Theme 6 - Ethical practice in out-of-school learning

Jill Clark, Newcastle University, Charlotte Haines Lyon, York St John University, Tim Jay, Loughborough University, and Karen Laing, Newcastle University

Ethics work in research is often conceived of as a process of research governance. The case study chapters, however, provide evidence of a much more sophisticated engagement with ethical dilemmas arising in research and an enactment of 'everyday ethics', in other words, a concern with our relationships with, and responsibilities to, other people (Banks, 2016). This emphasis on relationality can often lead to what Cook (2009) describes as 'mess' in research, which needs to be made sense of. This is in contrast to the notion of 'well-ordered' research, which underpins many of the ethical frameworks, principles and guidelines that are produced for research. The chapters also indicate the opening up of new spaces for research that raise new challenges in respect of ethical practice, including, for example, digital spaces (Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club). Case Study 8 – Democratic Engagement also demonstrates that both researchers and participants in the research process find ways in which to challenge conformity and research norms in order to access knowledge, and this is not always a harmonious process. The following sections try to make sense of the implications of these issues for the ethical practice of research. This chapter pulls together three key themes emerging from the case studies of research governance, ethical relationality, and ethical spaces, presenting an analytical overview of all three areas using the concept of 'willful subjects'.

Keywords: Co-production; Participatory methods; Ethical practice; Authenticity; Power relationships; Researcher role

Research governance

The case studies have described how research design often changed throughout the process of working with participants. Institutional systems tend to be set up to deal with research projects that have clearly articulated aims and objectives from the outset that stay relatively stable through the course of the project. Applications for ethical approval within universities generally require full descriptions of aims and objectives, plus details of methods including interview protocols, for example. Projects involving genuine collaboration and participatory approaches, or where there is some other need for flexibility in approach, do not sit easily with such requirements for precise description in advance (Goodyear-Smith, Jackson & Greenhalgh, 2015). Some of the projects described in part one of this book represent work that has great value in understanding out-of-school learning lives, but will have presented some considerable challenges for the researchers in securing funding and managing ethical approval processes.

Rose and Jay, for example, in Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths, involved close attention to the relationships between researchers and participants. As the chapter details, the project required the researchers to develop a different kind of relationship with participants than participants had with their children's teachers, as part of the out-of-school focus of the work. This focus on relationships meant

that some flexibility in approach was needed at times, where planned methods or activities could affect positive relationships and trust with participants groups. For example, while not explicit in the case study chapter, Rose and Jay had intended to produce a guide for teachers to facilitate workshops for parents. However, as the project progressed, they realised that relationships between teachers and parents were such that a good deal of foundational work was required to build connections and trust before it would be appropriate for teachers to focus on parental engagement in mathematics learning. Changes that were made in response to what they learned about the research context as the project progressed were significant and valuable enough to warrant the additional work in making and justifying changes to the research design.

Ethical relationality

An interesting ethical reflection across all the case studies is that of the importance of relationships and the development of trust. This often took the form of being 'willing to get stuck in' (Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes, by Costas Batlle and Brown), building up a rapport (Case Study 3 – Children's Informal Maths, by Jay and Rose) or just plain spending time with participants (Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club, by Bailey). In Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential, Clark and Laing refer to 'mucking in' and getting involved - akin to Judge and Blazek's description of 'hanging around' to develop relationships with, rather than knowledge of, people and place in Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work. In Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths, Rose and Jay are explicit that the time needed to build these research relationships, and the importance of doing so, cannot be underestimated. Relationships do not always have to be harmonious, as we have seen through Case Study 8 – Democratic Engagement (Haines Lyon), but even a dissensual relationship is a relationship (which may need additional attention) which people can move in or out of. Developing a collaborative theory of change (Case Study 9 – Theory of Change, by Laing and Todd) was indeed intensive and time-consuming, and was dependent on early relationship-building and establishment of trust.

These relationships are not only between the researchers and the researched, but also include relationships among research teams and among research participants. As we have seen, most of the case studies refer to non-traditional research methods and a blurring of researcher roles of 'insider', 'critical friends' or 'invited guests'. Much of the work cited in the case studies could be argued to be participatory, co-created or co-produced. A key strength (and challenge) of such research is the mixing of researchers' theoretical and methodological expertise with non-academic participants' real-world knowledge and experiences.

The research participants in some of the case studies were therefore not situated on the edge of the knowledge production process. Instead, the idea was that knowledge was culturally constructed (Thomson, 2008) and that knowledge was co-produced and the process was democratised (Israel et al., 2003; Stringer & Dwyer, 2005; Borg, et al., 2012). Such 'insider knowledge' which regards participants as experts, and researchers as facilitators or brokers in the process (Burke & Kirton, 2006) was obvious through particular case studies. Undoubtedly, working in such a way was dependent on spending a significant amount of time nurturing and developing these relationships, whilst simultaneously building trust. The particular journeys of establishing relationships and trust throughout the case studies, whilst different and often difficult, are working towards similar aims and values. There is a common thread of

researchers wanting to work with rather than on, and an increased depth of discussion in the research where participants know their contributions are likely to be valued. An emphasis on synergistic research approaches can be seen, alongside a belief that if good relationships exist, and trust is established, then research can be more collaborative and participatory. Some case studies recount the flexibility of the research approach, basing this on the needs expressed by the participants. Were we, as researchers, to disagree with such a request, this most certainly would have compromised our relationship with our participants and possibly the quality of the data. More importantly, one could argue that to refuse would be highly unethical, as it risks research that fails to see participants as active agents in their own lives and experiences, and the collapse of the trust needed to undertake such a collaborative approach. The necessity for such flexible enactment of ethics exposes a fundamental tension with university ethical procedures that require detailed planned activity in advance. All such strategies evidenced throughout the case studies indicate working ethically as a practice rather than a process, and reflect the research process as dynamic, relational and constantly shifting.

Ethical spaces

The case study chapters illuminate the significance of space, in a myriad of forms, to ethical research practice. They describe physical and conceptual spaces that offer different kinds of experiences for researchers to consider. Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work, describes how youth work is premised on notions of going to where young people are, and that young people can occupy spaces with little regard for adult 'ordering'. This led Matej to have conversations in unusual places, such as on a garage roof. Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club, describes digital spaces and outlines the necessity for different ethical practices that can deal with the multi-spacial, multimodal and multi-temporal aspects of the out-of-school club. While co-presence in these different spaces create unique opportunities for research, they present a considerable incentive for researchers to be highly reflexive and flexible in their approach to ethical practice. Several case studies point out the primacy of the written word in research, and the need to engage in other modes of meaning making in order to sustain and ethical approach to engaging in research. Certainly, in Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential, the physical space (being on a residential weekend), and the activities this necessitated such as cleaning the kitchen opened up a space where conversations happened that could not be written in the moment. How these conversations then become conceptualised as data is then, in turn, open to ethical interpretation. Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential also opens up notions of time as space, and Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work demonstrates this as the authors posit that the most useful conversations took place mid-trip (i.e. the time furthest away from their everyday lives).

Considering the various spaces that young people and researchers inhabit thus involves a consideration of these spaces as 'ethical spaces' with liminal qualities or indeed willfull spaces. Access to, and participation in, these spaces thus depends on the researcher having a level of trust as an insider (Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work) and embodying ethics as a way of being and doing and being flexible that goes way beyond research governance. Several case studies have thus disengaged with deficit notions of young people, and as Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes outlines, not treating them as vulnerable and in need of protection but recognising them as autonomous and asset-rich and subject to political and economic forces that act to disempower them.

Ethical conformity and non-conformity

To understand the ethical ramifications of the different case studies, it is useful to engage with Ahmed's (2014) concept of "willful subjects" [sic]. As Ahmed argues, willfulness is ascribed to those "who are *not* compelled by the reasoning of others" (p.15), they are not willing subjects. Willful subjects are defined by what they are *not:* they are not willing to conform, not willing to meet expectations or standards of what it means to be human. Being a willful subject might mean "not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied" (Ahmed, 2014, p.15). In the case of education in England, arguably working-class children and parents are also willful by not complying with the eulogised practices of white middle-class subjects who comply with the neoliberal mandate of being adaptive, resilient and compliant in the task of raising economic subjects (Reay, 2017).

The concept of willfulness can be applied in at least three ways to research ethics and is particularly pertinent in the range of case studies discussed in this book. Firstly, research subjects can be seen as willful subjects when they don't behave as expected but challenge the status quo or expectations of the researcher. Secondly the researcher may be a willful researcher in terms of not complying with so-called research norms. Finally, there may be a tension between research taking place in the margins and the expectations of the school or other gatekeepers to behave in particular ways and uphold particular standards. These spaces could be seen as willfull spaces, where willingness is difficult and unethical at times. It should be noted that in some cases all three types of willfulness may be present.

Research participants might be willful, when they refuse to comply with the researcher. For example, young people expressed suspicion of researchers using recording devices (Bailey, in Case Study 4 – Minecraft Club) or taking notes (Cheung Judge and Blazek, in Case Study 6 – Geographies of Youth Work). Furthermore, the ensuing playfulness with cameras in Case Study 4 and the self-reference by participants in Case Study 6 as Matej's 'laboratory rats' are examples of participants exposing issues of trust and participation, challenging the researchers to re-evaluate their stance. Instead of trying to compel these participants in Case Study 6, Cheung Judge and Blazek abandoned their strategies and worked with the willful participants rather than against them. Arguably the participants were acting politically, not simply refusing to take part but refusing the power dynamics and challenging researchers to change not only their plans but also the way they conceptualised the participants. As Ahmed (2014, p.133) argues, willfulness can be honed and "thought of as a political art", part of a greater struggle. This is demonstrated in many of the case studies featured here, where researchers are challenged by participants who are refusing to act as expected. As can be seen, researchers in many of the projects, had to abandon their plans and work with the participants in unexpected ways.

Rather than dehumanising participants by expecting them to conform in particular ways to be human, researchers in out-of-school learning must allow for participants, and themselves, to resist such conformity and to play with different concepts of being (Blackburn, 2014). This demands that the researcher is also willful in their refusal to be compelled to follow plans for funders and gatekeepers, whether it is a refusal to maintain harmonious relations (Haines Lyon, in Case Study 8 – Democratic Engagement), or even to challenge the expected terms used, such as "mathematical "or "economic" (Jay and Rose, in Case Study 3 – Children's Informal Maths).

The very nature of researching in the margins of education, can mean that researchers have to inhabit liminal spaces in which different sets of rules apply, to those of 'usual research governance'. This can cause dissonance for researchers and participants as they are expected to be willing subjects in one setting, for example, school, and are able to be different in the liminal space—a willful space? As Laing and Clark found in Case Study 5 – Young Women's Residential, there is a real possibility that within this space both the researcher and participants start to resist (or continue to resist) being compliant, willing subjects. Therefore, it is incumbent that we question our expectations to follow institutional rules especially as we report our research.

As we allow ourselves to become willful subjects in the margins, it is possible to reflect on the expectations of, and for, willing subjects within the school or other institutions. Laing, Mazzoli Smith and Todd (Case Study 1 – Out-of-School Activities and Attainment) noted an "implicit, evaluative stance" p xxx by head teachers which in turn shaped after-school provision, but also hinted the task was about developing willing subjects. Similarly Rose and Jay, in Case Study 7 – Parents' Everyday Maths, "realised how schools positioned" particular parents compared to others (p xxx). Such instances raise the ethical question of how researchers navigate such liminal spaces which are "located betwixt and between" (Conroy, 2004, p.55). It is incumbent on us to *refuse* the institutional narrative (Tuck & Yang, 2014) as willful researchers which may risk bring the institutional "walls down" (Ahmed, 2014, p.191). Willful researchers may become willful through their study, or possibly set out to challenge the status quo as Costas Batlle and Brown did in their questioning of the neoliberal personhood promulgated by many charities (Case Study 2 – Youth Sports Programmes). Our readiness to work with willful subjects and to be willful researchers is fundamental to ethical researching in the margins—willful spaces—but also has implications for research governance.

Conclusion

The case studies have demonstrated that research ethics is not a single set of processes but requires a varied, complex and diverse set of responses in different contexts (Kara, 2018). Effective ethical practice involves in-depth reflection and exposing our decision making, aiming for authentic relationships and credible research data. This might mean setting aside some usual practices of academia (e.g. the primacy of writing) for research that supports the wellbeing of those taking part, and considers conflicting interests (e.g. between an organisation and individuals).

We do not argue that there are challenges involved in research on out-of-school learning that are insurmountable, or that researchers would be best advised to stick to more traditional areas of research. However, it does seem that the experience of the authors of the case studies in part one shows that researchers working in this field would be advised to develop ways to work with institutional research governance systems in a flexible way to support changing foci or purposes of projects as they progress. Of course, this may mean finding institutional systems where such flexibility is possible. In our experience, this flexibility can be encouraged where relationships are built between researchers and reviewers and reflective dialogue is enabled to reach a point of consensus and compromise, rather than a process which relies on an anonymous reject or accept culture.