

# RESEARCH ETHICS CASE STUDIES

## 3. ANTICIPATING THE APPLICATION & UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

**Editor:** Jodie Pennacchia

**Annotated with references to:** BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.).  
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/ethical-guidelines-2018>

### About this series

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BERA's Research Ethics Case Studies series presents illustrative case studies designed to complement BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition (2018) by giving concrete examples of how those guidelines can be applied during the research process.

For a full account of ethical best-practice as recommended by BERA we suggest that researchers refer to our *Ethical Guidelines*, which these case studies are intended to illustrate without themselves offering guidance or recommendations.

Annotations in the right-hand margin of this document indicate where, among the numbered paragraphs of BERA's *Ethical Guidelines*, readers can find our full advice on the issues raised (hyperlinks to the relevant passages are included).

### Background

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Paul has been a teacher of English for 15 years and works in a school that is part of a multi-academy trust (MAT).<sup>1</sup> He is currently pursuing a part-time master's degree in school improvement. Having been struck by statistics that indicate a gradual increase in the proportion of young people requiring additional support to access the curriculum, for his dissertation

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1 Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are groups of schools (largely secondary schools) in England that share a governance structure and are, like all academies, directly funded by the state rather than being controlled and maintained by local authorities. Most academies are part of an MAT. The number of academies, and the proportion of all schools that they account for, have increased dramatically since 2010.

Paul chooses to explore the nature and impact of in-class teaching assistant (TA) support. His aim is to understand how TAs are being deployed in his own school, and how effective that deployment is in terms of supporting students' progress in English and Maths, and fostering wider student engagement and wellbeing.

Paul receives ethical approval, through both his MAT and the university where he is enrolled, for a mixed-methods study. Paul designs this study with input from his academic supervisor, who has been a lecturer for over 30 years and specialises in quantitative analyses of educational equity. Paul performs a secondary analysis of student data that his school collects every half-term, tracking 20 students who have been newly assigned to receive in-class TA support. He also observes interactions between TAs and students, and carries out interviews with a small sample of both, following the consent procedures required by his university. TAs volunteer to participate in the study and Paul creates a writing protocol whereby the names and any revealing characteristics of the TAs are altered or removed to ensure anonymity.

## The ethical dilemma

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Paul's dissertation reports on the full mixed-methods study. His quantitative data analysis shows that, as it is currently being deployed, in-class TA support is having a minimal impact on students' progress in English and mathematics. He draws on anonymised observational data and interviews to describe the role of TAs and the training and support they receive, and to evidence the wider impacts they have, including building positive relationships with students and improving student attendance and wellbeing. He highlights the limitations of his analysis, including the difficulty of accounting for what the case would have been had there been no TA support for these 20 students at this time.

A vice-principal at the school reads Paul's dissertation and asks him to produce some PowerPoint slides summarising his findings (83). The vice principal

*BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (4th edition), paragraph 83, reflects on the importance of research outputs taking account of 'the needs and interests of the communities that were involved in the research'.*

wants to present these at a meeting of the MAT's governing board and senior leadership team, to inform discussions about how to modify the use of TAs across the Trust.

Paul is pleased by this, as he wants his research to be of practical use. He is in the process of applying for a PhD, and his university supervisor advised him that being able to prove his research has had an impact will be viewed favourably by funders. Paul also wants to give back to the MAT, as it facilitated his research, acting as gatekeeper and giving him a reduced teaching timetable, access to the necessary data and opportunities to observe lessons. This was on the understanding that any findings would be relayed back to the MAT (11). Paul also wants to ensure that school resources are used most effectively, and that students who need additional support receive the best possible provision. He is concerned that the ways in which TAs are currently being deployed does not align with the evidence base, which highlights the valuable one-to-one support that well-trained TAs can provide (37). This is a key area of practice that he hopes to influence through both this research and future doctoral research.

However, Paul also has some reservations about how his findings may be used. He is increasingly aware of potential conflicting interests among the many stakeholders in this research (6; 54), and among his own multiple roles as a practitioner, employee, researcher and colleague (19). Paul spends considerable time in the evenings and at the weekend crafting a set of slides that he is satisfied present an accessible, accurate, thorough and contextualised account of his research findings. He describes a number of positive steps that, on the basis of his findings, the MAT could make to support TAs to have more of an impact, including further training. This process is time-consuming and difficult, but after running his finished slides by his academic supervisor, Paul is reassured that he has done his best to mediate the different stakeholder interests.

**Paragraph 11:**

'The institutions and settings within which the research is set also have an interest in the research, and ought to be considered in the process of gaining consent. Researchers should think about whether they should approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants...'

**Paragraph 37** discusses the need to balance the rights of an individual alongside the possible wider benefits of a study.

**Paragraph 6** reflects on the importance of weighing up the potentially conflicting benefits and harm that may stem from research.

**Paragraph 54** reflects on the possible stakeholders and sponsors of research.

**Paragraph 19** reflects on the complexities of research in which the researcher occupies dual roles.

After the meeting of the governors and senior leadership team, Paul discusses the presentation with a staff governor. He discovers that the vice principal, in his presentation, skipped through two of Paul's slides and emphasised Paul's quantitative analysis (which suggested that TAs were having limited effect on student outcomes in English and mathematics). Paul is concerned that his quantitative findings have been decontextualised from the study as a whole, and that the wider outcomes of TA support that are more difficult to quantify – such as improved student wellbeing – have not been conveyed to governors and senior staff (77).

Paul worries about the possible implications of the study for TAs working in the MAT. He is aware that the Trust is looking for ways to achieve savings, and has recently made TA contracts term-time only. He does not want his research to be used to legitimise further staff cuts (34). Paul has professional, and in some cases social, relationships with the TAs. During interviews many of them positioned him as an 'insider' and as someone who understood, and sympathised with, their situation and the job they do. They spoke candidly about the difficulties of the role and the negative impact of the effective pay cut they experienced when their contracts changed (38). They saw him as a colleague who would, through his research, represent their views, and hopefully increase the importance placed on the work they do.

**Paragraph 77:**

'Researchers must not bring research into disrepute by in any way falsifying, distorting, suppressing, selectively reporting or sensationalising their research evidence or findings, either in publications based on that material, or as part of efforts to disseminate or promote that work'

**Paragraph 34:** researchers have a 'responsibility to think through their duty of care in order to recognise potential risks, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise'.

**Paragraph 38** advises the researcher to consider the impact of their research on the lives of participants.

## Course of action

Paul decides to express his concerns to the vice principal. She explains that they had a large agenda to get through in the meeting so only had a short time to spend on the presentation, which meant both moving through his slides very quickly and only offering a brief outline of his research and findings. She also stressed that the priority of the governing board and senior leadership team was to ensure money was spent in ways that would have the biggest positive impact for students, which is why they focussed the discussion on quantifiable student progress. The vice principal agrees to share Paul's slides and his full dissertation report via email

with all governors and senior staff, and consequently Paul feels more reassured that decision-makers in the MAT have at least been able to access all of his research findings.

A couple of weeks after the meeting, senior staff announce that the number of TAs will be halved across the MAT in the forthcoming academic year. The vice principal tells Paul that this development had been likely for some time, and was not a direct result of his study. However, Paul doubts that this is entirely true, and feels very guilty. He is aware of the power and status imbalances in play in his research, and feels that the TAs were relying on him to advocate for the importance of the work they do. However, other aspects of his research were taken on board by the MAT: Paul is pleased to hear that the remaining TAs will be receiving training, and will work in small groups rather than in-class – a feature of effective practice that he highlighted in his literature review.

## Alternative courses of action

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Paul could have refused to create materials for the meeting between senior staff and governors, but this would have been difficult since the school is his employer and had facilitated the research, acting as both stakeholder and gatekeeper. Not only did Paul consider this to be an unethical way to proceed, but he was keen to use the opportunity to highlight how the positive outcomes of spending on student support could be maximised. He was also aware that such a refusal had the potential to affect his own future career development within the MAT (30).

There are a number of things that Paul now thinks, with the benefit of hindsight and greater experience, he could have done differently. He could have presented the slides himself so that he had greater control over how his findings were conveyed. Had he considered, earlier and more fully, the potential consequences of his study, he could have done more to prepare his participants for those potential outcomes as part of the process of them giving voluntary and informed consent (8; 35; 76). He also

### Paragraph 30:

'Researchers should not undertake work in which they can be perceived to have a conflict of interest, or in which self-interest or commercial gain might compromise the objectivity of the research.'

Paragraph 8 reflects on the process of gaining voluntary informed consent from participants in a study.

Paragraph 35 discusses the importance of the researcher communicating possible harm to participants from either the process or the reporting of research as soon as he or she becomes aware of it.

Paragraph 76 concerns instances of research in which the findings are sensitive or controversial, and considers how a researcher can negotiate this with stakeholders.

wonders whether a contract with interested parties – such as the MAT in this case – whereby the terms upon which any outputs are produced and presented is clearly outlined, may be a useful tool in future research. Finally, Paul feels that he would also have benefitted from the support of a supervisor who, alongside a sound methodological knowledge, was more alert to some of particular ethical issues that can stem from practitioner research in schools. This may have enabled him to better anticipate some of the outcomes of his study at a time of constrained school budgets and increasingly precarious contracts for support staff.

## Conclusions

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- Research can involve multiple stakeholders who have a range of different needs and have different expectations of that research. Practitioner-researchers may find that additional expectations are placed on their research, due to their multiple statuses as (for example) practitioner, employee, researcher and colleague.
- Research findings can be used to justify and inform decisions and practices that are contrary to the intentions and values of the researcher, or that create situations in which the researcher must deal with a set of conflicting ethical and moral positions. In Paul's case, the issues stemmed from conflict between his concern for, and professional relationships with, TAs, and his desire for professional advancement in his career through both a doctorate and promotion within the MAT.
- New researchers need support to think through and anticipate the possible outcomes of their research, and to consider how to manage scenarios in which inadvertent harm is caused by their research.

## Questions

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1. Did Paul strike the right balance between considering and accommodating the wellbeing and desires of the various stakeholders in his study?
2. Could Paul have done more to prevent the MAT from cutting the number of TAs? Is this a legitimate objective or concern for him in his capacity as a researcher?
3. Did the MAT act ethically towards Paul, its TAs and/or its students?
4. Should the university where Paul was enrolled for his master's programme have done more to alert him, as a new researcher, to some of the possible outcomes of this type of study?

## Further reading

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Blaikie, N. (2010). Designing social research. In *Designing Social Research* (2nd ed.) (pp.35–55). Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press. See in particular the section on 'Researcher's Stance' (pp. 50–53).

Simons, H. & Usher, R. (2000). *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*. Abingdon: Psychology Press.

### Citation

If referring to or quoting from this document in your own writing, our preferred citation (in APA style) is as follows.

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