

The ethics and integrity of research with schools, families and communities

[Perspective Article](#)

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Introduction: The issues of maintaining research integrity and addressing ethical educational research dilemmas

Concerns surrounding the ethics and integrity of research with schools, families and communities is one of many enduring debates within educational research. We already know that it is essential that researchers carefully consider all the ethical issues that relate to research, from conception to dissemination (informed consent, participation, privacy, vulnerability, truth, etc.), in order to guide robust meaningful research. Moreover, considering these ethical issues is relevant

for all stakeholders to feel protected and have increased trust in the research process. Therefore, this paper aims to offer the reader an overview of how research circles (RCs), as a tool for participatory action research (Persson, 2009), can be used as an ethical methodological research approach with educational settings, families and communities.

The main principles guiding RCs include democracy, empowerment, social context and agency (see **Figure 1**). The first principle refers to the *democratic* nature of RCs, as all involved participants are equals (Högdin and Kjellman, 2014). Given that our key aim is ‘to carry out research together with – not on – the participants’ (Svensson, 2002, cited in Bergman, 2014, p. 7), including everyone as equal partners in each RC project is vital. The second principle is the *empowering* nature of RCs, which is rooted in the reciprocal dialogue among participants at each stage and the source of their knowledge and learning (Freire et al., 2018). The third principle is the specific *social context* and related issues underpinning collaborative knowledge creation with RC participants – the context is what matters. Our RC models are considered a bridge between educational practice and theory (Lundgren, 1999) to support all stakeholders.

As such, all stakeholders within their individual social context are *agents* actively involved in making collaborative choices regarding the research phases (including the initial research idea, the number and elaboration of research questions, data collection, analysis, report writing and dissemination formats).



Figure 1: RC principles for research integrity

Following these principles, our RC models provide the distinct advantage of navigating and mitigating common ethical issues and maintaining the integrity of the whole research process – starting from the initial research idea and including the report-writing phases and final dissemination. The mutual participatory nature of our RC projects helps to ensure that all ethical issues, such as the lack of truly informed participant consent, confidentiality breaches (Cohen et al., 2007) or the research itself being imposed onto all participants (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014), are readily sustained.

The most important feature of our RC projects is research integrity, meaning that the focus of any research has strong moral grounding, including honesty, completeness and uniqueness, and considers all stakeholder viewpoints – agency and intentionality.

Therefore, it is essential that viewpoints, actions and the effectiveness of the provision include all stakeholders' honest voices. Here, the RC principle of the 'circle as a collaborative space' aids all stakeholders in understanding and adhering to the research integrity principles of openness, sensitivity and scientific impartiality (Cohen et al., 2007). This is obviously easier said than done. The main principles of democracy, agency and power of knowledge (Holmstrand et al., 2008) support the many ongoing ethical issues within our RC projects.

The next section will illustrate one particular RC case study, exploring the impact on children's development of a specialist autism provision within a UK primary school.

The research circle as an ethical research method: An exploration of the impact of specialist autism provision within a UK primary school

Study aims

The aim of this RC was to explore the impact of the newly implemented autism spectrum disorder (ASD) specialist provision at the school, in response to the growing needs of parents and families in the local community. Children are referred to the provision by the local authority, as no specialised provision is currently available in this area. Children attend the provision five days a week, from 9am to 2.30pm. The provision is physically and structurally connected to the mainstream primary school; however, the children are accommodated in separate units with distinct curricula and professional staff.

Participants

Participants in this study are the children attending the autism provision, the parents, carers and families of children attending the provision, the educators who teach in the mainstream school and the educators within the specialised provision. All stakeholders were involved in the RC meetings and discussions prior to and after ethical approval, to ensure that all voices and opinions were shared.

Methodology

Assessment of children's progress

The educators within the autism provision have identified social communication and social interaction as the two areas that the school wishes to assess. An assessment criterion called 'B Squared' evaluated the children's social communication and interaction at three time points: at

the beginning of the study period, at a six-month interval and finally at the end of the 12-month RC study. These observations were carried out as part of the general activities within a natural classroom setting by educators with whom the children were comfortable and familiar.

Assessment of parents' experience of the provision

A survey incorporating a questionnaire with open and closed questions was shared with parents/carers of the children attending the provision, to ascertain their views on the effectiveness of the autism provision. A random selection of completed questionnaires was identified to conduct five approximately one-hour interviews. Focus group workshops (FGW) were scheduled for parents, carers and families to further discuss their views on the effectiveness of the provision.

Assessment of school staff

A survey was conducted with the mainstream school staff to ascertain their views on the effectiveness of the provision, along with a follow-up FGW.

Assessment of the autism provision staff

A survey was conducted with the autism provision staff to ascertain their views on the effectiveness of the provision, along with a follow-up FGW.

Data analysis

Data was collated by a research assistant. Themes were explored using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2021) as part of the RC.

Findings

The main findings highlighted how this new autism provision successfully impacted on the children's development and the wellbeing of the families. However, an enhanced focus on supporting children's communication, alongside further collaboration, integration and networking opportunities with the primary school and local community, were identified. The findings have been shared with all stakeholders in two formats:

- a research report for autism provision staff and mainstream school staff
- a leaflet written in plain English, accessible to children's parents, families and carers.

Ethics and integrity of research with schools, families and communities

The collaborative nature of our RC, informed by the principles of democracy, empowerment, social context and agency, ensured that we adhered to the more traditional ethical dilemmas of educational research (e.g. ethical clearance, anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, participation, vulnerability and truth) (Ramrathan et al., 2017), and as such prevented the occurrence of ethical dilemmas usually linked to educational research (power dynamics and boundaries, ownership of data, findings dissemination and publication and social action for social change) (Brydon-Miller and Banks, 2019).

Here are some examples of how the RC principles maintained the integrity of the collective process:

- As part of the ethical approval process, all RC stakeholders had several meetings, ensuring that everyone, including participants, was informed in advance about the nature of the research. Participants' active involvement in the RC allowed them to make even more informed decisions regarding their willingness to *participate* in the research when reading the participant information sheet and the *consent form*. This process was transparent for everyone.
- The RC stakeholders' involvement was not just limited to research design. For example, the school stakeholders administered the parents, setting and school staff questionnaires based on participants' availability and access. This active involvement in collecting their data helped to reset *power dynamics*, so that RC participants were no longer considered passive sources of information for researchers.
- All stakeholders were actively involved in the life of the RC. Data analysis was also informed by input to RC members, who had access to a summary of the main research findings (anonymous at this stage). RC meetings explored the topic of ownership of the data. RC stakeholders also guaranteed the *trustworthiness* of the findings.
- Lastly, the *dissemination and publication of findings* were also decided based on RC stakeholders' needs and the context. RC participants suggested that the dissemination materials needed to include practical recommendations in a staff research report and parents' leaflet format.

Practical applications

Focusing on this RC approach, we hope, will demonstrate to teachers, families and communities that RCs are a safe space where they are protected from ethical issues and research integrity is maintained. Within this model, they can:

1. Find the time to come together and discuss the issues relevant to their *setting* as the starting point for developing an RC project.
2. *Democratically* participate and contribute as *active agents* alongside teachers/ researchers to carry out RC principles, making collective decisions about the RC project through recurrent circle meetings – listening and talking to each other and being open to exploring the ethical dilemmas in social contexts.
3. Be *empowered* to contribute their professional/practice-based knowledge with all RC participants within an *equal* learning community, creating new knowledge as the basis for their professional/personal practice development – developing their agency.
4. Put into practice the RC outcomes and continue with the collaborative nature of true research integrity – all voices to be equally heard, including communities, families and children.

Conclusion

The research ethical dilemmas were *democratically* discussed with all the RC stakeholders, considering the *setting* and *context* (**Figure 1**). RC stakeholders were involved as active *agents*, enthusiastically sharing inputs and contributing to all the research phases, from the proposal of the initial idea for the research to dissemination. RC is, therefore, an ethical 'mediating arena' (Persson, 2009, p. 10), where participants are *empowered* to create new knowledge through a reflective, dialogic and emancipatory construction process (Persson, 2009; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005).

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