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Ethical Considerations in Conducting Research with Children

There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected (and) that their welfare is protected ... (Kofi Anan)

Introduction

Acquiring children's consent to participate in research and recording their learning participation are some of the difficulties in doing education research. In educational research, children are recognized as individuals with rights and abilities to participate as active subjects. As a result, researchers are now very concerned about the ethics of research involving children. This topic covers procedural challenges in obtaining consent, recruiting, and paying children for their time and knowledge, as well as problems with child participation and protection (Abebe & Bessell, 2014).

Contemporary research ethics developed in the twentieth century in response to war crimes during the Second World War. The Nuremberg Code, established in 1947 to ensure the informed consent of research participants, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948 to uphold respect for human dignity and equality, were developed in succession. The Declaration of Helsinki, issued by the World Medical Association in 1964, marked the beginning of modern medical research. The Declaration outlines the guiding principles for medical research that has an impact on social sciences (Nairn & Clarke, 2012).

Abebe & Bessell (2014) argued that ethics guidelines are drawn from historical events that have their origins in Western philosophy, both geographically and culturally. Because of this circumstance, established ethical research techniques might not be applicable in other contexts. The necessity for researchers to explicitly understand and communicate the values on which their study is based is one of the numerous prerequisites for conduct-

ing ethical research. The ethics of caring for others and fairness for children is the values in this case. Children who appreciate fairness will also value the ethic of nurturing relationships and responsibilities. Additionally, research ethics is focused on more general themes of social justice and equality that can support one another and serve as the foundation for ethical research (Pratt & Rosner, 2006).

The integration of formal ethics and local ethos is the next crucial component. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) contend that there should be a distinction made between procedural ethics, in which researchers participate in the official approval process with an ethics committee, and ethics in practice, in which researchers deal with ethical issues that emerge in practical settings. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that research takes place within the framework of interpersonal and larger social connections.

Even while the researcher and children have a formal relationship as participants, when thoughts, feelings, hopes, and concerns are communicated, the relationship frequently deepens and becomes complex. Therefore, the researcher must ensure that the child is at ease and supported while participating in this study. The child will eventually leave the research facility and go back to their environment after the study is finished. Furthermore, the demand for research integrity, specifically accountability and participatory ethics, is present. Children who participate in research may be held accountable if reasonable ethical processes are followed. Participatory ethics, which remembers what has been overlooked and marginalized, is the next type of integrity (Fine & Torre, 2004).

According to Abebe and Bessell (2014), formal ethical guidelines, values, a willingness to be actively involved with children, and local ethos are all necessary for introducing research ethics to children. Some contend that ethical standards place restrictions on research with children in a range of social, cultural, and geographic circumstances. The situation is becoming more precarious, and it is difficult to open a discussion on local ethics and ethos in different nations. It should be mentioned that research ethics respect the implications of children's values and upholds children's human rights and dignity.

Ethical Dilemmas in Child Studies: Respect for Children's Rights

Respecting children's freedom to decline involvement was the key problem in a Singapore study by Harcourt and Conroy (2005). The practice of the research code of ethics in Singapore is that children cannot consent, so it is left to their legal guardians (Woman's Charter in Harcourt and Conroy, 2005).

It is challenging for children to exercise their freedom to say no, since they are used to giving in to requests from adults for permission to conduct research. Children learn the experience of giving the right response to a question, just like an adult would, as opposed to expressing their own opinions. Children are also frequently forced to obey in class, defenseless, and unable to decline the researchers' requests.

That said, in order to help the children develop a positive view of themselves as communicators and thinkers, games are used in the research on children conducted by Harcourt and Conroy (2005) in Singapore. The games can restore viewpoints that players have lost as a result of the impact of educational practices (Cook-Sather, 2002). The research also involves an ethnographic approach and narrative documentation. The method reduces researchers' tendency to make assumptions in processing the obtained information. Research conducted by Harcourt and Conroy (2005) shows that children can clearly articulate their needs and give opinions in accordance with their skills and abilities. The results of this study encourage researchers to engage children in dialogue using reflection as a method to understand their perspectives and the experiences that have shaped them. This study also demonstrates the value of ethnography as a way of exploring children's competence and giving them a voice. This method allows researchers to observe how children are involved in the classroom and gain an understanding of how they think. Significant data can also be gathered when children actively participate, sharing their ideas, perspectives, and feelings (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

Social and Cultural Context

Researchers experience challenging ethical dilemmas, namely rigid agreements and protocols, when implementing research ethics guidelines in the Global South (Abebe, 2009). According to Abebe and Bessell (2014), understanding the geographical context in applying research ethics is very important. In various African nations, including Ethiopia, ethical permission from the relevant university's ethics committee and the relevant Ministry is required. This condition is related to dual accountability and potentially contradictory expectations. These numerous institutions' ethical clearances are meant to safeguard children and vulnerable groups during the research process, ensuring that they are treated ethically and with respect. However, obtaining research approval requires a multi-layered bureaucratic procedure. One study may require approval from several institutions with different sets of ethical guidelines. This practice risks creating a mentality of formality

rather than a precautionary principle of professional behaviour (Abebe & Bessel, 2014).

Hammersley (2009) adds that Western thought and experience imposed inflexibly in the Global South will ignore local values, principles, and practices. It is important for researchers to understand that ethical guidelines are not created in isolation but are influenced by the prevailing values and ideas that prioritize dominant and formal modes of social interaction. Adopting a strictly universalist approach to research ethics and ignoring diversity can be harmful to both children and adults.

Power Relations and Child Welfare

Golczyńska-Grondas (2009) explained ethical and methodological dilemmas encountered while conducting research with children in Lodz, Poland. During school hours, the researchers conducted interviews to avoid disrupting the children's classes, which raised concerns about the appropriateness of using class time for research. Despite these concerns, the Principal assured the researchers that the interviews would not interfere with the children's learning. The researchers also encountered difficulties communicating with teachers and meeting with students due to their absence during the research process.

Golczyńska-Grondas's research notably observed the power dynamic between adults and children that researchers strive to overcome to treat children as equal partners in research. According to legal and ethical guidelines, parents and children must provide written consent for research participation. However, in Golczyńska-Grondas's (2009) study, it is unclear whether parents informed their children about their involvement in the research.

Another dilemma arose in the study when a child's diary was used as evidence in court by their mother during a divorce proceeding. The diary contained traumatic information about the child's experiences, causing emotional distress and a sense of guilt. While maintaining participant confidentiality is essential in research, Golczyńska-Grondas (2009) chose to inform the child's teacher about their condition due to concerning behaviors that required attention from the school.

While children's participation in research is essential, it can be challenging for children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Research often involves children being observed or heard without input on how their data is used (Markowska-Manista, 2021). Therefore, researchers need to reflect on whether their research is beneficial to the welfare of children (Freemann & Mathison, 2009).

Recognition of Children's Opinions

Mahon et al. (1996) point to the need for more attention paid to university research ethics committees on children's research and developing codes of ethics for practitioners. This movement also acknowledged how politically and socially vulnerable children's circumstances are. Several documents establishing the code of ethics for research involving children were compiled due to medical trials conducted during the Second World War.

Ethical principles undergo various changes related to social, cultural, and political developments. However, various research bodies have conflicting views, namely: First, the need to pay attention to research participants' psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being (Mental Health Foundation, 1999). Nairn and Clarke (2012) also point out that studies need to focus on children's emotional well-being because it can significantly impact matters such as bullying, body image, relationships with friends and family, and other susceptible areas. The following factor must be considered: how children's feelings change throughout the research process, not just during the planning and recruitment phases (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Nairn and Clarke (2012) propose that researchers can set up channels of communication that participants can use to get in touch with them if they feel uncomfortable researching delicate subjects. In addition, according to Markowska-Manista (2018), researchers need to consider various factors and conditions when involving children in research. Research with children and adolescents should only take place under specific circumstances: when the subject of the study is crucial to their health and welfare; when their involvement is necessary because other individuals cannot provide answers to the questions posed to children; when the methods used are suitable for children; when the study environment ensures the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of children

Second, voluntary consent and clear information to participants. Researchers must acknowledge participants' support and willingness to participate in research activities. Hill and Morton (2003) also state that if children are not committed to taking part in research, for whatever reason, they are likely to give a negative response and not engage at all with the question. As a result, it offers a practical justification for making sure that the children taking part in the research have agreed to it in order for the research to proceed.

Third, respect for the confidentiality and privacy of research participants. Regarding children's confidentiality, Halse and Honey (2007); Yanar et al. (2016) recommended that researchers should examine current research ethics committee policies and develop new alternative policies to apply in practice.

These ethics and policies also touch on the notions of the respondent's decision to be anonymous. Yanar et al. (2016) argued that the decision to remain anonymous in research should be left to the subject of the study rather than the researcher and that the confidentiality of their identity should be respected. The researchers should offer participants the option to choose whether or not to disclose their identity. Yanar et al. (2016) also cautioned that by acknowledging the research subject, the researcher respects and recognizes the subject's valuable input and is fair to the respondent's contribution. However, anonymity can still be used in situations that require special consideration and are sensitive.

Discussion

This study shows that there is an ethical dilemma in research involving children in several countries. In various countries, the practice of research ethics creates problems or dilemmas, such as the situation of Singaporean children, whose participation in research is approved by their legal guardians, because the children themselves lack the capacity to participate. Additionally, it was found that the convergence of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts – all of which differ significantly from the approval procedures and strict ethical regulations in the Global South – has grown into its own issue in studies. Children's involvement and opinions are taken into consideration in the UK when it comes to welfare and education. It is thought that protecting children's rights requires attention to their emotional well-being, which can have a big impact on things like bullying, body image, relationships with friends and family, and different sensitive areas. In some nations, the ethics of research create a dilemma. In Singapore, children participating in research must follow and give their consent through a legal guardian.

It is also an issue in the nations of the Global South, where it is more challenging to put ethical guidelines into practice due to the intersection of cultural, economic, social, and political elements. Changes in research involving children in the UK call for consideration of sensitive problems like bullying, body image, relationships between friends and family, and emotional wellbeing.

Ethical research practices in some of these countries show that it is essential to provide proper informed consent by thoroughly outlining the nature of the study, its goals, its potential risks, subjects' right to stop participating, how the data will be used, and what its effects would be on the research subjects. The subject need not be put under any pressure or incentive and any form of consent should be recorded and approved before data collection

(McNaughton et al., 2001). The researcher must provide clear instructions utilizing language, communication, and methods that children can grasp in order to ensure informed consent. Furthermore, Fraser et al. (2014) noted that children might understand things at different levels. Researchers must therefore provide movies, and other media to disseminate information and guarantee that children understand their choices.

Researchers must ensure that children understand what is asked of them, so researchers must respect the need for dialogue with children. In addition, researchers must also be able to record children's verbal and nonverbal expressions. Even very young children can verbalize thoughts and are capable of clarifying what they do not understand, as seen by the diverse responses of children during an informed consent exercise. In addition, in efforts to empower children, researchers must respect children's decisions to participate, recognize the child's right to withdraw from the research at any time, and believe in the confidentiality of data and children's rights and communication (France, 2004). Researchers must also have a supervisor to ensure that their research runs according to procedures.

Researchers must see all children as equal and competent in giving consent, meaning that they must be able to make informed decisions and have access to relevant information. This is in addition to obtaining parental approval for children under 16. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), establishes research ethics in studies on children (Bell, 2008). The Convention defines that children have the right to be respected humanely. Research with the correct procedures aims to open up intellectual space for discussion and in-depth reflection on methodologies, methods, and ethics. A state is legally obliged to guarantee children's inherent rights, but the power and participation of these children have different levels in various cultures. Adult's social power often determines the ability of children to exercise their rights and responsibilities. The development of these children is often influenced by the shadow of adults who decide what they think is best for the child so that democratic ideas are blurred (Gold, 1998).

Exploring viewpoints from the Global South and other nations that highlight the research's group, cultural, economic, and socio-political complexities begin with the right to be properly researched (Abebe, 2009). According to Alderson (2012), the right to be properly researched is a form of respect for children involved in research. Furthermore, the right to be adequately researched connects research ethics with research integrity. Therefore, statements of research ethics principles and ethics committees promote the proper use of ethics in research. Guidelines are frequently rigid regulations that must

be followed to receive ethical clearance, although they frequently take place in challenging procedural contexts and overlook broader context.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the ethical dilemmas of research ethics in studies conducted in several countries: in Singapore, the Global South, the city of Łódź, Poland, and in the UK. In addition, researchers need to engage in dialogue with children about their right to refuse research participation without fear of punishment or coercion. Respect for children's rights can create a forum for thoughtful discussion and reflection on approaches, methods, and ethics. A state is legally obliged to guarantee children's rights, but the power and participation of these children differ in various cultures.

This article reviews past literature highlighting essential considerations when conducting research involving children. Nevertheless, additional relevant sources are needed for this research to enhance its comprehensiveness.

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SUMMARY

The issue of ethics in research involving children has become a significant concern for researchers. This situation pertains to obtaining consent and conducting recruitment during and after the study, while ensuring the safety and well-being of the children involved. This investigation aims to identify ethical challenges in child studies across different countries. The study explores the application of research ethics in various nations and highlights the ethical predicaments that arise when conducting research with children, specifically concerning upholding their rights. Furthermore, the study uncovers that the interplay of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts can complicate adhering to ethical standards and protocols. Additionally, it notes that

power dynamics between children and adults may create an unequal footing for child participants in research. In light of this, the study stresses the importance of considering children's opinions and involvement, particularly in the context of their education and welfare, to protect their rights. It also underscores the need to prioritize children's emotional well-being, which can have significant implications for bullying, body image, relationships with friends and family, and other areas that demand high sensitivity.

KEY WORDS: ethical considerations, research, children