Ethical Dilemmas Facing Action Researchers

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ABSTRACT: The *Tri-Council Policy Statement*, which has its roots in the *Nuremberg Code,* specifies ethical obligations of Canadian researchers. The need for such regulations is evident in a number of studies which have shown complete disregard for the rights of human beings, studies which have continued into the current millennium. Teachers who conduct research in their own classrooms encounter ethical dilemmas in common with external researchers, but they also face unique challenges. Following a summary of 13 ethical issues facing educational researchers in general (e.g., students' ownership of their written work; anonymity vs. acknowledgment of accomplishments), this paper explores problems which are particularly troublesome for teacher-researchers: the ability of students to refuse to participate, and students' rights to the best instruction, be it experimental or control. For some types of teacher research, the problems surrounding informed consent can be addressed by having a third party manage the consent forms and data collection.

RÉSUMÉ: "L'énoncé de politique des trois conseils" (EPTC) qui a ses racines dans le *Code de Nuremberg,* spécifie les responsabilités éthiques des chercheurs canadiens. Le besoin de telles régulations s'est fait sentir dans un certain nombre d'études qui ont montré un dédain complet pour les droits des êtres humains. Ces études se sont poursuivies jusque dans notre millénaire. Les enseignants qui font des recherches dans leur salle de classe rencontrent des dilemmes éthiques similaires à ceux des autres chercheurs mais ils font aussi face à des défis qui leurs sont spécifiques. Après un résumé de13 problèmes déontologiques auxquels font face les chercheurs en éducation en général (ex., propriété des étudiants au sujet de leurs productions écrites, anonymat versus reconnaissance des réalisations), cet article explore des problèmes particulièrement complexes pour les enseignants chercheurs: la liberté des étudiants de refuser de participer, le droit des étudiants à l'instruction la meilleure, qu'ils soient dans un groupe expérimental ou contrôle.

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> Pour certains types de recherches faites par les enseignants dans leur classe, la question de consentement libre et éclairé peut être résolue si un tiers s'occupe de gérer les formulaires de consentement et la collecte des données.

> *For Brutus is an honorable man,*
> *So are they all, all honorable men*
> (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III, ii, 84-85)

All too many researchers, following in the footsteps of the conspirators who stabbed Caesar, are honorable human beings who place their conceptions of the good of mankind above the rights of the individual subject. They are all honorable men and women, of course: even the doctors charged with heinous war crimes at Nuremberg were merely carrying out "justifiable medical research" (Storch, 2003). Unfortunately, most subjects who have been treated unethically do not have a Marc Anthony to goad a mob into seeking justice.

Teachers who conduct research in their own classrooms encounter ethical dilemmas in common with external researchers but they also face challenges unique to action research. This paper reviews the literature on ethical decisions facing classroom researchers (for example, intellectual property rights of subjects, balancing subject anonymity and acknowledgment of accomplishments, legal obligations to disclose criminal activity, video recordings of classrooms, and secondary use of data). An important area which has not been carefully examined, however, is problems which are specific to teacher-researchers or action-researchers: students' legitimate expectations for their teachers' beneficence, mitigating potential coercion in obtaining free and informed consent (the first principle of the *Nuremberg Code)*, the distinction between the research treatment and the normal curriculum, and the potential need for curriculum audits. Naturally, such a discussion cannot help but touch upon some of the horror stories of unethical research.

Foundation Documents

The *Nuremberg Code*, the *Belmont Report*, and the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* provide the foundations of ethical treatment of research subjects. The *Nuremberg Code* grew out of the Nazi war crimes trials following WWII, the *Belmont Report* outlines a set of principles and guidelines which went beyond the *Nuremberg Code,* and the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* describes specific ethical principles Canadian

researchers must observe. In addition, both professional organizations and specialist councils have produced their own codes of ethics. For example, the World Medical Association adopted the *Declaration of Helsinki* in 1964 (and amended it five times between 1975 and 2000), and the American Psychological Association publishes "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (2002).

Nuremberg Code

Although not the first code of research ethics (Anderson, 1996), the ten principles of the *Nuremberg Code* form the foundation of modern research ethics. In the case which gained world-wide attention, the "doctor's trial," 23 Nazi physicians were charged with heinous crimes against concentration camp prisoners (deliberate infection of wounds with gasoline, gangrene, and malaria; submerging prisoners in ice water; subjecting them to increases and decreases in air pressure until they died). Storch (2003) notes that the physicians' defence was that they were carrying out justifiable medical research. In response, in the "Trials of War Criminals" (Kimmel, 1996; *Nuremberg Code*, 1949) the Nuremberg judges laid out ten ethical research principles.

Although many of the principles are directed toward medical research (e.g., Point 3: "The experiment should be ... based on the results of animal experimentation and knowledge of the natural history of the disease) the first principle seems particularly relevant to educational research:

> 1. Voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. The subject must be in a position to make an enlightened decision. This includes such factors as legal capacity to give consent, free power of choice, complete information on the nature, duration, and purpose of the experiment and an explanation of any risks.

Belmont Report

In 1979, The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (United States) published the *Belmont Report*[1] which focused on three principles "or general prescriptive judgments" to guide the resolution of ethical problems in research involving human subjects. The principles are "respect for persons," "beneficence," and "justice." Rules and examples provide practical guidance on the use of the principles. Again with a focus on medicine, the *Belmont Report* is descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Tri-Council Policy Statement

Canadian researchers are governed by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* "Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans," adopted in 1998. Two essential components of research ethics, according to the Statement, are "morally acceptable ends" and "morally acceptable means to those ends" (p. i.4). Four of the eight "guiding ethical principles" which underlie the policy are:

1. Respect for Human Dignity. Referred to as "the cardinal principle of modern research ethics, "respect for human dignity" aims to protect "the multiple and interdependent interests of the person." (p. i.5)
2. Respect for Free and Informed Consent: "Individuals are generally presumed to have the capacity and right to make free and informed decisions." (p. i.5)
3. Respect for Vulnerable Persons: "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." (p. 1.5)
4. Minimizing Harm: Non-maleficence, "the duty to avoid, prevent or minimize harms to others." Requirements include the "smallest number of human subjects and the smallest number of tests." (p. i.6)

Clearly, it would be difficult to argue against these principles in theory. Who, for example, would argue that research subjects should be subjected to humiliation (e.g., disrespecting human dignity) or that subjects can be duped into participating in research (free and informed consent)? However, in practice the Statement acknowledges that a given research project might not be able to honor each of the principles:

> In certain situations, conflicts may arise from application of these principles in isolation from one another. Researchers and REBs [Research Ethics Boards] must carefully weigh all the principles and circumstances involved to reach a reasoned and defensible conclusion. (p. i.5)

Examples of Unethical Studies

One need not read an extensive amount of research to discover a lack of concern for human rights which highlights the need for the above regulations. No catalogue of misanthropic research would be complete without mentioning the wanton disregard that the United States

military (and 45 U.S. teaching hospitals) showed soldiers by exposing them to nuclear radiation (1940s through 1970s), the CIA brainwashing experiments (1950s to 1970s), or the mentally retarded children who were deliberately infected with hepatitis – Willowbrook Study, 1950s to 1970s (Storch, 2003). These were not short-term studies carried out by individual scoundrels, but long-term, government-agency sanctioned and funded experiments. Summaries of these studies are available in textbooks on ethics in educational research (Bower & de Gasparis, 1978; Sieber, 1982), annotated bibliographies (Stern & Elliott, 1997), and journal articles (Anderson, 1998; Hammack, 1997; Johnson, 2002). Outlined below are four studies which suffer from the chattel approach to human subjects: research subjects are considered to be slaves and the owner can do pretty much what he or she pleases with them.

1. *Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment.* Conducted by the United States Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972, the experiment monitored the ways that syphilis ravaged the bodies of over 400 poor, black sharecroppers in Alabama. The researchers lied to the subjects – told them that they would receive treatment for their disease – and refused to treat them even after penicillin became available early on in the experiment. What's worse, it was not as if medicine did not know the effects of syphilis: Europeans had been studying it since explorers brought syphilis back from the New World in the 15th century.

2. *The Rakai AIDS Study.* A team from Johns Hopkins University monitored over 400 couples in Rakai, Uganda (Quinn, et al., The Rakai Project Study Group, 2000; Gray, et al., 2000). At the beginning of one of the studies only one partner in each pair was infected with HIV; the researchers did not alert the uninfected partner that the other was HIV positive. Within 30 months, one in every four of the healthy partners – almost 100 – had become infected with AIDS. The studies were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* although the editor of the journal found major ethical problems with the research. Angell (2000) in an editorial explored some of her agonizing about whether or not to accept the article for publication, coming eventually to the conclusion that "I hope that publication of this paper will once again focus attention on the vexing ethical issues raised by this sort of study" (p. 967).

Angell noted that:

> It is important to be clear about what this study meant for the participants. It meant that for up to 30 months, several hundred people with HIV infection were observed but not treated. It was also left up to the seropositive partner in couples discordant for HIV-1 to decide whether the seronegative partner would be informed, even though both were regularly seen by the investigators. In addition, many people who were found to have other sexually transmitted diseases were left to seek their own treatment. ... Such a study could not have been performed in the United States, where it would be expected that patients with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases would be treated. (p. 969)

Contrary to appearances, this is not a maverick study: it was approved by the ethical review boards of Johns Hopkins University and Columbia University, the Office of Protection from Research Risk of the National Institutes of Health, and the AIDS Research Subcommittee of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (Angell, 2000, p. 967). What is really troubling about the research is the defence mounted by the researchers: In a later rejoinder to Angell's editorial, the research team (Gray, et al., 2000) argued that they could not alert the non-infected partner because "Ugandan policy states, 'It is the right of the patient to decide who else to inform about their results' " (Angell, 2000, p. 922). In the original paper, they had justified not informing the HIV-negative partner by claiming that: "Participants in the study in Uganda consented to enrollment as individuals, not as couples, and involuntary disclosure of the results of HIV tests would have breached the confidentiality guaranteed as part of the informed-consent process" (Quinn, et al., 2000, p. 363). This research illustrates what the Tri-Council Policy Statement acknowledged when the authors wrote "In certain situations conflict may arise."

3. *The Monster Study.* In 1939 Mary Tutor, an M.A. student supervised by Dr. Wendell Johnson at the University of Iowa, took her advisor's advice and investigated the question of whether stuttering was inherited or learned behavior.

To do this, she recruited experimental and control students from an orphanage through the director. According to Jennings (2003), Tutor lied to a group of orphans who had absolutely no speech problems in 1939. She told them that they were developing a habit of stuttering, like one

of their classmates, and they must "do anything to keep from stammering" (p. 1). The treatment was to ask students to read aloud with the instructions that "try very hard to speak fluently and evenly. ... Take a deep breath whenever you feel you are going to stutter" (p. 1). The story made national news 60 years later when San Jose *Mercury News* reporter James Dyer reworked a story he had published a decade earlier, a story which included interviews with both Tutor and a number of the subjects. According to the newspaper story, the research treatment turned some of the experimental students into stutterers which handicapped them throughout the rest of their lives. As a result of the investigation, the University of Iowa apologized to the subjects, five of the surviving subjects and their families launched a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the State of Iowa, and the State is taking cover under a law which prohibits such lawsuits.

Professor Nicholas Johnson (2002) of the University of Iowa Law School (Dr. Wendell Johnson's son, one discovers in endnote 2) argues that

(1) the study cannot be judged against today's ethical standards; there were no published standards in 1939 [this defence was rejected at Nuremberg, of course];
(2) far worse violations of ethical treatment of research subjects have taken place before and since the Johnson study;
(3) no harm was intended or done (the latter is still before the courts); and finally
(4) his father made significant contributions to the study of speech.

4. *Exploitation of Blood Samples*. Looking for a genetic basis of a British Columbia First Nations group's high incidence of rheumatoid arthritis, a University of British Columbia research team took blood samples and case histories from members of the Nuu-chah-nulth tribe (Dalton, 2002). Geneticist Ryk Ward took the samples with him to Utah and then to Oxford and used them for a number of other research projects. According to Dalton, these highly identifiable subjects felt exploited when they learned that their samples had been used in a study of the spread of lymphotropic viruses by intravenous drug abuse.

Although the scale of harm is minor compared to those in the Tuskegee and Rakai studies, the blood samples study does illustrate a low regard for the rights and interests of the subjects. As Ward noted

recently, it was "the way people operated at the time ... it didn't cross anyone's mind – we didn't mean to be evil, and we are more careful now" (Dalton, 2002, p. 111).

A Caveat: Revisiting previous studies which have included egregious ethical violations runs the risk of the "renegade misanthrope" syndrome: such researchers were fiends and butchers in the tradition of Josef Mengela and Count Dracula, doing things to human beings that would curdle the blood of normal people. The lesson, therefore, may be dismissed.

Ethical Issues in Educational Research

Because such documents as the *Nuremberg Code* are grounded in medicine and do not specifically address educational research, many of the key ethical issues faced by educational researchers have slipped through the cracks. The 13 points outlined below are not part of the formal codes, but have been discussed by researchers in professional publications. Although topics such as secondary use of research data and protection of vulnerable subjects are issues in the wider research community, too, and have been explored in detail, educational concerns such as students' ownership of their written work, disclosure of prejudicial facts, and recording classrooms have not received the same attention.

1. *Students' Ownership of their Written Work*. Canadian statutes on intellectual property rights assign copyright for creative work to the creator of that work. By volunteering to participate in classroom experiments, students do not assign their copyrighted materials to researchers to cite at their discretion. However, many researchers appear to treat student texts ranging from classroom journals through responses to questions on formal examinations as if they were in the public domain, open to quotation, interpretation, and unanswered criticism. Although Anderson (1998) and The Clayton (Missouri) Research Review Team (2001) broach this subject, they do not offer advice on how the ownership issue should be settled.
2. *Anonymity*. In a related discussion, Williams (1996) offers examples from her research which emphasize the dilemma of maintaining anonymity and acknowledging accomplishments. Williams cites the responses of one parent and one teacher who asked to have their names included in research reports. Since this would have identified the school

and at least some of the other participants, Williams convinced the subjects to use pseudonyms instead but was left feeling uncomfortable because "the pseudonyms prevented key participants from receiving recognition for their success" (p. 41).

3. *Accuracy of Reports.* Williams (1996) addresses the issue of the accuracy of the interpretations from the subjects' viewpoints, noting that "When informants read what researchers have written, they may feel hurt, embarrassed, outraged, or deceived" (p. 46). Traditionally, drafts of texts have been given to subjects for response; however, this might cause the researcher some difficulty if the subjects respond negatively to "bad news" (Newkirk, 1996), which the researcher feels is integral to the study. Although the subject who objected to Williams' report ultimately declined Williams' offer to remove the offending description, Williams was left with the question: "Did Cathy's willingness to suffer embarrassment negate my ethical obligation to her?" (p. 49).

4. *Editing Subjects' Words.* Knobel (2003), exploring issues in on-line research, notes that "researchers are duty bound to represent study participants fairly, respectfully and with dignity" (p. 199). One dilemma is whether or not to edit subjects' writing. On the one hand, it might not represent them respectfully to reproduce faithfully punctuation, spelling, or usage errors – especially highlighting them with *[sic]*; on the other hand, editorial changes might misinterpret their work and not represent them fairly.

5. *Protecting Vulnerable Subjects.* School children and their parents are particularly vulnerable to feeling unable to withhold consent. In the case of students under the age of consent, requiring both informed consent from parents and assent from students is standard practice. However, as Anderson (1996) points out and as will be discussed in detail below,

> Many participate in studies not because they freely wish to do so, but because they believe that if they respond favorably to a teacher's request they may receive better grades, recommendations for employment, and so on, or because they may fear that failure to participate may negatively affect their relationship with the teacher or faculty in general. (pp. 375-376)

6. *Timing of Consent Form.* In studies using interviews, Anderson (1998) points out that some historians discuss the consent form prior to the interview but wait until after the interview to ask the subject for consent. In this way, the subject knows exactly what is being agreed to before the consent form is signed.

7. *Disclosure.* Disclosure is an issue for all researchers examining sensitive topics, but teacher-researchers seem to be especially vulnerable. While many jurisdictions make the reporting of sexual abuse of children mandatory, disclosing the use of drugs or alcohol or school subjects' sexual behaviors require judgment calls by teacher-researchers, especially when parents might react with hostility to such news and punish their children. Because children have a relationship of trust with their teachers, they may disclose facts to their teachers feeling that they are in confidence and off-the-record. It is, therefore, incumbent upon teacher-researchers to alert students to the types of information they are or feel obligated to report to authorities. However, as Kompf (1993) notes circumstances may require disclosure: "Disclosures which relate circumstances representing a clear and present danger to individuals or those around them may necessitate a breach of trust" (p. 526).

8. *Bad News.* Newkirk (1996) notes that while consent forms generally present a benign description of the proposed research, perils frequently lurk for subjects in the form of descriptions of questionable pedagogical decisions, unproductive classroom interactions, or inappropriate student written responses. These "bad news" items present subjects in a poor light in final reports, the possibility of which might have prevented volunteers from participating had they known in advance.

Newkirk suggests that in initial conversations about the studies, researchers should "state a willingness to bring up issues, problems, or questions" (p. 13) and that "if this mention of possible 'bad news' is disturbing or alarming to the teachers, they should be encouraged *not* to participate – that, after all, is the primary intent of the informed consent agreement" (p. 13).

9. *Recording Classrooms.* Audio and video recordings of classroom activities become problematic unless all students through their parents consent to take part in the research. Indeed, some security-conscious parents do not want their children photographed, especially if the photographs will be circulated as research. A major issue with classroom recording is the treatment of those who do not consent to participate in the research. Potential subjects have the right to withhold participation in research without placing themselves in any jeopardy. This raises several questions. If non-participants are kept out of camera range, are they precluded from full participation in class discussions and activities? Do they not have the right to the same instruction they would receive if the research were not taking place in the classroom? On the other hand, if non-participants are moved to another classroom for the duration of

the research, are they not being singled out and disadvantaged? It may be that to treat all students ethically, research involving recordings of classrooms cannot be carried out unless each subject in an intact class provides free and informed consent.

10. Equitable Selection of Participants. Ethical problems arise both when the groups most likely to benefit from the research do not contribute to it and when groups are systematically excluded from the research. Anderson (1996) points out that this is a greater problem in medicine than it is in education. However, since classrooms in urban schools may be more convenient for researchers than those in rural schools, since larger schools may present better conditions for controlled studies than smaller schools, and since some populations (e.g., English as a Second Language students) may be a focus of current research interest, these groups may be called upon as research subjects out of proportion to the benefits they will receive.

11. Fair Treatment of Control Subjects. It is a given that the teacher's first obligation is to offer each student the best possible instruction. Therefore, if the experimental treatment is the best possible instruction – and it would be unethical to teach an experimental treatment which the teacher-researcher did not believe to be the best possible instruction – each student has a right to be taught this curriculum. In controlled studies, only the experimental group receives the experimental curriculum, at least until the experiment is concluded. Consequently, the control subjects are not accorded their right to the best possible instruction. This problem can be partially alleviated by teaching the control group the experimental treatment once the experiment is complete, but this precludes longitudinal studies and post-study testing. In addition, if the treatment is significant, and if the experimental students are given a six-month or full-year head start on the control groups, the control groups may be disadvantaged.

12. Secondary use of Data. Use of data collected in one experiment in a subsequent study raises issues of informed consent: subjects will not be able to give informed consent for future use of the data if neither the researcher nor the subject knows what that use will be.

Indeed, by the time of the second study, circumstances may have changed and the subject might feel that he or she does not want to participate in the second study, even by having the work for the original study reanalyzed. This would be especially the case in a situation such as the one of the exploitation of the blood samples for a different purpose as described above.

The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* does not rule out secondary use of research data, but the general requirement is that informed consent of subjects be obtained for such use. However, the Statement acknowledges that "It may be impossible, difficult or economically unfeasible to contact all subjects in a study group to obtain informed consent" (p. 3.6). In such cases, the researcher is required to "propose an appropriate strategy for informing the relevant parties ... [or consult] with representative members of the affected group" (p. 3.6).

13. Collateral Damage. Impact of the research on people. As Zeni (2001) points out, the classroom teacher and students are not the only ones impacted by research carried out in a school. Parents are impacted in that they must read the consent form and decide whether or not to allow their children to participate. Other teachers in the school are impacted; research is a high-status activity and not being in the research and not having their students involved, might diminish their standing in the school. Even action research is seldom confined to the classroom and various school resources which could include the time of principals, secretaries, and the district office may be involved.

Ethical Considerations for Teacher-Researchers

The dual roles and responsibilities of teacher-researchers not only try their loyalties but also make it difficult for them to obtain free and informed consent from their subjects, their students. Unlike outsiders whose first priority might be the creation of knowledge, teacher researchers have a primary obligation to the welfare of their students. Researchers who are guests in schools are not seen as having control over students which at least mitigates the sense that they can coerce students into participating. Teachers, on the other hand, have a good deal of authority in their classrooms, authority which may have the appearance of duress.

Soltis (cited in Zeni, 2001) frames the problem as students' rights: the student, he contends, has "a legitimate expectation of being taught ... of not being ... harmed in any way, and in general, of having his or her own well-being, not the teacher's function as the guiding value" (p. xvii).

Zeni (2001) explores a fundamental ethical issue when she refers to the teacher researcher: "The insider has responsibilities and relationships that are fundamentally different from those of an outsider doing research in schools" (p. xii). Zeni raises the question of

beneficiaries: "Will my students benefit from my research or will I be using them for my own gain?" (p. xii).

Ray (1996), on the other hand, suggests that in some ways teacher researchers are held to a much higher ethical standard than are outsiders. She points out that teachers are directly responsible for their actions to their students, to parents, to school administrators, and to school boards. Questionable ethical decisions may bring them into disrepute with people at the centre of their working lives. They are "accountable *first* to their students and school communities and *secondly* to their academic disciplines" (p. 298).

The Practice / Research Dilemma

Whether teacher-researchers are merely carrying out their normal duties – and therefore are not subject to such requirements as institutional approval and informed consent – or they are researchers who must be governed by formal ethical practices is an open question. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement*, for example, appears to offer flexibility:

> Article 1.1(d) indicates that studies related directly to assessing the performance of an organization or its employees or students, within the mandate of the organization or according to the terms and conditions of employment or training, should also not be subject to REB review. However, performance reviews or studies that contain an element of research in addition to assessment may need ethics review. (p. 1.2)

Anderson (1996) is more categorical: a teacher's experimentation with innovative methods "might be considered research if he or she intends to write a manuscript about it for publication" (p. 279).

Teacher researchers frequently argue that teaching is a lifelong experiment, with teachers improving their methods and materials daily using a variety of innovations. Consequently, they contend, their research simply represents their best current practice and their students have no more right to withdraw from this than they do from any other classroom activity. Abiding by this logic, students' rights extend only to withholding permission for their data to be used in the research report. The "standard practice" claim also places teacher-researchers in a difficult paradox. On the one hand, if the method being used is tried and true, how can it be considered *research*? On the other hand, if the procedures are not standard practice – if they are research treatments

– there is no justification for claiming that the student must take part in the classroom activities.

Teacher-researchers' claims that they are merely teaching the normal curriculum has more face value in some jurisdictions than others. In provinces that mandate "learning outcomes" rather than methods or specific content, British Columbia, for example, teachers have a great deal of latitude in the ways they teach. Therefore, the normal curriculum varies from teacher to teacher and whether or not a teacher is off on a tangent is difficult to pin down. In these circumstances, an outside curriculum audit is probably much more important than it would be in a chain of command which includes inspectors, headmasters, and department heads to whom the teacher-researcher is accountable.

Free and Informed Consent

The principle "free and informed consent lies at the heart of educational research involving human subjects," according to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (p. 2.1). This principle appears to be straight-forward, but in practice it poses problems for teacher-researchers. First, since there is a power differential between teacher and student, freedom to withhold consent might be compromised or appear to be compromised. Second, to be fully informed those granting consent must be made aware of the features of the current program, the substance of the treatment, and any risks which the treatment poses.

Persons in positions of trust and dependency, as in student-teacher relationships, are advised to pay particular attention "as these can constitute undue influence on the [student] to participate in research projects" (*Tri-Council Policy Statement*, p. 2.4). As Anderson (1998) notes, researchers are obligated to "protect persons who might appear to be volunteers but aren't truly because their circumstances exert undue influence" (p. 73). For example, parents may not feel comfortable withholding permission or withdrawing their daughter or son from research if the teacher's graduate degree depends on children's participation. Students are not in a position to freely withhold assent from their teachers.

A major difficulty lies in the teacher-researcher's knowledge of who consents and who refuses. Parents and students are not unaware of the subjective nature of classroom interactions and the importance of being liked by the teacher. Promises on consent forms that not participating

in the research will not jeopardize the child in any way may be regarded as hollow by parents if teachers are aware of their non-participation.

A proposed solution to potential coercion in obtaining consent in teacher-research studies involves third-party management of consent and data. Masters' studies (Wilson, 2000; Chambers, 2004) and faculty research (Shi, 2003) at the University of British Columbia illustrate how this can be carried out.

Wilson (2000) worked with a colleague who taught at a different school to explore the relationship between teachers' annotations on papers and students' revisions to their written work. Each student protocol was identified by a code number which was entered on a class list. The vice-principal in each school collected the consent forms and selected papers written by students whose parents had provided written consent. Since the papers were identified by a code number and since the papers from the two classes were intermingled, the researcher was unable to identify students who did and who did not consent.

Chambers (2004) used a similar procedure, but in this case the third-party manager chose a stratified random sample of one-third of the students' papers. Consequently, the teacher-researcher could not know whether any students' work was not included as the result of random chance or of withholding permission. Both Wilson and Chambers made the rationale for the procedure clear on the consent form.

Researchers have also sealed papers in envelopes, promising not to open them until students' grades were submitted at the end of term. On the university level, Shi (2003) asked a student in the class to collect pre-writings and then post-writings and submit them to the deputy head of the department for storage until the end of term. In an earlier study, Broadkey (1989) stored the papers herself which somewhat marred the face validity of the procedure.

Of course, such procedures will not be appropriate for all teacher-research projects. When the researcher is also the classroom teacher, the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board believes that "the right of voluntary participation may be jeopardized," and that researchers must take special care to honor the rights of these subjects (Guidance Note, Appendix 3, Action Research, May 2003, p. 1). The Board suggests that researchers:

> Add a sentence to the permission letter to parents that indicates that the researcher is aware that parents may feel pressure to agree to their child's participation because the researcher is also the child's teacher and assure them that this is not the case. (p. 2)

In some cases, it may be useful to explain how there is no disadvantage in not participating – for example, all students will be taught the lesson (p. 2).

These suggestions neither describe nor solve all of the informed-consent problems faced by teacher-researchers, but they may provide a starting point for developing creative methods of shielding students from potential or perceived coercion. At the very least, they highlight a problem which is not widely acknowledged in teacher-research studies.

Conclusion

In a research world of untreated syphilis, undisclosed AIDS, preying on orphans, and misuse of blood samples, whether an anonymous student in an unidentifiable classroom feels he or she has the absolute freedom to consent or not to consent to his or her everyday school work being reported as research might seem to be very far from a major issue.

However, the first principle of the *Nuremberg Code* and a basic tenet of all those that followed is respect for human dignity, a major component of which is free and informed consent: research subjects may choose to participate in and may withdraw from studies without coercion, deception, or presumption on the part of the researcher, real or imagined. If the rights of students in action researchers' classrooms are not honored – if students do not have a genuine choice which does not place them in any jeopardy, actual or potential – then we are not acting ethically.

NOTES

1. Named for the Belmont Conference Centre of the Smithsonian Institution where the committee met over a four-year period. The *Belmont Report* may be found as an appendix in books on research ethics (e.g., Sales & Folkman, 2000).

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