

## CHAPTER TWO

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# Ethics in Educational Research



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*Karate Kid, 1984*

“Research studies are built on trust between the researcher and the participants, and researchers have a responsibility to behave in a trustworthy manner, just as they expect participants to behave in the same manner.” (p.61)

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading Chapter 2, you should be able to do the following:

- 2.1** Explain the ethical obligations that educational researchers have (particularly those involving informed consent) and describe the codes they must follow to ensure they adhere to them.
- 2.2** Understand the ethical issues prevalent in qualitative research and understand how to navigate those issues.
- 2.3** Understand the issues facing action researchers for IRB approval.

- 2.4** Describe the issues involved in gaining access to sites to conduct educational research.

Completing Chapter 2 should enable you to perform the following task:

### TASK 1D

Identify and briefly state the following for both research studies at the end of Chapter 1:

- 1.** Ethical issues the authors experienced and how they were addressed. (See Performance Criteria, p. 75.)

## ETHICAL CODES

Ethical considerations play a role in all research studies, and 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 the need or desire to carry out a study above the 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 behave in a trustworthy manner, just as they expect participants to behave in the same manner (e.g., by providing responses that can be trusted). The two overriding rules of ethics are that participants should not be harmed in any way—physically, mentally, or socially—and that researchers obtain the participants' informed consent, as discussed 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 and March 1, 2016) provides guidelines and contains 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 ([apa.org](http://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, aims 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 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. Educational researchers should consider membership in the American Educational Research Association; membership information and benefits can be found at [aera.net](http://aera.net).

The similarity among the ethical codes is not coincidental; they are based in the same history. In 1974, the U.S. Congress 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 a standard set of guidelines was prompted by a number of studies in which researchers lied to research participants or put them in harm's way to carry out their studies. For example, in a study on the effects of group pressure conducted in the 1960s, researchers lied to participants, telling them to apply high levels of electric shock to another (unseen) person who was apparently in agony, although no shock was really applied and the unseen person was simply pretending.<sup>1</sup> In another study lasting four decades, 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.<sup>2</sup>

Today, these types of studies would not be federally funded and could not be conducted at universities, research institutes, and medical centers that adhere to the current ethical guidelines. Most hospitals, colleges, and universities have a review group, usually called the Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB). This board should consist of at least five members, not all of one gender; include one nonscientist; and include at least one member who is mainly concerned with the welfare of the participants. People who may have a conflict of interest (e.g., the researcher of a particular study, a member of the funding organization) are excluded.

## INFORMED CONSENT AND PROTECTION FROM HARM

Perhaps the most basic and important ethical issues in research are concerned with protection of participants, broadly defined, which requires that research participants not be harmed in any way (i.e., physically, mentally, or socially) and that they participate only if they freely agree to do so (i.e., give informed consent).

Researchers obtain *informed consent* by making sure that research participants enter the research of their free will and with understanding of the nature of the study and any possible dangers that may arise as a result of participation. This requirement is intended to reduce the likelihood that participants will be exploited by a researcher persuading them to participate when they do not fully know the requirements of the study. Participants who are not of legal age or are not mentally capable cannot give informed consent; in these cases, permission must be given by parents or legal guardians. Even if permission is granted from a guardian, all participants still retain the right to decline to participate—the researcher must provide to each participant, in language appropriate to the individual's developmental level, basic information about the task, and the participant must agree to participate.

<sup>1</sup> "Group Pressure and Action Against a Person," by S. Milgram, 1964, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 69 137–143.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*, by J. H. Jones, 1998, New York: Free Press.

Researchers ensure *freedom from harm* first by not exposing participants to undue risks. This requirement involves issues related to personal privacy and confidentiality (i.e., protecting participants from embarrassment or ridicule). Collecting information about 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 personal. In other words, access to data should be limited to people 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 a seemingly innocuous measure such as an arithmetic test.

The use of anonymity to ensure confidentiality and avoid privacy invasion and potential harm is common. Study participants have complete **anonymity** when their identities are kept hidden from the researcher. It is often confused with **confidentiality**; researchers protect confidentiality when they know the identities of study participants but do not disclose that information. If the researcher knows participants' identities, the participants should be assured of confidentiality but not anonymity. Removing names from data sheets or coding records is one common way to maintain anonymity. When planning a study, researchers tell participants whether they will provide confidentiality (i.e., the researcher knows but won't tell) or anonymity (i.e., researcher will not know the participants' names); good researchers make sure they know the difference. Sometimes researchers seek access to data from a previous study to examine new questions based on the old data. In such cases, the original researcher has the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality or anonymity promised the participants of the original study.

When research is conducted in the classroom, concerns about confidentiality and anonymity are frequently raised. The **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974**, usually referred to as the Buckley Amendment, was designed to protect the privacy of students' educational records. Among its provisions is the specification that data that identify a student may not be made available unless written permission is acquired from the student (if of legal age) or a parent or

legal guardian. The permission form must indicate what data may be disclosed, for what purposes, and to whom. If a study requires obtaining information from individual elementary students' school record files, the researcher must obtain written permission from each student's parent or guardian, not a blanket approval from the school principal or classroom teacher. In contrast, researchers interested in using class averages (in which no individual student was identified) can usually seek permission only from the principal. However, if a researcher planned to calculate the class average him- or herself by using information provided in individual student records, permission from each student is required.

There are some exceptions to this requirement for written consent. For example, school personnel with a legitimate educational interest in a student would not need written consent to examine student records (e.g., a teacher conducting action research in his or her own classroom). 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 could then use the records without knowing the names of the individual students.

## Deception

A common ethical dilemma in research with human subjects occurs when a researcher wants to study a topic that he or she cannot disclose completely to potential participants without influencing or changing the participants behavior or responses. Studies concerned with participants' attitudes about things like race, gender, or culture are often susceptible to such influences. In such instances researchers can be tempted to hide the true nature of the topic of study. A common example where this dilemma can surface in research on teaching and classrooms are studies on teachers' interactions with or attitudes towards students. Teachers' responses on a survey or their behaviors during an observation may be affected if the teachers know the aim of the study and change their normal behaviors as a result. When deception occurs, participants cannot truly give informed consent.

This type of deception is a form of lying, and studies in which the researcher plans to deceive

participants must be carefully scrutinized on ethical grounds. Some researchers believe that any study that requires deceitful practice should not be carried out. Others recognize that some important studies cannot be undertaken without deception. We recommend that you do your initial research studies on topics that do not require deception. If you choose a topic that involves deception, your adviser and the HSRC or IRB at your institution will provide suggestions for ethical ways to carry out your research plan. Remember that all researchers, even student-researchers, are responsible for maintaining ethical standards in the research.

#### MyLab Education Self-Check 2.1

MyLab Education Application Exercise 2.1:  
Evaluating Research Articles: Understanding  
Research Ethics

MyLab Education Application Exercise 2.2:  
Reflecting on Ethics in Educational Research



## ETHICAL ISSUES UNIQUE TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The ethical issues and responsibilities discussed thus far pertain to both quantitative and qualitative research plans. However, some features of qualitative research raise additional issues not typically encountered in quantitative research.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in at least two major ways that produce additional ethical concerns. First, qualitative research plans typically evolve and change as the researcher's immersion in and understanding of the research setting grow. In a real sense, the research plan is only generally formed when presented to the IRB. As the plan evolves with added understanding of the context and participants, unanticipated and un-reviewed ethical issues can arise and need to be resolved on the spot. For example, as participants become more comfortable with the researcher, they often ask to see what has been written about them. They feel entitled to this information, even though seeing what has been written may cause personal distress for them or data collection problems for the researcher. Second,

qualitative researchers typically are personally engaged in the research context. Interviews, observations, and debriefings bring the researcher and participants in close, personal contact. The closeness between participants and researcher helps to provide deep and rich data, but it may also create unintended influences on objectivity and data interpretation.

Another professional organization that provides guidance for qualitative researchers is the American Anthropological Association (AAA) that adopted a Code of Ethics in 2012. These guidelines are helpful for ethnographic researchers in particular, and qualitative researchers in general. As Glesne (2016) acknowledges, "The AAA Code of Ethics includes directives on the researcher's responsibilities to scholarship, the public, employees, students and trainees, and to applied work" (p. 172). These directives can be summarized as follows:

1. Avoidance of harm
2. Open, honest, and transparent conduct of the research process
3. Ongoing informed consent of research participants
4. Accessibility of results
5. Accurate reporting of results taking into consideration the social and political implications of the research

For a comprehensive discussion of the AAA Code of Ethics visit [www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics](http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics) and Glesne<sup>3</sup> pp. 158–182.

The focus on immersion and detailed knowledge of the research context, more common in qualitative than quantitative research, may result in the researcher observing behavior that may otherwise be hidden, such as illegal or unprofessional activities. The qualitative researcher may observe theft, emotional cruelty and ridicule, or narcotics use, for example. In these and other similar situations, the researcher must make a choice—report the observations, knowing that to do so likely will end the study because participants will no longer be certain of the researcher's promise of confidentiality, or keep silent on the assumption that the system will eventually identify and correct the problems. In educational research, if the researcher perceives

<sup>3</sup> *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*. (5th Ed.) by C. Glesne, 2016, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson

physical or psychological danger, he or she has a strong mandate to inform the school authorities.

Unfortunately, not all situations present ethically clear actions. To respond appropriately and to make ethical decisions, qualitative researchers must ensure that their professional ethical perspectives are closely aligned with their personal ethical perspectives. This statement may seem obvious, except for this caveat: Qualitative researchers may find themselves in situations that require an immediate response—the very essence of which may threaten the success of the research. If your personal and research ethical perspectives are aligned, you will in all likelihood respond to ethical challenges in an appropriate, professional fashion that will not threaten the ongoing conduct of your research.

Considering ethics before commencing qualitative research is one way to ensure that you will be prepared to respond in an ethical, caring manner if difficult situations arise. The role of ethics in qualitative research can be considered in terms of how we treat the individuals with whom we interact in research settings. The nature of the qualitative research enterprise provides the potential for conflict and harm, and it is critical that everyone involved has a clear understanding of the intimate and open-ended nature of the research process so that participants are not injured in the name of research.

To summarize, qualitative research is intimate because there is little distance between researchers and their study participants. Qualitative research is open-ended because the direction of the research often unfolds during the course of the study. As a result, qualitative researchers often cannot obtain participants' informed consent, the principle that seeks to ensure that all human research participants retain autonomy and the ability to judge for themselves whether risks are worth taking for the purpose of furthering scientific knowledge.

## Navigating Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

The following commonsense ethical guideposts, adapted from Smith,<sup>4</sup> may help qualitative researchers respond appropriately when faced with ethical

decisions before, during, and after a qualitative research inquiry.

1. *A researcher should have an ethical perspective with regard to the research that is very close to his or her personal ethical position.* Qualitative researchers may find themselves in situations that seem foreign. For example, consider a collaborative action research project focused on how a new math problem-solving curriculum affects student achievement and attitude. Teachers distribute student attitude surveys in their classrooms, which are later analyzed by a team of teacher-researchers representing different grades in the school. During the analysis, it becomes clear that students in one of the groups are 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 stands to be hurt in the process? What potential good can come from sharing the data? What assurances of confidentiality were given to the participants before collecting the data?

This scenario is not meant to scare you away from doing qualitative research but rather to illustrate the unexpected outcomes that occasionally face qualitative researchers. Smith's guidepost is an important one. You will more likely avoid such awkward situations if you clarify your ethical perspectives at the outset. A values clarification activity that can be undertaken individually or collectively may be helpful. It is worthwhile to reflect on how you would want to be treated as a participant in a research study. How would you feel if you were deceived by the researchers? What action would you take? How can you prevent research participants from feeling exploited? Again, there are no simple answers to these ethical questions. The point is this: Be prepared to respond in a manner that is comfortable and natural for you.

2. *Informed consent should take the form of a dialogue that mutually shapes the research and the results.* Be clear about whether you need to seek permission from

<sup>4</sup> "Ethics in Qualitative Field Research," by L. M. Smith, 1990, in *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The Continuing Debate*, by E. W. Eisner and A. P. Peshkin (Eds.), New York: Teachers College Press.

participants in the study by discussing the research project with a school administrator or central office person who can describe instances that require written permission, and check the requirements of your IRB. For example, if you are collecting photographs or digital recordings as data and intend to use these artifacts in a public forum, such as a presentation at a conference, make sure that you know whether written permission is necessary.

Thinking about the relation between confidentiality and informed consent helps to clarify some of these issues. Confidentiality is important for protecting research informants from stress, embarrassment, or unwanted publicity as well as for protecting participants should they reveal something to a researcher that could be used against them by others interested in the outcomes of the research. In some qualitative research efforts, assigning pseudonyms to conceal identities is not enough because other details can lead to identification of the individuals or specific research settings. Researchers must consider whether participants would have consented to the study had they known about the type of data collected and the way in which results would be distributed, and they must take steps to ensure that participants' right to privacy is not violated. Informed consent should take the form of an ongoing dialogue that shapes the research and the results.

3. *Researchers should also think beyond the methods they plan to use; they must identify broader social principles that are integral parts of who they are as researchers and as contributing members of the communities in which they live.* These broader social principles dictate one's ethical stance. For example, a researcher studying schools in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer, may have faced social justice, equality, and emancipation issues in a politically volatile environment. The researcher was struggling with the ethical challenges of being in a community and how her insider lens (to neighborhood listservs, etc.) gave her access to data that she was not explicitly granted permission to use. She was

struggling with the public/private realm of neighborhood sites like Nextdoor, Facebook, and so on, and whether those conversations could be analyzed by a researcher engaged in a community-based development project (personal communication, Arend, 2017).

4. *Qualitative researchers are morally bound to conduct their research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study.* A broader view of this concept suggests that qualitative researchers need to convey with confidence that research participants will not suffer harm as the result of their involvement in the research effort.
5. *Even though an action may bring about good results, it is not ethical unless that action also conforms to ethical standards such as honesty and justice.* From this perspective, acting ethically may be viewed in terms of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. For example, it is unethical to treat participants as research pawns or as means to an end.
6. *The qualitative researcher must remain attentive to the relationship between the researcher and the participants, a relationship determined by "roles, status, language, and cultural norms."<sup>5</sup>* The lesson for qualitative researchers who are proponents of this perspective is to pay attention to the research processes of giving information, reciprocity, and collaboration and to be sensitive to how these processes are viewed by other participants in the research. Again, this perspective forces us to confront the socially responsive characteristics of our research efforts as being democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing.

The purpose of this discussion on ethics in qualitative research has been to prepare you to think about a range of issues that face any researcher. Carefully consider how you will respond when confronted with difficult questions from colleagues, parents, students, and administrators. Taking time to clarify your values and ethical perspectives will help you respond in a professional, personal, and caring fashion.

<sup>5</sup> "In Search of Ethical Guidance: Constructing a Basis for Dialogue," by D. J. Flinders, 1992, *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 5(2), p. 108.

As you embark on your qualitative research journey, remember that, in matters of ethics, there are few absolutes. Working through issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and rational judgment before you begin will help you to avoid or resolve potentially difficult situations that may arise in implementing a qualitative research effort.

## Action Research and IRBs

Another group of qualitative researchers who face unique challenges are classroom-based, school-based researchers using an action research design. Specifically, action researchers conducting research as part of a university program 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 action researchers studying their own practices (for example, teachers conducting action research) 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,<sup>6</sup> “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 school-based 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?

For example, given the emancipatory nature of action research, 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.

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 often struggle with social science research proposals that invariably focus on “insider” research, where the research process is inherently open ended and intimate. Teacher researchers are active participant observers of their classrooms, continually monitoring and adjusting their teaching based on formal and informal observations of their students.

Given this context, we 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

<sup>6</sup> “Action research in education: Addressing gaps in ethical principles and practices,” by A. L. Nolen and J. Vander Putten, 2007, *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 401–407.

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 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. See Figure 2.1 for a summary of ethical guidelines for action researchers.

[MyLab Education Self-Check 2.2](#)

[MyLab Education Self-Check 2.3](#)

[MyLab Education Application Exercise 2.3: Obtaining IRB Approval for Action Researchers](#)



**FIGURE 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 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.

Source: *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* (6th ed.) by G. E. Mills, 2018, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

## GAINING ENTRY TO A RESEARCH SITE

Very rarely is it possible to conduct educational research without the cooperation of other people. An initial step in acquiring the needed cooperation is to identify and follow required procedures for gaining approval to conduct the study in the chosen site. In schools, research approval is usually granted by the superintendent, school board, or some other high-level administrator, such as the associate superintendent for instruction. In other settings, such as hospitals or industry, an individual or a committee is typically charged with examining and then approving or denying requests to do research at the site. Regardless of the site, the researcher must complete one or more forms that describe the nature of the research, the specific request being made of the site personnel, and the benefits to the site. Before the request is approved, the researcher may need to obtain permission from others as well; for example, a superintendent or school board may require that permission be granted from the principal or principals whose schools will be involved. Even if such approval is not required, it should be sought, both as a courtesy and for the sake of a smoothly executed study. Of course, as discussed earlier, all participants must agree to be part of the study. Depending on the nature of the study, permission, or at least acceptance, should be obtained from the teachers who will participate in the study. If students under age 18 are to be involved, written parental permission will be needed.

Given the potential complexity of obtaining permission to conduct your research at the chosen site or sites, you should not assume that permission will be granted easily (e.g., often researchers hear, “we’re too busy”) or quickly (i.e., bureaucracies move slowly). Thus, you should think carefully about how to explain your study to all those who must provide permission and approval. The key to gaining approval and cooperation is good planning, and the key to good planning is a well-designed, carefully thought-out study and research plan. Some superintendents and principals are hesitant about research in their schools because of previous bad experiences. They don’t want anyone else running around their schools, disrupting

classes, administering poorly constructed questionnaires, or finding problems. It is up to you to convince school personnel that what you are proposing is of value, that your study is carefully designed, and that you will work with teachers to minimize inconvenience.

Achieving full cooperation, beyond approval on paper, requires that you invest as much time as is necessary to discuss your study with the principals, the teachers, and perhaps even parents. These groups have varying levels of knowledge and understanding regarding the research process. Their concerns will focus mainly on the perceived value of the study, its potential impact on participants, and the logistics of carrying it out. The principal, for example, will probably be more concerned with whether you are collecting any data that may be viewed as objectionable by the community than with the specific design you will be using. All groups will be interested in what you may be able to do for them. You should fully explain any potential benefits to the students, teachers, or principals as a result of your study. Your study, for example, may involve special instructional materials that are given to the teachers after the data collection ends. Even if all parties are favorably impressed, however, the spirit of cooperation will quickly dwindle if your study involves considerable extra work or inconvenience on their part. Bear in mind that principals and teachers are accommodating you; they are helping you complete your study without relief from their normal responsibilities. If asked, you should make any changes you can in the study to better preserve participants’ normal routines, as long as you do not adversely affect your work or its results. No change should be made solely for the sake of the compromise without considering its impact on the study as a whole.

It is not unusual for principals or teachers to want something in return for their participation. The request may be related to your study, as when a principal asks to review your final report for accuracy, asks you to return to the school to describe your findings to teachers, or requests that your results not be disseminated without the principal’s approval. The first two requests are more easily agreed to than the third, which probably should be refused in favor of an offer to discuss

FIGURE 2.2 • Principal's letter to parents concerning a proposed research study

**THE SCHOOL BOARD OF KNOX COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS**

Oak Street Elementary School  
Gwen Gregory, Principal  
113 Oak Street  
Clover, Massachusetts  
555-555-5555

January 23, 2005

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Oak Street Elementary School has been chosen to participate in a research study. Our school was selected out of the entire country as a result of our outstanding students and computer program. All third- and fifth-grade students will be able to participate. The results of this study will enable our teachers and parents to discover and understand the learning styles of our students. This knowledge will enable teachers and parents to provide special instruction and materials to improve student learning. It will also provide valuable information for the future development of effective professional computer software.

This study will take place from January 29 to March 30, 2005. It will be conducted by Mrs. Joleen Levine, a recognized and experienced computer educator. She has been Director of Computer Education at Northern University for six years. During that time she has participated in many projects in Knox County that involved teacher training, computer curriculum development, and computer assisted instruction implementation.

I have reviewed this research study and feel that it is a very worthwhile endeavor for our students and school. Please review the information on the following page in order to make a decision concerning permission consent for your child to participate in this study.

Sincerely,



Gwen Gregory  
Principal

the principal's concerns, if any. It is also common for principals to ask the researcher to provide a session or two of professional development for teachers in the school.

Figure 2.2 presents a letter written by a principal to inform parents of a doctoral student's proposed study. The doctoral student appears to have shared the potential benefits of the study with the principal and, as a result, secured not only the

principal's permission but also her strong support and cooperation. The parental permission form that accompanied the letter, shown in Figure 2.3, 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

FIGURE 2.3 • Parental permission form for a proposed research study

### PARENTAL PERMISSION 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).

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Student’s Name

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Signature of Parent/Guardian

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Date

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 never give school personnel the impression that you

are talking down to them. Also, your task is not over once the study begins. The feelings of involved persons must be monitored and responded to throughout the duration of the study if the initial level of cooperation is to be maintained.

The sources and advice noted in this chapter will help you conceive and conduct ethical studies, and to successfully gain access to your research site/s. The suggestions 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.

**MyLab Education Self-Check 2.4**

**MyLab Education Application**

**Exercise 2.4: Understanding Considerations  
in Accessing Research Sites**

## SUMMARY

### ETHICAL CODES

1. Ethical considerations play a role in all research studies, and all researchers must be aware of and attend to ethical considerations in their research.
2. The two overriding rules of ethics are that participants should not be harmed in any way—physically, mentally, or socially—and that researchers must obtain the participants' informed consent.
3. Professional organizations develop ethical principles for their members, and the federal government has enacted laws to protect research participants from harm and invasion of privacy.
4. Probably the most definitive sources of ethical guidelines for researchers are the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct adopted in 2010 by the American Psychological Association, the Code of Ethics approved by the American Educational Research Association in 2011, and the ethical guidelines adopted by the American Anthropological Association in 2012.
5. The National Research Act of 1974 led to the creation of a standard set of federal guidelines for the protection of human research participants.
6. Most hospitals, colleges, and universities require that proposed research activities involving human participants be reviewed and approved by an IRB prior to the execution of the research, to ensure protection of the participants.

### INFORMED CONSENT AND PROTECTION FROM HARM

7. Researchers obtain informed consent by making sure that research participants enter the research of their free will and with understanding of the nature of the study and any possible dangers that may arise as a result of participation.
8. Study participants are assured of confidentiality; researchers promise not to disclose participants' identities or information

that could lead to discovery of those identities. Confidentiality differs from anonymity; the identities of anonymous participants are hidden from the researcher as well.

9. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, referred to as the Buckley Amendment, protects the privacy of the educational records of students. It stipulates that data that identify participants by name may not be made available to the researcher unless written permission is granted by the participants.

### Deception

10. Studies involving deception of participants are sometimes unavoidable but should be examined critically for unethical practices.

### ETHICAL ISSUES UNIQUE TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

11. Qualitative researchers, because of their closeness to participants, must pay special attention to ethical issues and view informed consent as a process that evolves and changes throughout the study. Qualitative researchers may witness dangerous or illegal behavior and may have to make ethical decisions on the spot.

### Navigating Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

12. A researcher should have an ethical perspective with regard to the research that is very close to his or her personal ethical position.
13. Informed consent should take the form of a dialogue that mutually shapes the research and the results.
14. Researchers should also think beyond the methods they plan to use; they must identify broader social principles that are integral parts of who they are as researchers and as contributing members of the communities in which they live.
15. Qualitative researchers are morally bound to conduct their research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study.

- 16.** Even though an action may bring about good results, it is not ethical unless that action also conforms to ethical standards such as honesty and justice.
- 17.** The qualitative researcher must remain attentive to the relationship between the researcher and the participants, a relationship determined by roles, status, language, and cultural norms.

### Action Research and IRBs

- 18.** Action researchers should provide IRBs with all the necessary university-based IRB requirements (which vary slightly from university to university).
- 19.** 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.
- 20.** 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.
- 21.** 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.

### GAINING ENTRY TO A RESEARCH SITE

- 22.** It is rarely possible to conduct research without the cooperation of other people. The first step in acquiring needed cooperation is to follow required procedures in the chosen site.
- 23.** A formal approval process usually involves the completion of one or more forms describing the nature of the research and the specific request being made of the school or other system.
- 24.** The key to gaining approval and cooperation is good planning and a well-designed, carefully constructed study.
- 25.** After formal approval for the study is granted, you should invest the time necessary to explain the study to the principal, the teachers, and perhaps even parents. If these groups do not cooperate, you will likely not be able to do your study.
- 26.** If changes in the study are requested and can be made to accommodate the normal routine of the participants, these changes should be made unless the research will suffer as a consequence.
- 27.** The feelings of participants should be monitored and responded to throughout the study if the initial level of cooperation is to be maintained. Human relations are important when conducting research in applied research settings.

**PERFORMANCE CRITERIA****TASK 1D**

Reprints of two published research reports appeared at the end of Chapter 1. Read the reports and describe any potential ethical dilemmas faced by the researchers. If the authors do not explicitly state ethical dilemmas they faced during the conduct of the study, make an inference about possible

dilemmas and challenges based on the description of the research. One or two sentences should be sufficient to describe potential ethical challenges. See Appendix B for possible challenges faced by the authors.