ETHICAL AND/OR POLITICAL ISSUES IN CLASSROOM BASED RESEARCH: IGNORING THE EXCLUDED

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As researchers we have a political aim to understand the exclusion of students from school mathematics so as to be better able to promote changes to schooling that would mitigate the social factors related to that exclusion. But we find that ethical standards we follow as university researchers undermine our political aims and exclude students in our research. In our essay we address this problématique and propose it as a theme of discussion for the conference.

Joe sits at the back of the room, to one side, where our cameras are least likely to record him. We do not speak to him, nor to his mother when she visits in the classroom. Our interest is the way that classroom interactions translate social differences into disparity of achievement in school mathematics, but we do not inquire into Joe's family background and we do not interview him to see how he perceives his place in the class or the world. Officially, we do not observe Joe at all, but we cannot help to observe that he is one of the ones who does not behave in a way that suggests to us or his teacher that he will be successful at mathematics. He is one of the ones who will be at the losing end of the disparity that emerges quickly in his mathematics class. But we may not ask why in his case, and so we do not.

For a university researcher to conduct research in a public school in Canada, the research must be approved by the school superintendent and the university's Research Ethics Board (REB). The Research Ethics Board is guided by the principles set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS). Central to these is the principle of informed consent: "Ethical research involving humans requires free and informed consent" which "refers to the dialogue, information sharing and general process through which prospective subjects choose to participate in research involving themselves." (TCPS, commentary to article 2.1). For school based research the normal procedure is that a permission letter be signed by the students and her/his guardian prior to research beginning.

When a student or her/his guardian does not sign the permission letter the research may proceed, with every effort being made to avoid including data from a non-participating student. This means the student is excluded from being observed, interviewed, taped, etc. Joe did not sign the permission letter, so he is not a participant in the research.

Why didn't Joe sign? It is difficult to ask without either involving him in the research or interfering with his freedom to make the choice he did. In fact, Joe is necessarily a fiction as we cannot report on the behaviour of the non-participants in our research.

Occasionally we get some insight into the situations of students who have excluded themselves from our research by not signing their permission letters. Keith did not

return the letter he was given on the first day of school and so he was excluded from the research until we had the opportunity at a parent-teacher night to ask his father if he had any questions about the letter. Keith's father was interested to hear more about the research and signed the permission letter without hesitation after the research was described to him and the terms of the letter explained. Hence, we can report on Keith's situation. Keith's mother is illiterate and so was not able to sign the letter when it came home. Keith's father works long hours and may not have had a chance to read the letter carefully, if he even saw it when it first came home.

The particular case of Keith, which is the only one we have where we can say something about a non-participant, suggests the interpretation of "informed" as "provided with a written letter describing the research" may result in the exclusion from our research of students whose social backgrounds might make them vulnerable to being excluded from school mathematics.

Another path of exclusion occurs through the power relations inherent in schooling. For some students the first time a figure in authority offers them a genuine choice to participate or not in an activity comes when a researcher asks if they are willing to participate in a research project. Some say "no" before hearing the nature of the research, simply to test whether the choice is real or not. When they have tested choices offered by parents or teachers in the past, the reaction to their saying "no" may have indicated to them that the choice was not a genuine one, and so it comes as a surprise when the researcher then proceeds to exclude them from video taping and interviews. We have been asked by students "Why can't I participate?" when the answer is simply that they said (to us and to their parents) that they did not want to. Their decision in this case was made not on the basis of being informed, but simply to test the genuineness of the choice.

It could be said that informed consent is not possible when social factors such as literacy, contact with parents, and power come into play. Participants are required to make a decision before they have a real opportunity to understand the research. Decisions would certainly be more informed if they were made after the research had been conducted. While there are circumstances in which the TCPS allows the normal procedure of seeking consent before the research commences to be altered, providing participants the opportunity to make a more informed decision after the fact is not one of them. This suggests an implicit exclusionary aspect to the standard procedures for securing informed consent, perhaps revealing a particular set of social assumptions held by those preparing and implementing policies of ethical conduct. While following the TCPS seems from that perspective to result in ethical behaviour, the exclusion of some from participating in research on the basis of social background might seem unethical from other perspectives.

Researchers with an interest in social issues have recognised that there are limits to working within organisations that do not have explicitly social agendas. This has led, for example, to the formation of groups like MES to provide a forum for exploring social issues that are marginalised in mainstream groups. But seeking to develop

separate granting agencies and ethics policies for research with a social agenda is not a viable option. Is it possible instead to work within granting agencies and university Research Ethics Boards to raise awareness of the political and social implications of existing policies and to work toward acceptable modifications? If it is possible is it worth the diversion of energy from research?

Some might argue that our concerns about the ways that existing ethics policies and practices exclude students who might benefit from our research are misplaced. Observational, non-interventionist research that seeks to better understand that status quo rather than to change it sets up an explicit hierarchy between the observer and the observed. Our "participants" are so called to be politically correct, but it could be said that the traditional term "subjects" better expresses the reality of our research. In contrast, research that begins in a different context, for example action research in which the researcher has a prior and stronger role as teacher, treats the participants as true participants, and in such a context the research comes in the reflections, at a point where truly informed consent is possible.

As researchers we have a political aim to understand the exclusion of such students from school mathematics so as to be better able to promote changes to schooling that would mitigate the social factors related to that exclusion. But we find ourselves in our research excluding those students ourselves. The ethical standards we follow as university researchers undermine our political aims. This leaves us with many questions:

•   Is it possible and worthwhile to attempt to shift ethics policies through participation in organisations (e.g., university REBs) that make and implement these polices?

•   One circumstance in which it is possible for the requirement for informed consent to be waived is if "The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver" (TCPS, article 2.1(c)iii). Would the circumstances we have described above qualify?

•   Is expending effort on research observing the status quo worthwhile, given our role as outside observers, the methodological compromises required by ethics policies, and critiques from those who would take a more interventionist approach?

REFERENCES

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. 1998 (with 2000, 2002 and 2005 amendments). http://pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/tcps-eptc/