possible coercion; and (c) revise data collection instruments to include a final "yes or no" response item stating, "Please include my answers in the study," which unobtrusively allows students to opt out of the study while appearing to participate.
2. Establish a relationship between the researcher and participants that is as democratic as possible. In doing so, the participants become part of the decision-making process in all phases of the action research. Consequently, the participants can comment on the findings and, together with the researcher, develop more effective models of schooling.
3. Prepare school professionals to be researchers from the beginning of their coursework. As part of the licensure process, greater emphasis can be placed on the role of research- and data-driven instructional decision making in the profession. Regardless of their roles, creating an atmosphere of expectation will help school professionals to be more intentional in their research activities. For example, teachers might anticipate that they will want to gather data from their students during the year and therefore might solicit informed consent at the beginning of the year.
4. Establish and support districtwide IRBs that can serve as resources for local research initiatives. Districts could establish working relationships with a local institution of higher

education and work with the expertise of that institution's review board. An option may be to appoint school professionals to sit *ex officio* on a local college or university IRB to advise on action research projects involving K–12 professionals and students.

5. Require school professionals who plan to conduct action research involving human participants to successfully complete a formal training program in research ethics before beginning the project.

### *Recommendations for National Professional and Representative Organizations*

One function of national professional and representative organizations is to advance statements of ethical practice for their members. But unlike the fields of medicine, psychology, business, and law, each of which is represented by one primary association, the field of education has failed to yield a singular voice representing its members. The lack of a unified representative body produces disagreements in the field and gaps in policy.

For example, of the two main teacher representative organizations—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—only the former posts ethical standards for teaching professionals on its website. The language of these standards is limited to teachers' ethical obligations to the student and to the profession; it does not address ethical research practices or the dual roles involved in action research (National Education Association, n.d.). The two largest professional associations representing teacher educators, AERA and the Association of Teacher Educators, post only basic information on their websites (their primary method of communication to their vast memberships) regarding best practices in the responsible conduct of human participant research. They do not sufficiently address the complexities of action research as discussed here. Therefore, the following recommendations for professional and representative organizations address issues related to guiding and ensuring the quality of the research conducted by the members of these organizations:

1. Create a common document that addresses ethical issues specific to research on teaching and learning, including the complex dual-role issues surrounding action research and research in classrooms. Such a document would enable teacher education faculty and K–12 school professionals to operate under the same ethical principles, thus providing seamless accountability and expectations.
2. Create a forum such as the Campbell Collaboration<sup>4</sup> to serve as a clearinghouse for action research projects and accrue knowledge capital in education research. The clearinghouse would create a scholarly network and provide support for teacher researchers. It could also serve as a medium for disseminating local projects for review.

### **Conclusion**

All of these recommendations will contribute to a broader discussion of overall reform in K–12 teaching and teacher education, as well as call attention to the importance and legitimacy of the variety of research methods necessary to respond to the complex issues surrounding education and schooling. Action research is a valuable tool for gaining access to contexts, people, and knowledge that

would otherwise remain inaccessible (Kidd & Kral, 2005); however, issues of informed consent, participant autonomy, and the coercive potential of action research in the classroom must be addressed. Otherwise, action researchers and those involved in other nontraditional research methods will continue to be in conflict with traditional IRBs. Because the field of education is so vast and encompasses a multitude of dynamics, we need a broad array of tools. Action research is one valuable tool for generating new knowledge, solutions, and strategies in response to continuously emerging questions and problems.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Action research appears in the research literature under a variety of names: *action research*, *practitioner research*, *teacher research*, and *practice-based research*, to name a few. Here, we are referring to the entire body of research in which the practitioner is engaged in collecting data or information for the purpose of solving a practical problem in an authentic setting.

<sup>2</sup>For example, in 1998 Sage listed only one textbook devoted to action research. Currently, it lists eight textbooks on the subject, all published since 2005.

<sup>3</sup>The Declaration of Helsinki was developed in 1964 by the World Medical Association as a set of ethical principles for the medical community regarding experimentation using human subjects. It is widely regarded as the seminal document of human research ethics.

<sup>4</sup>The Campbell Collaboration is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to compile research on effective interventions in the social, behavioral, and educational arenas. The findings of this research are housed in a virtual clearinghouse that is publicly accessible for use in making data-driven decisions based on the most current research initiatives.

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