

Editorial

# Editorial for Special Issue on Regulation and Ethical Practice for Educational Research

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**Abstract:** The Education Sciences Special Issue, *Regulation and Ethical Practice for Educational Research*, focuses on the ethical aspects of the generation of knowledge in educational research to examine learning, the relationships between learners, educators, organizational leaders and other stakeholders and how those relationships are affected by people's social and cultural backgrounds and contexts. It argues that democratic and situated approaches to research are needed for researchers to consider critically the power imbalances bound up in their relationships with participants and other stakeholders in their projects. This involves finding ways to hear and compare the different voices and perspectives of those in these relationships to address the power imbalance that are inherent when carrying out research.

**Keywords:** ethics; educational research; regulation; moral practice; power



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## 1. Introduction

The Education Sciences Special Issue, *Regulation and Ethical Practice for Educational Research*, focuses on the ethical aspects of the generation of knowledge in educational research to examine learning, the relationships between learners, educators, organizational leaders and other stakeholders and how those relationships are affected by people's social and cultural backgrounds and contexts. It argues that democratic and situated approaches to research are needed for researchers to consider critically the power imbalances bound up in their relationships with participants and other stakeholders in their projects. This would involve them in finding ways to hear and compare the different voices and perspectives of those in these relationships. These power imbalances are particularly acute when research is being carried out between countries in the global North and the global South. The 'global North' includes those countries often with a history of constructing colonialism in the lands and peoples of others, through their deployment of military force, neo-liberal political actions, economic power, and cultural influence. The 'global South', mostly based in South and Central America, Africa and Asia, is rich in cultural heritage. However, each country, region or community will have responded and still be responding, in unique ways, to the domination of the 'global North' through industrial, technical, political and economic structures and processes whilst accommodating their indigenous heritages.

The paper authors in this Special Issue were invited to discuss two specific questions: What are appropriate and effective ethical appraisal and approval practices in specific contexts? How can Ethics Review Committees (ERCs), sometimes called Institutional Review Boards or Ethics Review Boards, effectively support educational researchers and educational research throughout the life of a study? Authors, where relevant, were also invited to reflect on how their experiences relate to a wider international context for ethical practice and regulation. The first two questions can be considered under six headings, three relating to the first question:

- the contexts and focus of the research
- the reasons for and means of undertaking a study
- changing views of participants in research

A further three headings relate to the second question:

- the changing landscape of research
- dilemmas of ethical regulation and sources of conflict with ERCs
- resolution of conflict with ERCs

## **2. What Are Appropriate and Affective Ethical Appraisal and Approval Practices in Specific Contexts?**

### *2.1. The Contexts and Focus of Research*

The authors of articles in this Special Issue discuss a variety of contexts and foci for their research studies. Capewell et al. [1] undertook research during the COVID lockdown which meant that enforced social distancing required different modes of learning, as well as adapting research methods to be able to examine the experiences of the learners remotely. The study noted how greater isolation and changes in society associated with COVID, especially those affecting their education, created greater senses of student uncertainty about their immediate and longer-term futures. The researchers note that, even when on-campus teaching resumed, many students preferred to stay at home and connect to their studies through online platforms. Their study focused on the appropriateness of ethical practices in this context and considered how the ethical process of an educational establishment supported the dynamic and iterative nature of participant-led research. McGregor & Frodsham [2] investigated the juxtaposed processes of teaching and learning which, although related, are not the same, nor are the enactments of a teacher's or learner's agency. Their paper illustrates how the interplay between individuals, the available resources, and structural factors, demonstrates how teachers can be both enabled and constrained by their social and material environments. The authors focus on the ethical dilemmas and concerns that are related to finding out about the nature of agency in classroom learning contexts. To do this they needed evidence of earlier interpersonal classroom interactions that might have influenced and shaped later events. Cascant Sempere et al. [3] point out that many research consortia and partnerships in the international development sector are financed by donors based in the global North, leading to fraught power relationships in contemporary North–South research collaborations, often arising from former colonialism. This, they argue, can lead to research partnerships that are driven and decided by countries in the global North, including the disproportionate influence of the legacy of white European thought and culture.

Three of the papers in this Special Issue do not report research studies, focusing instead on their authors' experiences of the ethical review processes that surrounded, constrained and enabled their projects. Godfrey-Faussett [4] discusses how his research into a school in England was regulated by an ERC. Its processes, he argues, made it difficult for researchers meaningfully to share decision-making with their participants because the processes included the routine anonymisation of data. This is a standard ethical research practice intended to protect participants from harm. However, he argues that this practice conflicts with participatory approaches to research that prioritise shared ownership of a research project and risks silencing participants' voices from research outcomes. Quickfall [5] reflects on the fieldwork phase of her doctoral study in relation to ethical dilemmas which were not anticipated and arose after having gained ERC approval. She refers to critical incidents related to her recruitment strategy using social media and the emotional impact of carrying out interviews which she felt challenged her safety as a researcher. Fox and Busher [6] focus on the regulation of educational research through ERCs (whether institutional, regional and/or national) and how this affects research practice. While recognizing that ethical regulations are intended to help researchers to protect research participants, they argue that ERCs could play an important part in recognizing and

removing barriers to inclusivity and in helping researchers to develop wise understandings of appropriate research practice in particular social and political contexts.

### *2.2. The Reasons for and Means of Undertaking a Study*

Capewell et al. [1] gathered real time understandings of Higher Education students' responses to learning during the pandemic by collecting students' on-going reflexive experiences about issues that they considered to be of personal importance. They put the participants at the centre of their research using a form of Photo-voice methodology that developed through negotiation with the participants. McGregor & Frodsham [2] focus on the ways that teachers and learners in classrooms interact by using observational data to reconstruct a fictional story. They captured the data using audio and video recordings which they then transcribed and analysed into events maps, photographic images, and dialogic episodes to make sense of teachers' and learners' enactment of agency in defined cultural communities and learning contexts. Quickfall's [5] research used a set of life history interviews with teacher-mothers to gain an understanding of their experiences. However, her paper focuses on the implications of carrying out this study, rather than on the study itself, aiming to contribute to thinking about how ERCs and supervisors might effectively support early career researchers. On the other hand, Cascant Sempere et al. [3] used a multi-country research project, coordinated from London, to scrutinise ethics and power relations between researchers and researched as well as within research teams and with ERCs. They used collaborative auto-ethnography, collecting data through regular self-reflective meetings, visual methods, a self-evaluation survey, and blogs to share control over the selection of research topics, the research design, budget, and publications. They wanted to eradicate long-term patterns of power and inequality which, they argue, persist in sustaining a 'colonial' gaze through which, in effect, the global North researches the global South. Godfrey-Faussett [4], too, used a participatory research study to explore tensions with research participants about their lack of involvement in research decision-making. He argues for a dialogic and situational approach to ethics regulation that would allow researchers to involve participants in research decision-making rather than just informing them of decisions supposedly made on their behalf. Fox and Busher discuss how inexperienced and experienced researchers, participants in research projects and gatekeepers and stakeholders of them might be involved in ethical decision-making about research projects by ERCs. Inevitably, in considering these unequal power relationships, they turn their attention to the influence of global North- global South relationships in post-colonial times and how these disparities of power might be addressed.

### *2.3. Changing Views of Participants in Research*

Several of the papers in this Special Issue recognise the agentic nature of research project participants, especially in participatory research. Capewell et al. [1] perceive them as knowledgeable others who need to become co-researchers to create ethical appraisal of and practices in research projects. Their own participants, they explain, wanted their voices to be heard narrating their own images and captions and were willing to attend conference presentations to share their experiences of participation. McGregor & Frodsham [2] make a similar argument, asserting that research project participants have agency and make choices that inform their actions. They give the example of how students and teachers in education enact their choices of practices to learn or guide learners although these choices are constrained by the socio-cultural contexts in which they find themselves. In a related vein, Godfrey-Faussett [4] suggests that carrying out research is a privilege granted by research project participants and not a right that researchers have. This view leads him to argue for participatory research methods that acknowledge the agency of research participants and helps them to feel benefits from taking part in research. He describes this as an ethic of respect for participants and other stakeholders that is asserted in the British Education Research Association (BERA) [7] guidelines (2018). Fox and Busher argue that researchers need to consider critically the power imbalances bound up in the relationships between

learners, educators and stakeholders in identifiable social and cultural contexts and how these imbalances can be addressed through using a variety of research methodologies appropriately. They argue that researchers should create opportunities to gain understanding of those associated with the research setting, by listening, observing, building relationships and, hence, trust. Developing this understanding will help researchers to know better how to include participants, gatekeepers and stakeholders in the research in ways that empower, rather than impose research on them. This understanding can be used to support cases made to ERCs for the approaches chosen for the research and help to educate ERCs about the potential participants, gatekeepers and stakeholders' perspectives in order to support their agency. Neither Cascant Sempere et al. [3] nor Quickfall [5] explicitly offer a changing view of research participants. However, Quickfall focuses on the impact of research participants' behaviours on her as a researcher. She notes how the ERC did not sufficiently alert her to risks of breaches to her privacy and safety from her selected electronic recruitment and data collection methods, something which the wider research community needs to consider carefully.

### **3. How Can ERCs Effectively Support Educational Researchers and Educational Research throughout the Life of a Study?**

#### *3.1. Changing Landscape of Research*

A world in which smartphones and easy access to the internet worldwide has changed the world of research, according to Capewell et al. [1]. Research participants now can and want to play an increasingly active role. For Quickfall [5] this electronic world led to potential participants searching through her social media profile and feed in ways which not only felt as if work-life boundaries had been crossed but also potentially compromised the way she could choose how to engage with the participant as a researcher. As with McGregor & Frodsham [2], Quickfall [5] makes it of central importance that the ethics of data gathering and analysis are considered carefully and conscientiously at each step in a research project. For McGregor & Frodsham [2] this was to map how teachers and learners responded to each other and showed agency in different phases of lessons. Such interactions are in an ecological niche that is defined by the national or international contexts of participants' actions and interactions.

Cascant Sempere et al. [3] consider the current research ecosystem, pointing out that it does not lend itself to shifting power and building more equitable research partnerships. To make that shift, they argue, development donors need to fund more research and research ideas coming from the global South universities and non-academic research institutes and these projects need to acknowledge both the short-term, project-based ethical aspects and those aspects that aim to change unequal social structures. Godfrey-Faussett [4], too, argues for changes in the research eco-system. He wants to promote on-going ethical reflection in research by delaying certain decisions in the life of a research project for later review. This would allow researchers and participants the space and time to re-evaluate and re-negotiate ethical decisions as situations change. This more dialogic, contextual and situational approach to ethical regulation might create wiser researchers than, as currently happens, compelling them to have pre-agreed ethical regulations before a study commences. This is a view with which Quickfall [5] concurs. She points to support being needed in responding to ethical dilemmas as they arise in research and calls for opportunities for on-going advice to be offered, particularly for early career researchers, since studies are unlikely to be conducted risk free. She argues that further support needs to be planned in for such eventualities both in terms of supervisor workload and opportunities for ERC engagement.

Fox and Busher [6] express concern that the differences between personal, local, national and international communities which confront researchers raise questions about whether there are values and practices which can be universally accepted in a single research project. Situated research decisions need to accommodate the richness and complexity of communities affected by a study, even if this means extended negotiations with various communities and stakeholders as part of designing the research. ERCs can support this by

reviewing early and emerging plans for research as more local, research setting perspectives are accommodated to help shape the design. Although guidance on Ethical Action in Global Research has been created, driven by globally agreed sustainable development goals which are applicable for supporting the whole journey of a research project (Reid et al, [8]), this guidance was created by members of a global North based University so should be open to critique and reworking by any in any research settings. Further, as Fox and Busher also note, ethical regulatory systems and practices have been developed by communities in the global South, such as the San people in Sub-Saharan Africa and indigenous communities in Australia, for researchers wishing to approach them to follow.

### 3.2. Dilemmas of Ethical Regulation and Sources of Conflict with ERCs

Capewell et al. [1] think that it is difficult for researchers to navigate an institution's ethical landscape especially when doing participatory research. While ethical codes of practice are necessary, they argue, their implementation is not always appropriate for projects that need a research team to respond to the findings, debates and suggestions made by participants. The institutional ERC overseeing their research informally acknowledged this problem. However, to fulfil its responsibilities their ERC asked the researchers to provide, before the start of their project examples of participants' images/pictures and examples of typical discussion questions. These requests conflicted with the Photo/voice research methods the researchers were using, which asked participants to generate visual and written examples from their own experience which therefore had not yet been generated. McGregor & Frodsham [2] noted the ethical challenges of eliciting evidence which emerged in their research as they tried to make sense of agency without compromising the privacy of their participants. The data they collected through video cameras and Dictaphones to reveal participants' agency intruded on participants' identity and privacy by revealing an individual's thinking, reasoning, decision-making, and meaning making. It raised questions about what was appropriate and ethical for researching teacher and learner agency and how to ensure that participatory engagement could be sensitively handled so that the resultant detailed conversations and interactions could be meticulously captured but presented anonymously. Capturing the raw emotion of human experience was an ethical dimension to data collection for Quickfall [5], too. In her case, it impinged on her well-being as a researcher. Researcher well-being needs to be considered during ethical review and was added to the 4th edition of the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) [7] with a case study published (BERA, 2019) [9] to help bring these issues to wider attention.

Whereas Capewell et al. [1], McGregor & Frodsham [2] and Quickfall [5] discuss research projects carried out in global North countries, Cascant Sempere et al. [3] discuss research projects carried out in several countries, including those in the global South. They argue that, from de-colonial perspectives all countries involved should have an equal say in research decision-making and that the research ethics regulations for multinational research projects should promote this. Unfortunately, they argue, at present the research ethics processes for multi-country research projects tend to focus on technical perspectives, such as the legal aspects of research and not on its daily and contextual challenges. Further, research ethics processes tend to focus on the development of single projects rather than on the ecosystem of research project development, the last of which might challenge imbalances of power in research. These conflicting perspectives led Cascant Sempere et al. [3] into conflict with their ERC because it relied on formal rather than dialogic processes of ethical regulation and did not understand the necessity for diverse international research teams in a project having diverse research methodologies for different political and cultural contexts.

Godfrey-Faussett [4] discusses having ethical dilemmas with an ERC that privileged ethical regulation procedures prior to the start of a research project over participatory approaches to research, thus challenging research participants' ownership of their data and the representation of their voices. To minimise the impact of the ERC's approach the author recruited a steering group of participants to help with data collection and empower

participants' voices. However, Fox and Busher argue that it is understandable why ERCs are risk averse because their central role is to sustain institutional reputations in global North neo-liberal societies. They are nervous about research practices and methodologies that might be perceived as risky, and their thinking is still dominated by protection rather than empowerment of participants. This latter is rooted in the biomedical origins of ethical guidance for research with human participants. Papers in this Special Issue have illustrated this even for studies which aim to maximize benefits to participants, empowering them and building in inclusive practices.

Much of the risk averseness in the global North in recent years is linked to the management of personal data, given the increased rights by citizens for access to and control over data collected and held about them. However, as Godfrey-Faussett notes, there should also be a right for participants and stakeholders in research to be acknowledged if they want to be. This requires knowing the desires of participants and a responsibility for researchers to think through the consequences of their preferences. However, in global South societies ERCs often sit at ministry level. Such hierarchies of permissions of approval may create reduced agency for participants since permission for their participation may be given on their behalf, with an expectation they would agree if practical. Such differences cause tensions in research across cultural contexts (Liamputtong, 2008) [10]. Fox and Busher argue the distribution of power and agency needs to be explicitly recognized in order to exercise post-colonial research ethics regulation perhaps through engaging in greater South–North dialogue.

### 3.3. Resolution of Conflict with ERCs

Like all the authors, Capewell et al. [1] assert the importance of ERCs for maintaining ethical codes which they perceive as necessary to prevent harm to participants. They think that ERCs have an important role to play in requiring researchers to think thoroughly about all elements of the research process from participants' perspectives. Similarly, McGregor & Frodsham [2] think ERCs help to ensure that research is carried out with integrity so that there are benefits from research and that no-one is harmed or made to feel uncomfortable. A caveat to this is offered by Quickfall [5] who calls for ERCs to ensure that risks to researchers are also included in these considerations.

Referring to global South research contexts, Cascant Sempere et al. [3] think that a formal scrutiny of research projects is needed so that ethical frameworks and codes advance a wider vision of ethics. However, this scrutiny, they argue, needs to challenge the research structures and wider research ecosystems that support knowledge hegemonies if knowledge justice is to be achieved. Godfrey-Faussett [4], too, thinks that following ERCs' procedures are necessary even if, by front-loading ethical decisions they might distort an appropriate approach to ethical decision-making for projects using certain research methods. Fox and Busher concur that the regulation of research is needed to both protect and benefit potentially vulnerable learners and other participants in research whilst also helping and supporting researchers in ethical research decision-making. Review by an ERC offers the opportunity to offer checks and balances on proposed research plans, helping a researcher consider the needs of multiple stakeholders, only two of which are the reputations of the ERC and the researcher's institution.

Having recognised the necessity of ERCs, the authors in the Special Issue consider how they might resolve researchers' conflicts with ERCs so that the latter use more inclusive ethical decision-making procedures. The authors also consider how ERCs might better help and support researchers to be wiser in their thinking about the ethics of research. Capewell et al. [1] think ERCs need to be more trusting of researchers but that researchers, in their application for ethical approval, need to earn this trust by showing their expertise in research ethics, either by citing references to a relevant literature or to practices that have been already approved at another institution. However, they also argue that ERCs need to use more inclusive approaches by hearing first-hand the voices of participants, gatekeepers and stakeholders in a research project, as well as being more open to novel

research methodologies. Further, they argue that research projects need to be supported throughout their lives, perhaps using mentoring by experienced members of an ERC, a practice that occurs in some Scandinavian countries. On the other hand, McGregor & Frodsham [2] believe the existing approach of ERCs only needs fine tuning, arguing that it is important that researchers have to face external review of their intended practices and give a robust justification for it so that participants have the opportunity to consider their voluntary participation in all phases of a research project. Like Capewell et al. [1] they think researchers should base their justification for the methods they are proposing to use on an extant literature. Quickfall [5] accepts the need for ERCs but calls for training for doctoral and early career researchers to manage their expectations of ERCs as only offering guidance on anticipating risks, not guarantees on appropriate risk mitigation. Researchers need to expect there will be ethical dilemmas and critical incidents to navigate and that there should be a research culture in place to help resolve these in the most respectful way for all concerned.

From an international perspective, Cascant Sempere et al. [3] argue that ERCs need to become more geographically, culturally and professionally diverse, whether or not they are involved in international research projects, and that it is imperative for ERCs to apply a de-colonial lens to all research codes and frameworks across the research cycle. This, they argue, would help equitably shared global South - global North research designs, budgets, and publications to become a reality. In their paper they suggest eight practical steps towards shifting power in research projects. Godfrey-Faussett [4] makes the case for reflexive and dialogic approaches to ethics regulation to encourage researchers to reflect carefully on their intended processes as well as support the development of their ethical decision-making skills. He argues that if research is going to be carried out in a participatory manner, then ethical decision-making should include participants as active and capable contributors, too. An aspect of this would be to allow researchers to delay key decisions so that an ethical process is constructed that involves participants in making decisions, too. He argues that ERCs are lagging in developing their procedures to facilitate this approach to research ethics reviews but points out that his suggested approach is supported by BERA's [9] latest ethical guidelines.

Fox and Busher argue that researchers and ERCs need to become knowledgeable about local customs and practices, be they in international or local community contexts, to construct and carry out research that is respectful, democratic and perceived by the community in which it occurs to be useful to it as well as to the researcher. This reflects the four main principles of research practice set out in the Global Code of Conduct [11] in 2020, being: Fairness; Respect; Care; and Honesty. It makes clear how and why ERCs, especially those in the global North should be respectful of the views of others and should develop codes of ethical practice and procedures *with* rather than *on* communities whether marginalised or not. However, such principles can only be enacted through multi-stage ethical approval processes using situated research ethical regulation based on epistemic justice. In these processes, Fox and Busher argue, researchers playing a pivotal role between those in potential research sites and those responsible for approving research, to ensure research design is not only appropriate for but indeed welcomed by those in the research setting. This approach requires ERCs to use a full range of research methodologies without any being considered too risky per se, and to engage in dialogue with researchers, firstly in a mentoring and advisory role, and then in an on-going supervisory role, monitoring projects ethically throughout their lives.

#### 4. Summation

The Education Sciences Special Issue, *Regulation and Ethical Practice for Educational Research*, focuses on the generation of knowledge needed in educational research. It calls for researcher awareness and democratic action which supports research to be created in a manner appropriate to its local and national contexts. It also, necessarily, makes the case for shifting the locus of power when making ethical judgements about proposed

research projects especially within the broader context of the decolonization of knowledge production that emanates from the imbalances of power generated by neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism. Although the neo-liberal approach, so prioritized in the global North (Mignolo, 2002) [12], is based on faith in free-market capitalism that is encouraged by political deregulation of trade, it is not as 'free' a market as this conceptualization implies because of the geo-political power imbalances, sometimes referred to as neo-imperialism (Connell and Dados, 2014) [13] between global North and global South. A combination of direct knowledge held by the researcher of those in their research setting with the wider knowledge of research ethics held by members of ERCs can offer effective regulation of research practice. This requires all involved to demonstrate: a willingness towards engaging in dialogue with one another; open-mindedness to learn from one another; and a commitment to de-colonisation by redressing imbalances of power distribution wherever they are located.

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