“Reaching the Foothills of Everest”
Ethics Approval - A Personal Perspective

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Abstract

I am currently working on my doctorate entitled ‘Enhancing the Bicultural Curriculum in Early Childhood Education’. Part of the process of this study was making an application to the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) prior to starting the data collection stage of the research. According to Oliver (2003) researchers tend to experience an application to an ethics committee as an unnecessarily lengthy process preventing them from getting on with their research. I found fellow students who had completed the ethics approval process were sympathetic rather than encouraging. But my experience was that the process (albeit lengthy) was worthwhile, challenging and reassuring as my vague research proposal became a specific planned timeline for the research. My response to fellow students in the future would be to explain what a positive difference the process can make. In this paper I describe the landmark ethics case in New Zealand (the Cartwright Commission, 1988) and the purpose of ethics committees. This is followed by an outline of the process of completing an ethics application, the specific ethical issues I needed to address, the knowledge I gained and the reassurance and satisfaction I felt on completion of the process.

Introduction

When fellow researchers asked me how my doctorate is going and I told them that I had ethics approval, the inevitable comment was how terrible they found the ethics application process. I was motivated to write this paper because I did not find the ethics application process ‘terrible’. The process served to enhance my research by helping me to turn a vague conceptual proposal into a more solid carefully crafted proposal with a clear timeline for the research.

At first the ethics approval process seemed to be daunting and pedantic, especially as this was reinforced by the comments of my fellow students. Oliver (2003) noted that researchers perceived ethics committees to be a “hurdle in the sometimes lengthy process of gaining approval for a research project” (p. 40). However, in filling out the comprehensive application form I learnt the value of explaining and justifying my methodology and decisions clearly to those outside my field. This process challenged me to consider the meaning of the jargon I took for granted, as well as the specifics of consultation with Maori and the details of how I would implement action research in my
study. By the time ethics approval had been granted, I had arrived at a realistic timeline for carrying out the research and had the reassurance that experienced researchers had examined my application and approved it. Whilst I recognised that nothing, especially with action research, can be guaranteed, at least all obvious pitfalls had been considered and the participants of the study would be safeguarded from lack of knowledge by a beginning researcher. Nevertheless I did feel as though I had at least reached the foothills of Everest – Everest being the satisfactory completion of my research.

Possibly because I did not come to research through the traditional academic pathway, I have been uncertain at each step of the research journey. Indeed the journey to gain higher qualifications (especially a Doctor of Philosophy) has felt too challenging. I had never seen myself as a researcher and to some extent still do not. I started sustained university studies after completing the Playcentre Federation Certificate whilst bringing up my family. I began with one paper, moved to two as my confidence grew and I gained satisfactory results, until, in 1989, I was able to study full-time, completing a Master of Arts in 1992. In 1999 I started a Doctorate in Education but transferred to the university in which I teach to start a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 2002. Despite attending a variety of workshops (e.g. writing proposals), obtaining responses from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) members and receiving guidance and support from of my supervisors, such as suggesting readings, critiquing my work and giving me feedback, I still felt I stumbled my way through the doctoral proposal and ethics application.

**Impact of the Cartwright Commission on Ethical Expectations**

Much of the development of ethics for research in New Zealand occurred since 1988 with the publication of the Cervical Cancer Inquiry usually known as the Cartwright Commission (Snooks, 1999). This report investigated the ethics of Associate Professor Greene’s cervical cancer research and the performance of the National Women’s Hospital Ethical Committee in relation to that research. Over the course of 16 years, contrary to the generally accepted beliefs of the international medical community that carcinoma in situ was a precursor to cancer; Greene left 131 women untreated with that condition. Subsequently 95 percent were found to continue to have carcinoma in situ, 29 percent had invasive cancer; whereas of the group that were treated only 1.2 percent developed invasive cancer (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). In addition to Greene’s unethical research the Cartwright Commission had several other ethical concerns. Although the National Women’s Hospital Ethics Committee had approved Greene’s research, Greene was a member of that committee and the other members were also from the medical community. There were no lay people to provide balance to the view of the importance of furthering medical knowledge (Tolich, 2001). Neither were the women in the research aware they were part of an experiment and had no information about their treatment and therefore had not given written, informed consent. In the wake of the Cartwright Commission “attention turned to ensuring that professionals would never again have the power to ignore ethical considerations” (Snook, 1999, p.71). Similarly it is important in applied social science research to have ethical rigour. Against this background it was important to me that everything possible was done to protect the participants in the research I was undertaking.
Purpose of Ethics Committees

Gaining ethical approval has become an essential practice in tertiary and research organisations before researchers can proceed with any research on human or animal subjects. Larger organisations, such as universities, usually have a committee whose business it is to give ethical approval to research involving human and animal subjects, using guidelines and/or a code of ethics to assist the process. Ethics application forms tend to be comprehensively written to address health and scientific research and are aimed to make sure that those taking part are safeguarded from risk. Ethics committees are currently made up mainly of volunteers, including academics, professionals and members of the public. Usually there is at least one person with expertise in ethical issues, such as a minister of religion (Gauld, 2001). The committee is “generally concerned with three key issues: privacy, consent and harm” (Gauld, 2001, p.114). These issues are commonly encompassed in the code of ethics and/or regulations that the committees use to guide their decisions.

Davidson and Tolich (1999, p.376) suggest that codes of ethics can be “… reduced to a collection of common principles”. They advise that the main aspects are that (a) the research does no harm, (b) there is voluntary participation, (c) anonymity or confidentiality for participants is assured, and (d) researchers avoid deceit and the analysis of the data is reported faithfully.

A key concern of human subjects’ ethics committees is the protection of less powerful or more vulnerable members of society such as children, prisoners, people with disabilities and those living in poverty. Other groups that may need closer consideration are minority and/or indigenous groups as historically indigenous and minority ethnic groups have been researched with little respect or understanding for their cultural practices (Coady, 2001). In New Zealand there is an onus “now on institutions, particularly those funded by the government, to reflect the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi” (Jahnke & Taiapa, 1999, p.44). This means that respect, understanding and thought about the possible effects of the research for Maori should be considered (Snook, 1999).

The role of ethics committees has sparked debate not only in New Zealand but also overseas (Gauld, 2001), with not all being convinced of the need for such vigilant overseeing of research. There has been concern expressed that the scrutiny ethics committees give to methodology is unwarranted. However Gauld (2001, p.115) points out it is difficult to assess the ethics of a proposal without checking to see if the methodology is ethical as if it is “ineffectual this will waste both financial and physical resources of the participants and researchers alike”. Casey (2001, p.120) notes that more recently ethics committees, especially those attached to a university, have also been concerned “to conserve resources and defend itself against uncertainty and risk”. She is concerned that in their efforts to protect universities, ethics committees may limit research. Tolich and Davidson (1999) are worried that the bio-medical model, which has guided ethics committees since the Cartwright Commission, is problematic for social science research. In particular they feel it could limit “the rich diversity of methods and theoretical assumptions otherwise available to social researchers” (p.85).
Coady (2001, p. 71) however believes that “ethics committees are now more sensitive to a range of different paradigms”. These concerns are valid and much depends upon the interpretation of the guidelines and on the people who comprise the ethics committee. However as a student I was reassured the research had been vetted and could take “confidence that [my] research design had been approved by experienced researchers” (Oliver, 2003, p.41). Furthermore the process in my case was ably assisted by members of the ethics committee who ran relevant workshops and provided suggestions for further reading and discussions.

My Experience of the Ethics Application Process

The process of completing the ethics application form was an opportunity to reflect on all aspects of my proposed project and to develop a much more detailed design for my research. For example, as a feminist educator I believed that all research was highly subjective. My chosen methodology was action research with an emphasis on collaboration and power sharing, but I was not sure how this would specifically work with real people. As part of completing the ethics application process I found I had to engage in further reading and reflection on action research. This moved my thinking from vague concepts to a concrete detailed plan for methodology for the data collection stage of the research.

Filling out the ethics application form gave me the opportunity to consider several aspects of my research. There were a number of short organisational questions that required specific decisions on my part, as well as more detailed consideration of procedural sections. Organisational details included length of time of the study, types of and recruitment of participants, the use of audio and video equipment for recording participant responses, and finally how I would store and eventually destroy the data I collected. Working through the responses to these questions enabled me to develop a clear timeline with specific details for each stage.

Procedural questions led me to reconsider my original research aims as in the six months since the research project had been submitted to the doctoral committee my ideas had changed and expanded as I continued to read, reflect and discuss my project with supervisors and peers. The original purpose of the study was to explore bicultural practices in early childhood centres (other than Maori immersion) and to identify ways for teachers to implement effective bicultural programmes. The aims I had developed by the time of ethics approval were:

1. To explore the ways in which bicultural practices are integrated/implemented in mainstream early childhood.
2. To identify ways for early childhood teachers to implement effective ‘bicultural programmes’ in early childhood settings and to overcome barriers to change.
3. To determine early childhood teacher attitudes and beliefs which are barriers or enablers to implementing an effective ‘bicultural programme.’
4. To identify ways to enhance effective bicultural teaching practices in early childhood services.
Specific Ethical Issues in my Research

In my particular study there were several procedural ethical issues to consider, such as researching in relation to knowledge of the indigenous culture – Maori; working with Maori participants; implementing the Treaty of Waitangi; building relationships with participants; the ethics of action research and whether or not to co-research with children as participants.

Because the nature of the research involved investigating the ways in which tikanga Maori and Te Reo Maori were implemented within early childhood centre programmes, the first ethical consideration was in relation to this. As a Pakeha my Maori knowledge and understanding are limited. I also needed to consider the implications of the ethnicity of the teacher participants. Although the research will be carried out in mainstream centres with the majority of the staff likely to Pakeha (although in Auckland there is growing ethnic diversity among teachers), there are likely to also be teachers who are Maori and for whom the process of consultation will be important. It may well be an area of sensitivity for Maori teachers if for example they experienced limited access to Maori culture and language when they were children. As individuals Maori people cannot be expected to be the experts to supply knowledge for everyone else (Manning, 1998).

Over the last two or three decades ‘Maori research’ by non-Maori has been seen as problematic and Eurocentric (Cram, 2001). What is more appropriate is kaupapa Maori research which is by Maori for Maori where the “validity and legitimacy of Maori is taken for granted” (Cram, 2001, p.41). Maori processes and protocol are an intrinsic part of the research. Smith (1999) thought it was unlikely that non-Maori can be part of kaupapa Maori research; although Bishop and Glynn (1999) believe non-Maori can support it. Furthermore they note that these ways of researching “call for self-determination and the associated ideas of collaborative, reciprocal participation will facilitate participants’ control over the initiation of research projects and will guarantee them a say in determining the focus of the benefits of the research” (p.102). Therefore collaboration and consultation will be crucial at all stages of the research, especially prior to commencement. This is seen as preferred way for Maori to communicate (Metge & Kinloch, 1978) as well as being an integral part of bicultural processes. Equally important is the establishment and maintenance of relationships and addressing issues of power and control (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Finally it was important to realise that Maori “knowledge is highly valued and particular types of information were highly prized and tightly regulated” (Jahnke & Taiapa, 1999, p.42).

I established a Maori Advisory Group to guide me through the complexities of attempting to work in bicultural ways - to minimise the tensions of a Pakeha researcher working with Maori knowledge and to be mindful of power relations in this type of research. I thought carefully about the composition of the Maori Advisory Group as I felt it was important to have representation of Maori from both the early childhood field and academia. I therefore asked two lecturers from my own institution to participate – one from early childhood and one from Te Ara Poutama (Maori Studies department). I also invited a colleague who was active in several community groups around Auckland,
a kindergarten teacher and a lecturer from another institution for early childhood teacher education.

I was surprised how difficult it was to ask Maori colleagues to be part of the advisory group. I was mindful of the sheer number of requests they receive from Pakeha and was concerned that I would appear to be yet another person attempting to “dial a powhiri” (Manning, 1998, p.106). This role of being asked to provide token Maori knowledge and protocol for Pakeha was one every member of the group reported they had experienced rather frequently. I wondered what the benefit of being involved in this process might be for them, and subsequently realised in our conversations that it was a wider social benefit of doing something to try to help enhance Maori and Pakeha relationships. The first meeting was planned as an opportunity for everyone to get acquainted, outline my proposal, seek feedback, ask questions, consider being on the advisory group and set up the process for future discussions. During the course of the initial meeting time was needed for each to make relationship connections.

In my chosen methodology of action research there are further ethical considerations. For guidance I looked to Zeni (1988) whose action research drew on a set of questions requiring researchers to consider their role as a participant as well as a researcher. These questions include asking researchers to reflect on the consequences of the research, to put themselves in the position of participants, and to consider what would be needed in order for them to be comfortable with the research. Placing myself in the role of the participants enabled me to be thoughtful about the information and consent forms and how I invited teachers to be part of the research.

When I considered how I would address the issue of anonymity it became clear that anonymity was possibly not even desirable; especially if I believed in power-sharing and was happy for the participants to publicly ‘own’ the research as well. Participants may wish to become co-authors of any subsequently published material. I needed to consider this issue, but I had no clear answers. On the ethics application I stated that no individual or group would be identified without their consent.

Power in relationships is an important issue especially from a Maori perspective (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). The action research process relies on building trust and power sharing between the researcher and participants. Once a centre accepted the invitation to participate, building strong relationships would be essential. This means that as the researcher who was also a teacher educator I needed to take care. I also needed to take care not to presume or decide the specifics of how the research would be undertaken, as this would be cutting across the potential collaborative nature of action research. But at the same time I also needed to acknowledge my own power as a person with some expertise leading the research process. I needed to thoughtfully consider whether my desire for collaboration, was as Patai (1991 cited in Goldstein, 2000) has described of other researchers, nothing more than a sham to make me feel less guilty about exploiting teachers to gain a higher qualification. Whilst I have as an ideal that the research would be carried out collaboratively with the early childhood teachers, it is important to heed Goldstein’s (2000) note of caution. She believes that it is important to define collaborative research, especially if the research is for a doctoral thesis which
needs to be the work of the researcher and therefore may not be fully collaborative. Furthermore she notes that in entering the classrooms of teachers, researchers can potentially exploit those teachers with whom they wish to collaborate. Impositions of time and effort will inevitably be involved, especially when data gathering includes keeping journals and narratives of classroom interactions. Whilst I am focussed on the research, the teachers’ priorities will be in providing the care and education of the children in their centres. In my endeavour to achieve my research agenda I need to do my utmost to avoid becoming an encumbrance. One way for me to alleviate this potentially difficult situation is for bicultural development to be the focus of curriculum planning during the time of the research. This will enable research meetings to be part of centre curriculum planning sessions.

Increasingly giving children a ‘voice’ in research that affects them is a growing trend (Hedges, 2001). Research with children legally requires the consent of their parents or guardians. However in her literature review on this topic Hedges makes the point that the ability of preschool-aged children to understand what is happening to them is often underestimated. She advocates discussing with children what the research is about and gaining their permission (as well as their parents/guardians). Further, she notes that having children’s responses recorded by people who are familiar to the children, such as their teachers, can enhance trust building, which will facilitate the research. Familiar adults, such as teachers, are able to recognise signs of stress and offer further protection to children. As I am currently interested in adult actions, I decided not to pursue researching with children, at least until the pilot study is completed, when I will be in a position to make a more informed decision. Should I decide to include children in future case studies a new ethics application will be necessary. Indeed any changes to the original ethics application will need to be referred back to the ethics committee.

In addition to the ethical issues discussed above there were other considerations that appeared minor but which needed more thought. In response to the organisational questions on the ethics application form I decided that each action research case study would be three months duration. In each case study centre I believed that staff would need to be unanimous in their decision to participate, otherwise early childhood centre teamwork could be jeopardised. These decisions, as well as the one to use audio and photographic equipment to record responses, were then transferred to information and consent forms. Keeping the data safe meant that I obtained a lockable filing cabinet for this purpose.

Conclusion

By the time my application for ethics approval had gone to the committee I felt I had reached the foothills of Everest! There was a long and challenging journey ahead in embarking on my research towards a doctoral qualification but at least I was as well prepared as I could be. I had a detailed map that took into account the many difficulties I might encounter. I had sent my plan to the experts for their consideration, guidance and suggestions to ensure that the participants, I and the tertiary institution would have protection.
The process of making a formal application to the ethics committee was an opportunity to clarify many vague aspects of my proposal. By the time the application was sent off I had met initially with my advisory group and was as clear about the methodology as the planning of an action research study could allow. The research now feels less risky, and a more exciting endeavour. I have considered and am confident that I have done the best that I could at the time to work through issues such as a collaborative methodology, kaupapa Maori research, working with indigenous knowledge, exploitation of teachers and the dynamics of power structures.

I found the process of compiling an application for presentation and approval by the ethics committee helped tremendously in making me more aware of possible potential pitfalls and how to minimise if not completely ameliorate these. I was reassured by the feedback and approval of the ethics committee members that the data collection stage of the research was considered to be ethically sound. However most importantly the process left me with an unswerving understanding of the value ethics committees provide. In the future if I hear fellow researchers complain about the process I will explain my experience and why the ethics approval process should be approached as a positive opportunity to progress and enhance rather than to hinder the progress of research.

References


### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Jenkin is a senior lecturer in the School of Education Te Kura Mātauranga at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT). She has been involved in early childhood education for 29 years, starting with Playcentre. Chris is currently studying towards her doctorate at AUT. She has particular interests in bicultural development, the anti-bias curriculum, family, and society and equity issues.