



**Scottish Educational Research Association
Ethical Guidelines for Educational
Research
2005**

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Foreword

SERA's Code of Practice in Educational Research published in 1997 provided useful guidance for the conduct of educational research in Scotland. It set out the responsibilities of researchers, funding bodies and host institutions and the role of SERA. Since publication of the SERA Code, there has been heightened concern in society about human rights in general, for example, with respect to freedom of information and the right to privacy. With regard to children's rights there is particular concern with protecting them from harm and ensuring their active participation in decision making. Educational legislation, in the form of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, has set a new context for the Scottish education system and hence for educational research. These changes present new challenges to the research community to work in partnership with all stakeholders in education, with learners of all ages, professional bodies, government agencies, voluntary bodies and other interest groups towards the aim of enhancing the quality of life in our society. The Executive Committee of SERA reached the decision in 2002 that the Existing Code of Practice should be revised to take account of these changes in the context of Scottish education. The present document is intended to provide comprehensive guidelines for the ethical conduct of educational research in Scotland. It is expected that membership of SERA entails a commitment to the ethical standards set out below.

Research in education is often directed at children and other vulnerable populations. A main objective of this code is, therefore, to remind us that as educational researchers we should strive to protect these populations and to maintain the integrity of our research, of our research community and of all those with whom we have professional relations. We should pledge ourselves to do this by maintaining our own competence and that of colleagues we induct into the field by continually evaluating our research for its ethical and scientific adequacy and by conducting our internal and external relations according to the highest ethical standards. The standards that follow remind us that we are involved not only in research but in education. It is, therefore, essential that we continually reflect on our research to be sure that it is not only rigorously conducted, but that it also makes a worthwhile contribution to the quality of education in our society.

March 2005

Acknowledgements

The SERA Ethical Guidelines have drawn heavily from other published ethical codes of practice for educational research including the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research 2004 and the Ethical Standards of AERA. In particular, the SERA Executive Committee is grateful to the Executive Council of BERA for its permission substantially to adopt and adapt the text of the BERA Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004).



Scottish Educational Research Association

Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research

Preamble

1. The SERA Ethical Guidelines are a set of standards designed to guide the proper conduct of the research activities of members of SERA. Since education has the fundamental ethical purpose of improving the lives of individuals, communities and society, ethical considerations must lie at the core of educational research. SERA strongly asserts the view that giving due attention to such ethical considerations should not be seen as constraining or limiting research but rather as enhancing the quality of educational research in the widest sense. Since educational research often involves children and other vulnerable groups, a key purpose of these Guidelines is to remind SERA members that educational researchers should be aware of the potential influence of a power differential inherent in their relationship with research participants and that they must at all times strive to protect and safeguard the interests of participants in research. The Guidelines are also aimed at ensuring that SERA members do their utmost to maintain the integrity of their research, of the research community, and of all those with whom they have professional relations. In order to achieve these aims, SERA members should be prepared to maintain and enhance their own competence by critically evaluating their research activities in relation to the ethical standards set out in the following pages.
2. This set of Ethical Guidelines replaces the SERA Code of Practice published in 1997 and takes into account developments in legislation and research governance, which have taken place since then. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and its requirements, implemented in 1997, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Data Protection Act 1998 must all be taken into account in the conduct of research activity. In all fields of research involving human beings, the importance of ethical considerations has now been widely acknowledged. It is important that educational research is conducted in accordance with ethical standards shared across disciplinary boundaries. In this context, SERA acknowledges that educational research is a diverse field of inquiry, is informed by a number of disciplines, drawing upon a range of theoretical frameworks and employing a variety of research methodologies. SERA recognises that its members may already be guided by other codes of practice reflecting their different disciplinary backgrounds and the interests and requirements of the institutions and organisations to which they are affiliated. However, this set of ethical guidelines is designed to be sufficiently robust and comprehensive to incorporate the key ethical considerations to be addressed across the whole field of educational research.
3. Membership of SERA entails individual responsibility to adhere to the Ethical Guidelines and Code of Practice in the proper conduct of research. SERA recommends that educational researchers should join with others in their institutions, organisations or agencies to form local ethics committees which

should use the guidelines to inform their deliberations on the ethical conduct of research activity and the process of formal approval of research proposals.

4. Educational research is conducted in complex social settings. Decisions about the conduct of research require professional judgement on the part of researchers. These ethical guidelines cannot and should not aim to provide a 'formula' or simple blueprint for research. Rather they set out key principles and provide advice which should inform the process of decision-making about research in ways which will allow the resulting research activity to be carried out in a sound, justifiable and ethically acceptable manner.

Guiding Principles

5. SERA shares with colleagues in the wider UK and international community of educational researchers, represented by such bodies as BERA and AERA, a number of fundamental principles which underpin this set of Ethical Guidelines. These are represented by a commitment to an ethic of respect for:
 - the person;
 - knowledge;
 - democratic values;
 - justice and equity;
 - the quality of educational research; and
 - academic freedomBERA¹
6. These guiding principles are applied to four key areas of responsibility on the part of educational researchers, namely:
 - responsibilities to participants in research;
 - responsibilities to sponsors and other stakeholders in educational research;
 - responsibilities to the field of educational research; and
 - responsibilities to the community of educational researchers.

GUIDELINES

Responsibilities to Participants

7. Participants in research are taken to include all those involved in the research activity either directly or indirectly and either passively, such as when part of an educational context being observed, or actively, such as when taking part in an interview procedure.
8. SERA expects educational researchers to demonstrate respect for participants in research regardless of their age, gender, race, religion, political beliefs, lifestyle or any other source of potential discrimination. Particular care should be taken in the use of non-discriminatory language in all research communications, in the construction of research instruments and in the reporting of research.

¹ BERA (2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Southwell: BERA (p. 4).

Voluntary Informed Consent

The essence of the principle of informed consent is that the human subjects of research should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research²

9. Researchers must ensure that participation in research is on the basis of voluntary informed consent. Participants in a research study have the right to be informed about the aims of the investigation, the processes in which they will be engaged, the likely risks involved in the research and any potential consequences for them. Participants also have the right to know in advance why their participation is necessary, how the information gathered will be used and how and to whom the results will be reported. They must have the opportunity to give their informed consent before participating in the research. Consent to participate should never be given under any kind of duress.
10. Obtaining informed consent is a continuing obligation rather than a once-and-for-all step in the research process. Educational researchers should ensure that they inform participants about any significant changes in the programme of research. It is essential that participants are made aware that they are free to withdraw their consent at any time and for any, or no reason. It is important to stress that giving informed consent must be an active process. It is inappropriate to assume consent is given by virtue of the fact that an opportunity provided to “opt-out” of participating has *not* been taken up.
11. However, there are circumstances, where it may be impracticable or unduly restrictive to obtain informed consent from all participants, for example, in observational studies where the observed activity, such as playground games, is non-specific to individuals. In some participant observation research, it is important that the researcher's role is not made evident. In all such cases, the circumstances must be carefully and thoroughly considered and clear reasons recorded before any decision is taken not to obtain informed consent. Where such research activity is intended, researchers should seek the approval of their local ethics committee.

The Rights of Children, Vulnerable Young People and Vulnerable Adults

12. Educational researchers must conduct their research in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and relevant subsequent legislation based on the principles of the UN Convention, including the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.
13. In particular, researchers must comply with the stipulation of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, which extends Article 3 of the UN Convention by asserting that the best interests of the child must be the *paramount* concern in all decisions and actions affecting the child. In addition, researchers must comply with Article 12 of the Convention which requires that children must be given the opportunity to express their views freely in all matters affecting

² Homan, R. (1991). The ethics of social research. London: Longman (p. 69).

them, commensurate with their age and maturity, and that these views must be listened to. This is particularly relevant to the issue of obtaining informed consent. Every effort must be taken by researchers to facilitate children's right to give their own informed consent to participation in research. This should be done on the basis of an initial assumption of children's competence to do so.

14. Researchers should operate in the spirit of Articles 3 and 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child where the research involves vulnerable young people and vulnerable adults³.
15. In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstances may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances, researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as 'responsible others' (i.e. those who have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the participants e.g. social workers).
16. Researchers must make every effort to ensure that they meet all relevant legislation governing work of any kind with children, vulnerable young people or vulnerable adults.

Avoidance of any detrimental effects on participants in research

17. Researchers must recognise that participants may experience distress or discomfort in the research process and must take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and to put them at their ease. They must desist immediately from any actions ensuing from the research process that cause emotional or other distress.
18. Researchers must recognise concerns relating to the 'bureaucratic burden' of much research, especially survey research, and must seek to minimize the impact of their research on the normal working and workloads of participants. They should adhere to the ethic of 'minimal intrusion', and only ask those questions that provide the data required to address current research questions.
19. Researchers must make known to the participants (or their guardians or responsible others) any predictable detriment arising from the process or findings of the research. In addition, researchers must discuss any predicted detriment with their local ethics committee before embarking on a research project. Any unexpected detriment to participants, which arises during the research, must be brought immediately to their attention or to the attention of their guardians or responsible others as appropriate.

³ Paras 14-16 are based on BERA (2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (p.6)

20. Researchers must take steps to minimise the effects of designs that advantage or are perceived to advantage one group of participants over others, e.g. in an experimental or quasi-experimental study in which the treatment is viewed as a desirable intervention and which by definition is not available to the control or comparison group.

Offering Incentives for Participation

21. Researchers' use of incentives to encourage participation must be commensurate with good sense and must avoid choices which in themselves have undesirable effects (e.g. the health aspects of offering cigarettes to young offenders or sweets to school-children). They must also acknowledge that the use of incentives in the design and reporting of the research may be problematic; for example where their use has the potential to create a bias in sampling or in participant responses. In general, the use of incentives for participation should be the exception rather than the norm in educational research and where incentives are being proposed, the case for this should be considered by a local ethics committee.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Anonymity⁴

22. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others, specifically and willingly waive that right. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to have such a waiver in writing. Conversely, researchers must also recognise participants' rights to be identified with any publication of their original works or other inputs, if they so wish. In some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified. However, caution must be applied in any situation where an individual waiving the right to confidentiality could lead to others being identified or where an individual is representing the views of an institution or organisation. It is inadvisable for the researcher to assume that the participant is entitled to put the confidentiality of others at risk or waive it on behalf of their institution or organisation.
23. It is possible to draw a distinction between the extent to which confidentiality and anonymity can be guaranteed. It is possible to provide anonymity to participants by taking clear steps to ensure that the identity of any participant is not discernible to any other party in any research database or research report. However, since researchers have certain duties of disclosure discussed below in Paragraphs 28 and 29, it is not always possible to guarantee confidentiality.

⁴ Paras 22 and 24-30 are adopted from BERA (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (pp 7-9).

Data Protection

24. Researchers must comply with the legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data as set down by the Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent similar acts. In essence people are entitled to know how and why their personal data are being stored, to what uses it is being put and to whom it may be made available.
25. Researchers must have participants' permission to disclose personal information to third parties and researchers must ensure that participants have given their agreement to any such third parties being permitted to have access to the information. They are also required independently to confirm the identity of such persons and must keep a record of any disclosures. Disclosure may be written, electronic, verbal or any visual means.
26. The Data Protection Act also confers the right to private citizens to have access to any personal data that are stored in relation to them. Researchers seeking to exploit legal exclusions to these rights must have a clear justification for so doing, which should be submitted for approval to a local ethics committee. Researchers should also be aware of obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2005.
27. Researchers must ensure that data are kept securely and that the form of any publication, including publication on the Internet, does not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of agreed confidentiality and anonymity.

Disclosure

28. Researchers who judge that the agreements reached about confidentiality and anonymity may allow illegal behaviour to continue, must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. Insofar as it does not undermine or obviate the disclosure, researchers must apprise the participants or their guardians or responsible others of their intentions and reasons for disclosure.
29. At all times the decision to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to make contemporaneous notes on decisions and the reasoning behind them, in case a misconduct complaint or other serious consequence arises.

Providing feedback to participants

30. All research participants are entitled to receive feedback on the outcomes of the research. It is good practice for researchers to debrief participants at the conclusion of the research and to provide them with copies of any reports or other publications arising from their participation. Where the scale of the

research makes such a consideration impractical, alternative means such as a website should be used to ensure participants are informed of the outcomes.

Responsibilities to Sponsors of Research⁵

31. A sponsor of research is considered to be any person or body that funds research (e.g. a research charity or government body) or facilitates it by allowing and enabling access to data and participants (e.g. an examinations body or a local authority education department). All sponsors should be made aware of these Ethical Guidelines.
32. In the context of school-based research, the Scottish Local Authorities have a key role in granting permission to researchers to approach schools and other educational establishments. The researcher should take appropriate steps to consult with Local Authorities when negotiating access for research purposes.
33. The relationship between researchers and sponsors should be defined by a written agreement in the case of funded or commissioned research. Such agreement should minimally cover the purpose of the research, the research methods to be used, any conditions of access to data or participants, ownership of data, the researchers' right to publish, requirements for reporting and dissemination, deadlines for completion of the work and the accounting for the use of funds. In recognition of the dynamics of research, agreements should also include provision for negotiating changes sought by either the researchers or the sponsors.
34. Researchers must fulfil their responsibilities to sponsors to the highest possible standards. It is in the researchers' interest that respective responsibilities and entitlements should be agreed with the sponsors at the outset of the research. Where the sponsor acts essentially as a host or facilitator for research, researchers must, out of courtesy, inform them of the work they propose to undertake e.g. a group of teachers engaging in a process of action research as part of curriculum renewal should inform the school management of their intentions.

Responsibilities to the field of Educational Research⁶

35. Educational researchers should conduct their professional lives in such a way that they do not jeopardise future opportunities for research, the public standing of the field, or the integrity of the discipline's research results.
36. Educational researchers must not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent authorship, evidence, data, findings, or conclusions. They must not 'sensationalise' findings in a manner that sacrifices intellectual capital for maximum public exposure.

⁵ Paras 31, 33 and 34 are based on BERA (2004) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (p. 9).

⁶ Adapted from AERA (2000) *Ethical Standards of AERA*. American Educational Research Association. <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm>

37. Educational researchers must not knowingly or negligently use their professional roles for fraudulent purposes.
38. Researchers must employ methods that are fit for the purpose of the research they are undertaking. Those researchers who prefer or promote specific methods, theories or philosophies of research must have knowledge of alternative approaches sufficient to assure sponsors that they have considered these and that the research needs are being properly addressed. Sponsors should be offered a full, honest and amenable justification on the final choice of methods.
39. Researchers must, within the context and boundaries of their chosen methods, theories and philosophies of research, communicate the extent to which their data collection and analysis techniques, and the inferences to be drawn from their findings, are reliable, valid and generalisable.
40. Educational researchers should report research conceptions, procedures, results, and analyses accurately and sufficiently in detail to allow knowledgeable, trained researchers to understand and interpret them.
41. Educational researchers' reports to the public should be written straightforwardly to communicate the practical significance for policy, including limits in effectiveness and in generalisability to situations, problems, and contexts. In writing for or communicating with non-researchers, educational researchers must take care not to misrepresent the practical or policy implications of their research or the research of others.

Reporting and publishing findings of research

42. The right of researchers to publish the findings of their research under their own names is considered the norm for sponsored research. However, there are conditions under which this right might not hold including circumstances in which:
 - researchers have waived this right in writing;
 - publication would contravene the law (e.g. in the area of libel or race relations);
 - the work that has been commissioned specifically to produce a confidential report e.g. consultancy reports that are based on research activity;
 - undertakings have been given to participants concerning confidentiality and the intention to avoid causing unnecessary harm to those affected by the research findings;
 - the researchers have failed to comply with contractual obligations;
 - the researchers have failed, without reasonable justification, to report findings in a manner consistent with these ethical guidelines e.g. failure to report findings honestly and accurately.
43. Researchers have the right to dissociate themselves publicly from accounts of the research that they consider misleading or unduly selective. Sponsors enjoy a similar right. It is in the interests of researchers and sponsors alike to prevent

this situation arising by agreements on publication or, if necessary, through arbitration.

Responsibilities to Colleagues and to the Community of Educational Researchers⁷

44. The community of educational researchers is considered to mean all those engaged in educational research including academics, professionals (from private or public bodies), full-time research staff, teachers and students.
45. Researchers must protect the rights and interests of research colleagues and research staff contracted to carry out research activities. Researchers must ensure that they carefully assess and strive to minimise any risks to staff in conducting research activity. For instance, it is inadvisable for a researcher to go unaccompanied to an unknown research participant's home for the purpose of conducting an interview procedure.
46. All educational researchers must protect the integrity and reputation of the educational research community by ensuring they conduct their research to the highest standards. Researchers must therefore not bring the educational research community into disrepute by, for example:
 - criticising other researchers in a defamatory or unprofessional manner;
 - exploiting the conditions of work and roles of contract research staff;
 - undertaking work for which they are perceived to have a conflict of interest or where self-interest or commercial gain might be perceived to compromise the objectivity of the research;
 - undertaking work for which they are not competent;
 - using work carried out with co-researchers as the basis of individual outputs without the agreement of the co-researchers concerned;
 - misrepresenting, falsifying, distorting or sensationalising research findings.
47. Where researchers become aware of examples of malpractice or potential malpractice they must present their concerns, in the first instance, to the researchers involved. If their concerns are proven correct and if the researchers in question do not move to correct the situation, the matter must be reported to the Association's Academic Secretary. With due consideration to the important principle of the public's right to know, researchers should avoid bringing the community into disrepute through public accusations or allegations.
48. Subject to any limitations imposed by agreements to protect confidentiality and anonymity, researchers must make their data and methods amenable to

⁷ Adapted from AERA (2000) *Ethical Standards of AERA*. American Educational Research Association. <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm>

reasonable external scrutiny. The assessment of the quality of the evidence supporting any inferences is an especially important feature of any research and must be open to scrutiny. Where sponsors initiate the request for scrutiny, and disclosure of aspects of the data may be injurious to participants, researchers should consider assuring the sponsor of the integrity of the work through the scrutiny of a mutually acceptable third-party, who is also bound by the non-disclosure agreements.

49. Researchers must accord due respect to all methodologies and related methods. They must contribute to the community spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism that generates improvement in practice and enhancement of knowledge.

Authorship

50. Authorship should be determined based on the following guidelines, which are not intended to stifle collaboration, but rather to clarify the credit appropriately due for various contributions to research.
 - All those, regardless of status, who have made substantive creative contribution to the generation of an intellectual product are entitled to be listed as authors of that product.
 - First authorship and order of authorship should be the consequence of relative creative leadership and creative contribution. Examples of creative contributions are: writing first drafts or substantial portions; significant rewriting or substantive editing; and contributing generative ideas or basic conceptual schemes or analytic categories, collecting data which require significant interpretation or judgment, and interpreting data.
 - Clerical or mechanical contributions to an intellectual product are not grounds for ascribing authorship. Examples of such technical contributions are: typing, routine data collection or analysis, routine editing, and participation in staff meetings.
 - Authorship and first authorship are not warranted by legal or contractual responsibility for or authority over the project or process that generates an intellectual product. It is improper to enter into contractual arrangements that preclude the proper assignment of authorship.
 - Anyone listed as author must have given his/her consent to be so listed;
 - The work of those who have contributed to the production of an intellectual product in ways short of these requirements for authorship should be appropriately acknowledged within the product.
 - Acknowledgement of other work significantly relied on in the development of an intellectual product is required. However, so long as such work is not plagiarised or otherwise inappropriately used, such reliance is not ground for authorship or ownership.
 - It is improper to use positions of authority to appropriate the work of others or claim credit for it. In hierarchical relationships, educational researchers should take care to ensure that those in subordinate positions receive fair and appropriate authorship credit.

- In cases where writing relies on a thesis or data collected by a student, the authorship in the publication of work arising from theses and dissertations is determined by creative intellectual contributions as in other cases. An explicit agreement should be negotiated in each case. Research teams or academic staff involved in sustained co-working with students should agree an authorship policy at the beginning of the research process.
- Authors should disclose the publication history of articles they submit for publication; that is, if the present article is substantially similar in content and form to one previously published, that fact should be noted and the place of publication cited.

Note on Practitioner Research

Paragraphs 7 to 30 of the SERA Ethical Guidelines aimed at protecting the rights of participants should *not* be interpreted as inhibiting practitioner research and enquiry and/or other forms of action research as long as the following conditions are met:

- the data are those that could be derived from normal teaching/learning processes;
- confidentiality is maintained;
- the safety and welfare of participants are protected;
- informed consent is obtained when appropriate; and
- the use of the information obtained is primarily intended for the benefit of those receiving instruction in that setting.

References

BERA (2004) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Southwell: British Educational Research Association.

AERA (2000) *Ethical Standards of AERA*. American Educational Research Association. <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.htm>

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Historical Note

During his term of office as President, Donald Christie took responsibility for revising the 1997 SERA Code of Practice in Educational Research and produced an initial draft of a much more substantial document in 2004, 'Scottish Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research'. Following this, a small working group composed of SERA Executive members Donald Christie, George Head, Fran Payne, Christine Stephen and Allen Thurston discussed and made several revisions to the draft. Subsequent to this process, a 'final' draft was sent to all SERA members in October 2004 for consultation. It was also posted on the SERA website and responses invited. The consultative draft document was an item on the agenda of the Annual General Meeting in November. It was approved subject to amendments proposed by members as a result of the consultation. Further minor amendments were submitted by members and taken account of by the Executive working group. The new ethical guidelines were formally adopted by the SERA Executive in December 2004.

Fran Payne
President

March 2005