

Roles, rights, and responsibilities

The 3 Rs of Research in Child Care

by Barbara B. Rosenquest

As preschools, child care centers, family child care, Head Start, and school-age programs become the sites for research studies, teachers and directors become partners in the projects. The involvement of program personnel in educational research studies ranges from being the subjects of an investigation, to facilitating access to children or a classroom, to becoming researchers of their own practice. In each situation, it is important for teachers and directors to understand the roles, rights, and responsibilities that accompany participation in educational research. The purpose of this article is to delineate three levels of participation for classroom employees in educational research and to present the issues that must be considered at each level.

Child Care Employees as Research Subjects

Individuals doing a small study or a team of researchers involved in a larger project may approach your program to solicit your participation. They may be interested in using your staff, families, or classrooms to examine curriculum, teaching, or how children learn and develop. In order for you to determine if

the study is reliable, there are two essential resources to guide your decision. The American Psychological Association (APA) publishes a set of guidelines that researchers routinely follow to ensure that studies meet ethical standards. The latest version of the guidelines is available from the association (see apa.org/ethics/code.html) and it can be provided to the administrative and teaching staff by the research team.

In addition to the APA Guidelines, projects that are associated with a college or university customarily undergo an internal review of the research proposal by the institution. Most colleges and universities have an Institutional Review Board that requires faculty to obtain approval for projects based upon the methods that will be used to recruit subjects, plans to ensure confidentiality, and the name of a contact person who will be responsible for supervising the project.

At the first meeting with the research team, the primary investigator should summarize the purpose of the project, the procedures for conducting the study, and any potential drawbacks inherent in participating. Obstacles to participation can include additional time commitments, public disclosures, and possible financial consequences, such as a requirement to purchase materials or the use of personal health insurance to cover medical testing. Although physical or emotional injury is normally unlikely, specifically ask if there may be difficulties involved in participation and inquire if resources would be provided should an employee experience any distress. The overview of the study and

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the listing of potential drawbacks and advantages in participating must be supplied in writing, usually as part of a consent form that you will receive prior to the beginning of the study.

The first and most important right of every research subject is the right to refuse to participate. All participation must be voluntary. In addition to agreeing to voluntary participation, you have the right to withdraw from a study at any time without any concern about negative consequences. The consent form should state that the teacher or director has freely decided to become a subject in a project and it should describe procedures for withdrawing. In agreeing to participate, you also have the right to expect that any information collected, stored, and used in the study will be kept private and that confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained.

Teachers and administrators must also follow ethical guidelines for maintaining confidentiality while the study is being conducted. It will be important to the research team that program personnel not solicit information while the study is being conducted that could affect results. Direct any questions to the research team with the expectation that any reasonable requests for information will be answered. If anyone should become concerned about the conduct of a study, the first step is to discuss the matter with program administrators and decide whether there should be further discussion with the research supervisors. If concerns persist, then follow the procedures for withdrawing from the project.

Subjects in Research Studies

Teachers and directors have a right to:

- Know potential risks and benefits in participating.
- Participate voluntarily.
- Provide or withhold written consent.

- Withdraw without negative consequences.
- Expect confidentiality/anonymity.

Responsibilities for child care employees as research subjects include:

- Following ethical guidelines for the study.
- Maintaining confidentiality about the study.
- Avoiding ideas or information that could interfere with the study.
- Raising any concerns about the study with program administrators and project supervisors.

Things to do as a subject of a research study:

- Meet with the research team to discuss the project.
- Obtain a copy of the consent form and examine it for explanations about voluntary participation, risks and benefits, and procedures for withdrawing.
- Have program administration contact the institutional review board to ensure approval if it is a university/college-based study.

Child Care Employees as Facilitators for Others Conducting Studies

Even when a study does not directly examine the actions and behavior of a teacher or director, its success is still dependent upon the cooperation of program personnel. Administrators, teachers, and families should all participate in the decision to allow outside investigators access to a classroom. Your role in facilitating a research study is to ensure that the project only minimally disrupts on-going classroom routines and that it has little effect on the lives of the children and their parents. Before entering the classroom and meeting the children, investigators should spend enough time with you to build trusting

relationships and to make certain that all questions and concerns have been addressed. It is always in everyone's best interest for there to be open and respectful communication between the program team and the research team.

You may find that you become the conduit in forwarding questions from parents to the research team. As intermediaries in a research project, you may be called upon to introduce and explain the study to the children, confer with parents, adjust teaching schedules, and modify the classroom in ways that allow the project to succeed.

Research that involves children obviously requires extra precautions. Obtaining the consent of family members to allow researchers in a classroom goes beyond gathering signatures on a form. It can be a lengthy process. Because you know the families, you may want input into how the consent form is written to make sure that parents understand what is being asked. You can discuss with the researcher your role in either distributing and collecting the consent forms, submitting a list of parents who volunteer to participate, or arranging for a meeting of parents who are interested and inviting the researcher. All consent forms must be signed and returned before a study begins.

Teachers, parents, and the research team must all agree upon how the study will be explained to the children. Investigators should make themselves available to families during the study to explain the project as it moves forward and, whenever possible, to share some of the findings at its conclusion. It is appropriate that you keep a watchful eye to ensure that the project unfolds as planned and that families are kept informed. You will play an essential role overseeing that data is collected and stored as planned.

The role of a facilitator for a study comes with explicit responsibilities. You must continue to follow procedures that maintain confidentiality. It is ultimately your responsibility to raise questions if the project is a concern for the children or family members. In a well-designed and well-supervised study, unforeseen consequences are rare events. Should there be unfortunate events, follow the protocol established in the consent form to discuss concerns within the program and with project supervisors.

Teachers and administrators who facilitate research projects often enjoy their association with investigators. Collaborating with investigators can lead to new professional relationships and access to university resources and faculty expertise. Researchers can assist with inservice programs or become speakers at a family night. Some projects automatically bring with them new materials as donations to classrooms. Watching a project unfold can demystify the research process in ways that make educators more critical consumers of educational research. It can lead to reflection on various aspects of professional development or raise questions that could become research projects for teachers, group leaders, or administrators.

Facilitators of Research Studies

Teachers and directors have a right to:

- A complete overview of the project, including how data is collected and stored.
- Provide input into the consent process.
- Request additional information from investigators.
- Work with investigators to keep families informed.
- Inquire about contributions toward program resources in return for providing access to the program.

Responsibilities for child care employees as facilitators in educational research include:

- Following ethical guidelines for the study.
- Ensuring that the study is explained in ways that children and families can understand.
- Integrating the research team into the classroom including managing access to the children in the classroom.
- Maintaining confidentiality about the study.
- Keeping children and families informed on the progress of the study by maintaining communication with the research team.
- Raising any concerns about the study with program administration and project supervisors.

Things to do if child care staff are asked to facilitate a research study:

- Meet as a staff to review the study methodology and consent form.
- Arrange for a meeting of the families with the research team.
- Meet as a staff to plan with families how to introduce the study to the program.
- Schedule periodic updates from the research team.
- Provide a secure area of the program to store study materials if needed.

Child Care Employees as Researchers

When teachers and directors become researchers of their own practice, they realize that decisions made every day are important in generating scholarship on how children learn and develop (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1992). The practical wisdom inherent in daily events can be collected, summarized, and combined with other data to produce insights that are applicable across practitioners and early childhood settings. By systematically gathering information from your

own practice, you can make important contributions to the profession.

Classroom personnel already think and act like researchers in many important ways. Data collection through recording observations, saving minutes from meetings, or collecting examples of children's work is an ongoing component of all teaching and program administration. When trying a new teaching strategy, noticing a child's behavior, or speaking with parents or colleagues, new ideas often surface that could be formulated into viable research questions. To become a researcher, you need only organize your thinking and collect data to answer a specific question in a systematic way. This will allow you to arrive at insights that are useful in your own practice and that are worth sharing with others in the field.

When program personnel are also researchers, they have responsibilities beyond those of personnel operating as research subjects or as facilitators for studies by outside investigators. As a researcher, you are now directly accountable for upholding conventional research ethics, including following APA guidelines and obtaining approval from an institutional review board if the project is sponsored through a local college or university. You can explain a study thoroughly and be candid about its impact on the program. Daily contact with families and colleagues means that you can be readily available to answer questions and to provide additional information as requested.

From a perspective within the program, you will be acutely aware of factors that will influence how a study is conducted and you must be careful to avoid problematic situations. When obtaining voluntary consent from participants and program personnel, be careful that your requests are not misinterpreted. Make sure that families and colleagues are aware that they can refuse to participate

in a study and that their decisions will not positively or negatively influence collegial relationships or the care and education of any child. Be clear when paperwork or routine conversations are liable to become data. Store data and artifacts, such as children's work or written communication with families, in a restricted area that is separate from routine storage of classroom materials.

Finally, clearly identify the program administrators who will act as impartial channels should there ever be objections to your study. If you encounter decisions around gathering data or interpreting results that are at odds with the interests of families or the program, your first responsibility is to uphold the quality of the care and education offered by the program. The first principle of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct has authority over all other ethical principles: "First do no harm" (Feeney and Kipnis, 1989).

Employees-as-Researchers

Teachers and directors have a right to:

- Reflect on their own practice to enhance their skills and knowledge.
- Develop relationships with colleagues in the field and at local universities/colleges.
- Explore applied research as a means of professional development.
- Request time and consideration from colleagues and supervisors to conduct an applied research study.

Responsibilities for employees-as-researchers include:

- Following APA ethical guidelines for the study and submitting the study proposal for appropriate review.
- Upholding the interests of the program and families above the interests or needs of the research study.
- Explaining the impact, risks, and consent process in the proposed study in

ways that children and families can understand.

- Maintaining confidentiality about the study.
- Keeping children and families informed on the progress of the study by maintaining communication with the research team.
- Storing research materials in an area separate from the storage of day-to-day classroom materials.
- Answering requests for additional information on the study.
- Supplying an unbiased contact person for colleagues or families to anonymously speak to express concerns.
- Changing or ending a study if requested by families or program personnel.

Things to do if employees are engaged in a research study:

- Meet with staff and families to review the study methodology and consent form.
- Engage additional resources to support employee-as-researcher studies.
- Schedule periodic updates to keep families and colleagues informed on the progress of the study.
- Designate a secure area of the program to store study materials.
- Clearly notify colleagues and families during any episodes of data collection.

The Role of the Director in Managing Research Projects

Program administrators are the glue that connects research projects to program families and personnel. As protectors of program integrity, directors ensure that all parties engaged in a research project are well aware of the roles, rights, and responsibilities that accompany their participation. Supervision includes insisting that a study is thoroughly explained, participation is completely voluntary, and privacy and confidentiality are strictly maintained. The leadership of directors can support studies as a medium for

collective inquiry and to generate research to identify quality services.

The enthusiasm that directors generate around research projects can spread throughout the program. Directors can organize a cohort of teachers to pursue a question as part of an approach to staff improvement. They can provide incentives for collaborative projects and time for reflection and communal inquiry. Professionals can be selected for inservice programs based upon their expertise in a research question. Finally, results of on-site studies can be shared through letters to parents, in program newsletters, at workshops and conferences, and even through professional publications.

Becoming a researcher may be mostly a matter of picturing a new role. Directors can model an encouraging outlook towards research by openly questioning and investigating their own practice. When teachers and directors are researchers, they are able to examine their skills and make productive changes in their own practice while producing knowledge that may be of value to others. Without the support of administrators, educational research will not capitalize on its potential to enrich services for families, children, and staff. With the support of administrators, involvement in educational research can help create a professional community of learners that will benefit all.

References

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