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Research ethics case studies

Negotiating power, participation & dissent with young-researchers in community dissemination

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ANNOTATED WITH REFERENCES TO:

BERA'S ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (FIFTH EDITION)

ABOUT THIS SERIES

SERIES EDITORS: SIN WANG CHONG & ALISON FOX

BERA's Research Ethics Case Studies complement BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fifth edition (2024) 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, researchers should 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 full advice on the issues raised. Extended versions of the case studies will feature in a forthcoming book to be published in 2025 in partnership between BERA and Bloomsbury, *Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Research*.

Background

Nadine is a practising home educator who has spent the last three years pursuing a doctorate in alternative education. Following the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),¹ Nadine has supported four young people (aged 13–16 years) as co-researchers to jointly plan, co-design and conduct their own personalised qualitative research projects on their lived experiences of being home-educated. The young-researchers collected their data using interviews and multiple visual and creative methods, including vlogs, blogs and visual boards. To foster high levels of autonomy, participation and inclusion, Nadine has facilitated several training workshops for the young-researchers. Topics covered include: research design principles, qualitative interviewing, thematic analysis, research ethics and community dissemination. As the young-researchers' individualised data generation nears completion, an opportunity arises to co-plan and disseminate their research findings to an influential community of stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners and academic researchers, via a large cross-university hybrid event (70, 72, 81). Nadine

BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (fifth edition): 'Researchers have a responsibility to make the results of their research available for the benefit of educational professionals, policymakers and the wider public' ([paragraph 70](#)) and to make research findings accessible outside of academia ([paragraph 72](#)) while considering the needs and interests of those involved through the 'format(s) in which research is published, and the means by which those publications are disseminated' ([paragraph 81](#)).

discusses this opportunity verbally with the young-researchers, their parents, her supervisors and the event organisers (6). She follows the ethical protocols and risk assessment procedures stipulated by the university ethics committee, which has approved the project, and secures written consent for participation from the young-researchers' legal guardians.

To ensure informed consent (28) before the hybrid event, Nadine facilitates multiple meetings with the young-researchers and their parents on: privacy and the ownership of their data; their preferences for anonymity; and the risks and benefits of a recorded hybrid event for the group's digital footprint (35, 36). Over the next eight weeks, Nadine and the young-researchers meet regularly to plan and practise their personalised presentations. Group workshops cover online audience engagement, the young-researchers' preferred medium and mode of presentation communication, and anonymisation procedures. Nadine facilitates mock presentations and provides ongoing one-to-one and group support to each young-researcher (9, 10). Throughout the preparation, Nadine upholds participatory research principles (Mann et al., 2014) and children's rights, prioritising the young-researchers' voices and agency in disseminating their findings effectively and safely. She co-ordinates communication between the group, event host institutions and the young-researchers' parents, ensuring all parties have a shared understanding and consent to their participation.

The group of four young-researchers prepare and intend to deliver their individual presentations alongside digital artefacts, including two slideshow presentations, a digital storytelling application presentation and a digital research poster. Nadine allocates time and offers light refreshments before and after the presentations to provide a supportive environment for the young-researchers. The approach taken offers informal opportunities for participants to alleviate their pre-presentation nerves and to address any last-minute questions. This arrangement aims to enhance the participants' comfort and overall experience, allowing them to navigate the research presentation process congruent with their individual needs. Nadine has also arranged for a nominated 'responsible other' to be present outside the teaching room should any young-researcher need to take a break or withdraw from the event. Nadine follows her university's safeguarding policy (11) and the young-researchers agree to present their research synchronously with Nadine in a teaching room on a university campus (81). She has also invested in a 360-degree camera and has delegated parts of the technical management of the online meeting space (as agreed with the university information security team) to an event host institution (a research centre at another university) (34). The young-researchers are excited, well prepared and looking forward to the event.

Nadine demonstrates a thorough consideration of ethical principles related to data use, consent, participant engagement and maximising benefits while minimising harms, as outlined in **paragraph 6**: 'Researchers also have a responsibility to put in place ways of maximising the benefits and minimising the likelihood of any potential harms to participants, sponsors, the community of educational researchers and educational professionals and the environment more widely.'

Paragraph 28: 'Principles of consent also apply to possible reuse of data. There are two relevant categories of such reuse: secondary data analysis by the same research team to address new research questions; or the sharing of the dataset for use by other researchers.'

Nadine's explanation to the parents and young people about the risks involved in leaving a digital footprint aligns with ethical principles of transparency, duty of care, minimising harm and balancing individual rights with the public good. Additionally, '[r]esearchers should make known to the participants (or their guardians or responsible others) any predictable disadvantage or harm potentially arising from the process or reporting of the research' (**paragraph 35**) and '[t]he rights of individuals should be borne in mind along with any potential social benefits of the research' (**paragraph 36**).

Paragraph 9: 'Researchers should do what they can to ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they are able, what is involved in a study.'

Paragraph 10: 'Participants may be willing to take part in research even though they are unable to be fully informed about the implications of their participation'.

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 adopt an institution's own ... safeguarding procedures; this is usually a requirement.'

Paragraph 81: 'The format(s) in which research is published, and the means by which those publications are disseminated, should take into account the needs and interests of the communities that were involved in the research.'

Paragraph 34: 'Ethical research design and implementation aim to put participants at their ease and to avoid making excessive demands on them.'

The ethical dilemma

The hybrid event commences. As planned, the group sits around a table, with Nadine positioned at the centre and managing the camera. The young-researchers can see a large screen on the wall displaying their presentation and the names of attendees, but they cannot see the video feed of the 80 people in attendance online. Two young-researchers successfully present to the live audience in the order and mode agreed. However, when the third young-researcher, called Ali, is about to begin, Nadine notices that he suddenly seems uncomfortable (8, 34). She quickly realises that Ali has just seen his parent's name appear on the large display screen on the wall. Before the event, it was discussed and agreed that Ali's preference for his parent not to attend the event online or in person would be upheld. The 360-degree rotating camera is poised to capture Ali's presentation, heightening tension.

Although withdrawal before the event was discussed in their planning, Nadine did not anticipate this unintended risk. Additionally, as the online event lobby is being managed by the event organiser, Nadine had no forewarning of Ali's parent's entry into the online meeting space (43, 44). Nadine does not have a backup plan. She feels this young-researcher has important findings to share that would give a unique insight in this rare opportunity with an influential audience, including a Department for Education (England) representative (36, 70). If Ali does not present, Nadine worries that he may feel disappointed, having invested so much time and energy in preparing for this moment. Nadine recognises that she needs to respond promptly to maintain the ethical integrity of the participatory principles of her co-researcher positionality (59).

Course of action

In response to his non-verbal cues of dissent, Nadine immediately redirects the camera away from Ali's presentation slides to focus on her face, announcing technical difficulties to the online audience. Nadine then turns off the camera and mutes the microphone to speak to Ali. She feels it would be unethical to compel Ali to narrate his presentation verbally, as initially planned, and thinks it is important to respect his non-verbal cues of dissent irrespective of his reasons (31). In this moment, Nadine is also very aware of the material space and group environment they share. She is concerned that this young-researcher might feel compelled socially to conform and present (20). She is also aware of Ali's distinctive way of engaging with learning material and his preference for alternative learning methods. When working through the research project and preparing for this event, Nadine learned that Ali sometimes finds it difficult to engage with traditional text-based learning methods and lacks confidence in public speaking. Although it seems that the preparation sessions helped him to overcome this, she believes it may also be a factor in Ali's reaction.

Nadine considers these possibilities rapidly and judges that Ali's dissent is rooted in nerves triggered by his parent's unexpected online presence, indicating a need for her support rather than being silenced. Verbally, she reassures Ali of the quality, impact and significance of his presentation. She then offers Ali a range of choices for what he could do next, including:

Paragraph 8: 'Researchers should be alert to non-verbal signs that individuals who previously consented to participate may no longer wish to. In such circumstances, renewed consent should be sought.' If harm arises from participation in research, researchers should 'immediately reconsider any actions' in light of their responsibility for protection (paragraph 34).

Paragraph 43: 'In cases where participants are anonymised, researchers should be aware of the possible consequences to participants should it prove possible for them to be identified by association or inference.'

Paragraph 44: 'Researchers need to be aware that participants' understandings of their level of privacy in a particular place, especially in online spaces, may be inaccurate.'

Paragraph 36: 'The rights of individuals should be borne in mind along with any potential social benefits of the research, and the researcher's right to conduct research in the service of public understanding.'

Paragraph 70: 'Educational researchers should communicate their findings, and the practical significance of their research, in a clear, straightforward fashion, and in language judged appropriate to the intended audience(s). Researchers have a responsibility to make the results of their research available for the benefit of educational professionals, policymakers and the wider public.'

Paragraph 59: 'All educational researchers should aim to protect the integrity and reputation of educational research by ensuring that they conduct their research to the highest standards. Researchers should contribute to the community spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism that generates improvement in practice and enhancement of knowledge.'

Paragraph 31: 'Researchers should recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and participants should be informed of this right.'

Paragraph 20: 'In some cases, potential participants may not be in a social position vis-à-vis the researcher that enables them to give voluntary informed consent.'

moving to the next item on the programme, taking a break or a complete withdrawal (31). Ali verbally asks Nadine to present his digital research artefacts on his behalf and to use his chosen pseudonym while doing so (39). Nadine interprets this verbal exchange as a renewal of his consent (23). She turns the camera and microphone back on and verbally narrates Ali's research findings and conclusions to the online audience, thereby aiming to honour his contribution while respecting his autonomy and preferences.

Alternative courses of action

Nadine was sensitive and attuned to this young-researcher's non-verbal expression of dissent. This was predicated on the trust and rapport she had established with the group in the months preceding the event. In this temporary and relationally situated context between the physical space of a university classroom and an online meeting room, group communication and participation evolved dynamically, impacting the researcher-participant relationship and the planned and 'unintended' dissemination process.

Nadine might have interpreted Ali's cues of dissent as rooted in pressures to conform to social expectations and the asymmetric power relationship between the adult co-researcher and the audience. In this context, Ali's verbal consent renewal could have been considered impossible to give (20). Instead, Nadine could have proceeded to manage an active withdrawal from the dissemination of any artefacts belonging to this young-researcher, either directly or narrated on his behalf. In their brief verbal exchange, Nadine could therefore have further emphasised the option to abstain amidst the other options that she provided. However, managing a full withdrawal in this context would have created new risks and other potential harms within an intra-group dynamic of non-participating and participating young-researchers. This includes the risk of the non-presenting young-researcher experiencing feelings of inferiority, heightened anxiety and diminished self-confidence compared to his presenting young-researcher peers. Managing a full withdrawal while potentially mitigating these individual risks could have introduced new challenges, such as perceived exclusion or reinforcement of the non-presenting researcher's sense of inadequacy. This scenario underscores the complex interplay between individual participant wellbeing and group cohesion in participatory research with young people, highlighting the need for nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to ethical decision-making.

Nadine thought that she had prepared for every ethical risk, but her fluid participatory research approach reconfigured a multi-layered context for unanticipated risks to surface. Participant consent, dissent and assent are not absolutes, but a continuum of communication expressed in diverse ways. The opportunities and benefits of disseminating participatory research to reach wider community audiences (54) across online and offline spaces, where the young-researchers were given high levels of autonomy, created complex ethical issues. In this case, Nadine pivoted to low levels of participation to protect Ali by presenting on his behalf. Reflecting on her role and actions, Nadine realises that this decision-making was heavily influenced by her insider position (19). This led to an inclination to advocate for the representation of knowledge and experiences of the young-

Paragraph 31: 'In most cases the appropriate course of action will simply be for the researchers to accept a participant's decision to withdraw, but there are circumstances in which researchers can appropriately discuss with the participant whether a course of action might be taken that would enable the participant to re-engage. Any decision to attempt to persuade a participant to re-engage should be taken with care.'

Paragraph 39: 'Researchers should recognise the entitlement of both institutions and individual participants to privacy. This could involve anonymisation, pseudonymisation or employing "fictionalising" approaches when reporting ... Researchers should recognise the right of participants to be identified as the originator of their own work if they so wish.'

Paragraph 23: 'Principles of consent apply to children and young people as well as to adults.'

Paragraph 20: 'In some cases, potential participants may not be in a social position vis-à-vis the researcher that enables them to give voluntary informed consent ... Researchers need to consider carefully how to deal with such situations and, if possible, should reassure potential participants that non-participation is entirely acceptable.'

Paragraph 54: 'Researchers should consider the implications of their research for the global community and the environment ... This includes such specifics as the amount and type of travel, the nature of the food at meetings and dissemination events, and more fundamental questions about the actual research, for example, and the purposes for which it is undertaken.'

Paragraph 19: 'An important consideration is the extent to which a researcher's reflective research into their own practice impinges upon others – for example, in the case of power relationships arising from the dual roles of teacher/lecturer/manager and researcher.'

researchers, who she felt were frequently excluded from broader public discourses about education (37). While this positioning reinforced her belief in supporting young-researcher autonomy, it simultaneously brought into tension balancing this with her duty to protect the young-researchers from a wide array of incidental and unanticipated risks and harms in this hybrid community dissemination context.

Paragraph 37: '[R]esearchers should do what they can to ensure that relevant individuals and communities are not, intentionally or otherwise, excluded from participation in their research.'

Conclusion

This case study highlights the nuanced nature of participation preferences and the ethical considerations surrounding autonomy, consent and dissent in community research dissemination with young-researchers. Importantly:

- Dissent, assent and consent are non-binary continuums that must be reflexively considered across all stages of research, including community dissemination.
- The case study underscores the necessity to adapt modes and levels of participation both before and during live dissemination events to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. This adaptive approach must respond to the power dynamics at play and the complexities of the shifting nature of non-verbal and verbal communication.
- It demonstrates the importance and the need for researchers to engage in open dialogue with participants and institutions, to respect their autonomy, and to carefully consider the implications of consent and dissent taking into account participants' individual preferences and the broader ethical principles of the UNCRC that guide research practice with children and young people.
- It reinforces the need for researchers to see and enact consent as a relational and ongoing process through all phases of a research project and to maintain ethical reflexivity and flexibility in community dissemination practices, ultimately ensuring the ethical integrity and meaningful social benefit of all stakeholders.

Questions for discussion

1. Did Nadine strike the right balance between participation, inclusion and protection in response to the young-researcher's unanticipated dissent during the event?
2. In what ways did Nadine's power and the context of presenting in a physical university teaching room and online to a large public audience impact young-researchers' consent during the event?
3. What additional steps could Nadine and the event host organisers have planned to prepare the young-researchers for potential parental involvement and other risks inherent to an event held in an online public space?
4. What are the risks post-event for the young-researcher who dissented, and what ethical responsibilities does Nadine now have to debrief and renew his consent for storing and publishing the event recording?
5. In what ways could Nadine have redesigned and co-planned the hybrid event with asynchronous elements and synchronous audience participation to include and protect the individual needs, preferences and confidentiality of the young-researchers?

Further reading

Alderson, P., & Morrow, V. (2011). *The ethics of research with children and young people: A practical handbook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

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UNICEF. (1989). *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

Notes

¹Article 12 of the UNCRC grants children the right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, with due consideration given to their age and maturity. They should also have the opportunity to be heard in legal proceedings. Article 13 of the UNCRC guarantees children the freedom of expression, allowing them to seek, receive and share information and ideas without restriction, regardless of borders or media. (UNICEF, 1989)

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