

AISNSW Ethical Guidelines

The AISNSW Ethical Guidelines are for use by researchers undertaking research in schools within the independent sector in NSW. In developing these guidelines a range of internationally regarded principles articulating a common set of values ascribed to by education researchers have been drawn upon¹.

These Guidelines represent an attempt to capture some aspects of best practice in ethically conducted research and are not a definitive guide or exhaustive list of principles and practices. It remains the responsibility of each researcher to ensure that they conduct research that is both ethical and professional.

Purpose

The purpose of the AISNSW Ethical Guidelines is to:

- assist in ethical research practice and decision-making
- promote ethical sensitivity and awareness of researchers in the field
- provide guidelines that do not rely on any particular moral position or ethical theory.

The guidelines are as follows.

¹ Australian Association of Research in Education (AARE) : <http://www.aare.edu.au/pages/aare-code-of-ethics.html>

American Educational Research Association (AERA):

<http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/AERARulesPolicies/ProfessionalEthics/tabid/10200/Default.aspx>

British Sociological Association (BSA): <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx>

The Australian Sociological Association (TASA): <https://www.tasa.org.au/about-tasa/ethical-guidelines/>

Nolen, A. L., & Vander Putten, J. (2007). Action research in education: Addressing gaps in ethical principles and practices. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 401-407.

Professional integrity

It is imperative that all researchers maintain the integrity of the discipline and profession through a commitment to contributing to the research field/body of knowledge and the social good, whilst being responsible for their own ethical practice.

Researchers should only conduct research for which they have the appropriate levels of competence and ensure that in areas of unfamiliarity they are trained to an appropriate level of competence for the research context. Currency in developments within the appropriate field must be maintained. This includes developments in theory, methods and methodologies.

As there are diverse opinions, theories and research approaches within the research field, researchers should respect fellow researchers. Many differences relate to epistemology, and therefore researchers should be aware of the contingency of their 'truth' claims, both across and within disciplines.

Researchers should not misrepresent, or allow others to misrepresent, their expertise and skills, judgements or opinions, or their research and research results. Should this happen, the researcher should take reasonable steps to correct misrepresentations.

Researchers have a responsibility to be aware of, and where possible, safeguard the interests of those involved in the research, as well as those who may be affected by research outcomes. This responsibility entails awareness of the complexities of the social world, the diversity of beliefs and values, and social positions with respect to aspects of identity such as age, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, culture and other identity aspects, many of which are protected under policy and legislation.

Researchers have a responsibility to raise ethical issues with team members, whether aspects of research design and/or implementation, or researcher behaviour.

Research can come with risks not only for participants but for researchers themselves.

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure their own welfare during the research process.

Researchers, particularly those who conducting research in their own classrooms, should reflect upon and remain aware of the role conflict that may be unavoidable. 'Teacher-researcher as change agent' may be in conflict with student learning. Researcher awareness of this conflict should inform practices in order to mitigate negative impacts of the research on student rights to autonomy and fair treatment, and to academic progress.

Research participants

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, psychological, social and academic wellbeing of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. Participant rights should not be impinged, and they should be treated with respect and dignity.

Researchers should be cognisant of the differences in power between researchers and participants. These may be attached to identity aspects such as gender, age, race, disability, and ethnicity, among other aspects. These may also be reflective of pre-existing relationships that have positive or negative histories, such as those between a teacher and student. Research practices should be critically evaluated to ensure that power differences do not cause harm or exploit participants, but that relationships and interactions are instead based on trust, integrity and respect of difference. Methods and instruments should be adjusted if they are not wholly appropriate to the particulars of the participants, or if they increase the likelihood of vulnerability and risk for participants, in order to protect both rights and wellbeing.

Although researchers work to ensure they do not cause harm during the research process, adverse effects can be unanticipated. Should adverse effects occur the researcher has an obligation to take steps to minimise harm and address the situation.

Researchers should ensure steps are taken to provide provisions for support for participants who may disclose personal information about past/present traumas. These disclosures can occur in even the most innocuous situations. Being aware of local support organisations and institutional procedures can mitigate harm that may result from being unprepared.

Where research takes place within an institution such as a school, researchers should take care to ensure minimal disruption occurs. If unavoidable, steps should be taken to ensure this is remedied as quickly as possible.

Consent, Confidentiality and Anonymity

Participants should be aware that they are taking part in research. Not informing participants that they are taking part is classified as deception, and is permissible only under circumstances where:

- the research is no/low risk;
- informing the participant prior to research would make the research invalid or impossible to carry out;
- no other research method is available to the researcher;
- and even partial disclosure is not an option.

Deceptive research is a violation of informed consent, and researchers must provide sound rationales for conducting this kind of research. Post-study consent, informing and debriefing is advisable.

Research participation should, where possible, be based on freely-given informed consent. Participants should be made aware of their right to refuse participation and/or their ability to withdraw consent and participation at any point, without negative consequences.

- Where possible consent, or assent, should be sought from children and young people.
- For children too young to consent directly, consent may be acquired from a parent/guardian on their behalf, for research that is considered no/low-risk.
- In low/no risk conditions, tacit consent may be acquired. This does not absolve the researcher of the requirement to fully inform parents/guardians of the research being undertaken.

Researchers should remain cognisant of the challenges related to obtaining informed consent/assent for research with children and young people. The reality of freely given, informed consent/assent is complicated by young participants' maturity and cognitive capacity to understand and evaluate the research context and possible impacts, as well as their understandings of the power dynamics between themselves and researchers, particularly teacher-researchers. All efforts should be made to ensure that a participant's desire to, or not to, participate will have no impact on their academic future or relationships with researchers and school staff, and that this is understood by participants.

Informed consent is required for the recording of participation by video, audio, or observer in a non-public space. Participants should be made aware of what is being recorded, why, who that material will be shared with, and how data will be

secured. In some contexts, researchers may need to make decisions about whether recording could present a possible present or future harm to a participant, for example, capturing the image of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Researchers have an obligation to protect confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of participants in all areas of research and publication, to the best of their abilities. Issues with respect to these should be anticipated by the researcher and mitigated where possible. Limitations should be communicated to participants, including the legal requirements to report incidents of abuse - confidentiality in research does not afford any legal privileges.

Research data should be stored in a secure and confidential manner. Steps should be taken to de-identify data to preserve anonymity. If data is shared, then the researcher should ensure everyone accessing the data is aware of the conditions of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy attached to it. Again, limitations should be communicated to participants with respect to restrictions on the ability to de-identify data completely under some circumstances. For example, some details may be too specific to completely mask. This is particularly pertinent when research results are disseminated to the local community familiar with the school context and population. For this reason, issues of anonymity and confidentiality should not be taken lightly.

Researchers should take special care if research is being conducted over the Internet, and should ensure that they are up to date on debates about ethical practices for research in online environments. This is a rapidly changing field.

Researcher and funder/sponsor relationships

Researchers should respect the right of funders and host institutions (for example, schools) to have sufficient information about research projects, progress and team members. At the same time, funders and host institutions should respect the parameters of the research process.

Researchers must acknowledge the support of funders, host institutions and other support organisations and individuals in publications and communications to ensure research transparency, avoid conflicts of interest, and to honour any terms and conditions of contract between the researcher and funders/hosts/sponsors.

Researchers must notify funders of any proposed departure from the terms of reference of the contracted research. Researchers must make very reasonable

effort to complete the research on time, within budget, and in accordance with the terms and conditions of the contract.

Researchers should not allow funders, host institutions, or mentors to compromise the integrity of the research.

Publications, reports and artefacts

Researchers should endeavour to disseminate their research findings as widely as possible.

As part of dissemination, research participants should be provided with access to research results. This may be in the form of a research summary.

Researchers should ensure that all those who have made substantive contributions to an intellectual product or research artefact are listed as authors/contributors.

Researchers should not take credit and responsibility for products they did not directly create.

Care should be taken to avoid plagiarism, and to accurately cite and acknowledge the work of others.

Researchers must represent their research honestly and transparently – relevant findings and data should not be omitted, conflicts of interest and funding sources should be declared.

Researchers should take care to fully disclose all relevant information about the research, such as methods and methodology, theoretical perspectives and underlying assumptions, and any other factors that may bear upon interpretation and understanding of findings.

Research findings must be presented in ways that are consistent with agreements with participants around consent, confidentiality, anonymity and the open access of data.

Where conditions that limit the disclosure of data are in place, researchers should provide enough information to ensure others may verify their research results without compromising those conditions.

If researchers detect errors in their research and/or subsequent publications, they should take reasonable steps to address those errors.

Researchers should be cognisant, as far as is possible, of potential harms to research participants that may result from the publication of research findings. This may particularly be the case for participants who are more at risk of negative impacts due aspects of diversity and difference. Researchers should take steps to mitigate harm where possible. Informed consent does not absolve researchers from this responsibility.

Training and support

Researchers have an obligation to ensure the competence of those working on their research projects. This includes ensuring adequate training and support of team members, and the undertaking of reasonable steps to ensure team members perform their roles competently and ethically.

Employment

In the employment of team members to the research project, the researcher should ensure that they are informed of employment regulations, communicate employment terms and conditions promptly, and position requirements are clearly articulated.

Employees must be made aware of any constraints on conduct (for example, protection of anonymity), access to data, and publications, to ensure that the security of the research project, and the limits of employee activity.

Should a team member leave the research project before completion, they must take adequate steps to ensure their departure has minimal impact on the successful running and completion of the project.

Education programs

Where research involves new program design and/or deployment, researchers should seek to ensure that programs are competently designed, meet the learning goals of the program, and do not compromise student academic progress. Researchers should ensure that program design and content, learning

objectives and goals, completion and assessment requirements are accurately described and communicated.

Where programs are deployed as part of the research, researchers are responsible for ensuring that instructors are sufficiently trained and have substantive knowledge to ensure the adequate teaching of the program and facilitation of student learning and program completion.