Embedding Ethicality within Student Practice-Approaches and Dilemmas

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Abstract

This paper follows on from previous work that I have produced which discusses appropriate approaches to research within the early years. This time I focus upon the concept of ethicality and explore the nature of ethical dispositions. I highlight the qualities of care and sensitivity not only within research, but within the wider scope of the early years profession. I also question our role, as educators within the early years field, in supporting students to develop such qualities. I question the extent to which an ethical disposition can actually be 'taught'. Finally I finish with the conundrum of making time to consider informed ethical responses within a society which values instantaneous electronic responses.

Key words: ethicality, research, care, professionalism and social contexts

Introduction

As a tutor of early years students and researcher I have always embraced the concept that we research 'with and not on'; but Stern's (2011) talk, *From Negative Ethics to Positive Virtues in Research,* took the consideration of research participants and settings to a new depth. Stern encouraged practice based researchers to move on from simply 'avoiding harm' towards a set of positive values that included modesty and humility. His discussion, of 'vicious' and 'virtuous' research, raised a number of new questions for me, related to how students approach their practitioner research. As a result values such as honesty and respect are now firmly embedded within discussions with students about their research.

Within my early years centre the discourse surrounding student research has changed markedly over recent years. Students no longer take the 'balcony view' (McNiff, 2011) of research, judging the 'problems' at settings that need to be solved; instead they look more personally, at how their own practice can be improved. 'How can I find out more about this?' and 'How can I become better at this?' are key questions. As a centre we have used McNiff's (2010) approach to Action Research as the basis for this, embracing

the concept that improving individuals' understanding will, as a result, have an impact upon their workplace. This may happen through direct communication of findings to colleagues, or through those 'subtle accumulation of nuances, a hundred things done a little better' (Kissinger cited in Peters and Waterman, 1982: 107) that the enlightened practitioner models. The fruits of the research are shared. Over the past two years, I feel relieved that we have 'humanised' our approach to research within our centre and made it far more appropriate for a caring profession.

But although, as a team, opinions towards ethical sensitivity within research have changed markedly over recent years, and although we are now looking for very different things when we mark a study, how do we make sure that the values that we hold are clear and accessible to our students? And how do we embed a more ethical approach, not just within research projects, but within our course as a whole?

An ethical approach to research

Within our early years centre a number of steps have been taken to encourage students to be more mindful of settings when embarking on research, these include:

- Ensuring that the research is purposeful to both the student and the setting, but ultimately considering how it will impact upon the quality experience of the child.
- Being mindful of the social context/ culture of the setting and the researcher impact.
- Working as research partners with colleagues (families and children where applicable) at the setting.

The latter two points are clearly exemplified in the excerpt below. Emily, an early years student, was eager to explore the impact of policy change upon a setting, but was mindful that her questions should not have a negative impact upon those that she was working with. The following is a short extract from her independent study:

My study aimed to provide a snapshot during an uncertain time. As a family support worker based in the team my inquiry posed a question of ethical sensitivity. Some of the participants felt high levels of anxiety and emotional stress due to the uncertain future of SureStart and changes in policy. Although it would have provided a very useful perspective, and may have enhanced my inquiry, it would have been inappropriate to explore these feelings and thoughts further without causing distress to the participants. The British Educational Researchers' Association (BERA, 2004) guidelines remind us that, as researchers, we have a responsibility to do no harm. Although the participants in question felt strongly that their opinion must be noted regarding the effect of policy change, it was **agreed** that participation in the semi structured interview would perhaps not be the most appropriate method of recording this valuable information. Instead it was agreed to record conversations with a purpose, as they arose, which placed no additional pressure on an already sensitive issue.

In the use of the final statement, 'it was agreed' it is clear that Emily worked closely with her colleagues, ensuring that the research was broached in a manner that was suitable for all. In addition, as a centre, we believe that disseminating findings with your research partner/s should be an integral facet of research. And we do our best to steer students away from the authoritarian format of 'recommendations' towards a dialogue for improvement. Taking an Appreciative Enquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) approach has proved to be extremely useful for this. 'What are you doing well, what makes it work and how can we build upon this?' makes for a far more positive discussion with research partners than 'This is what you are doing wrong and this is what you need to do to put it right.'

Finally, we see honesty as central to telling the research story. It remains a struggle for many students to accept their own subjectivity as this is rather negatively branded 'bias' within traditional research texts. But Munford *et al.* (2008: 57) stress how 'Researchers

need to be explicit about their research intentions, the values that inform their research work and the positions they occupy within the research process'. Ely (1991) explains why this is so important and extremely effective and I encourage you to read her work. What Ely refers to as 'putting prejudices in their place' Luca (2009) refers to as 'embodied bracketing'. Luca (2009: 22) advises researchers to place 'assumptions and preconceptions in parenthesis' so that 'they are constantly accessible for reflection'. Rather than feigning objectivity, Luca sees the meeting of subjectivities as a medium through which deeper reflection can take place. She says that 'It is within this process that minds meet and understandings become illuminated' (Luca, 2009: 22). We encourage students to share, rather than hide their subjectivity. This is something of a battle, as there endures the view that subjectivity does not exist in 'proper' research. Ultimately it is important that we help those practitioner researchers that we are working with to realise that they are working with *people* and not *settings*. So we move beyond the procedural approach to ethics, which includes cover letters and permissions, to one which considers our relationships with, our position and impact upon those settings with which we are researching. That we move from the abstracted area of 'study' to the reality of lived experiences within our work, and that we do this by 'broadening the scope of focus from codes, conduct and cases to include commitment, character and context' (Banks, 2009: 59). But clearly this does not begin and end with the study, so how do we extend this throughout the student experience?

An ethical approach to professionalism
As Banks' (2009) comment above suggests, what has actually happened as we have developed our approach to the independent study, is that it has illuminated the need to recognise ethics as integral to all that we do, not as something only related to research. It is relatively straightforward to put procedures such as an extended ethical proposal in place to ensure that the status of ethicality is raised within research, but what we really need to do is to ensure that ethicality is embedded throughout our students' professional development, throughout their studies. Munford *et al*. (2008, 53) describe 'social work as an activity that takes place within relationships and in contexts where there is a complex

interplay of diverse perspectives and positions'. This has significant implications for teaching our developing professionals to work competently with others in a variety of situations. Our early childhood students are dealing with sensitive and challenging circumstances whenever they enter practice, so how can we ensure that they are prepared for this? Or, more importantly perhaps, the question is *can* we prepare them for this?

Banks (2009) discusses how in the mundane reality of daily experiences practitioners will be unlikely to come across ethical issues that relate to prescribed ethical guidelines. It is doubtful that the type of difficult situations that our students will face will involve principles of equality, freedom, or harm. It is also unlikely that student practitioners will be able to step back and make decisions about ethical disputes in a 'relatively impartial fashion' (Banks, 2009; 5), with ethical guidelines to hand, as such situations are often spontaneous and emotionally charged. So is it possible to prepare students for such situations?

One approach that we have used with first year students is to have them reflect on their own and others' roles and relationships within a set group task. In their reflections they have been supported in 'Balancing logic (analysis) with passion (feelings, emotions, imagination)' (Banks, 2009: 7). They have been required to demonstrate their levels of perception and organisation alongside empathy, compassion and sensitivity for their peers. We have encouraged them to take a responsible, pro-active and, more importantly, kind and caring approach to those things that they view as being problematic in their work with peers. When considering difficulties, we have urged students to always try to understand their colleagues' viewpoint and always to try to come up with their own, positive solution that will enable them to cope with (or even prevent) the problem next time. This approach has helped the students to recognise the perspectives of others and made a significant difference to the quality of ethicality and empathy seen in the reflective work that they have submitted. I hope that it will continue to positively impact upon their practice and reflection over the coming years.

But is it really possible to teach others to develop an 'ethical disposition'? Noddings (1984) suggests that ethical behaviours can only emerge from a caring nature – that care and ethicality are intrinsically linked. And so I now question whether it is possible to *teach* meaningful ethical behaviours to individuals who may not have a caring nature. And conversely one would expect an individual that has a caring disposition, and the majority of students that come into early years education do, to be disposed to intuitively act in an ethical manner. If this is the case, do we really need to teach ethicality at all? Or is it, as Banks (2009) suggests, that we do not really need to teach ethics per se, but we need to help students to recognise how it is an integral and important part of their professional lives? This then leaves them to decide whether this particular profession is right for them.

I have a final dilemma to leave you with. The students that we are working with live in a society that does not run at an appropriate speed to enable or support careful and sensitive consideration of issues. In the Facebook and Twitter age speed is everything and ethical values can be temporarily suspended. Czarniawska (2013) discussed how within the electronic generation thoughts are 'burped' out without temperance. I am sure that we are not the only university department for which such 'burping' of comments has caused difficulties. Czarniawska also used the very simple illustration of a man who was walking at speed slowing down in order to try to remember something; and the opposite example of someone walking at speed to try to forget. Should we encourage our students to slow down and take time to consider, or is it our job to enable them to think more effectively and sensitively at speed? Again this is a question that is specific to your own individual contexts, no set principle will suit all, but it is something to consider.

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