

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Punita Govil

A.M.U. Aligarh, India (punita_govil@rediffmail.com)

ABSTRACT: If a doctor prescribes wrong medicine to a patient, the sufferer is only one person i.e. the concerned patient but if a researcher working in the field of education does not do his work honestly, the sufferer is the whole community or rather the generations to come. Researches in Physics, which led to the development of nuclear weapons jolted the humanity, however, researches in Education may not cause such severe consequences, but have the power to affect the entire community. It is generally observed that research in Education is losing its credibility and prestige. Society no longer regards it as an instrument, which can bring change. The present paper discusses various malpractices related to educational research and the need to define ethical code of conduct so that every researcher may realize that he is involved not only in research activity rather in a process of modifying the system of education, aiming to improve the life of individuals, society, community and ultimately the nation as a whole. It also describes various guidelines for researchers so that they may carry out their work in ethically justifiable manner.

Key Words: Ethics, Educational research

1. INTRODUCTION: Basically, the term ‘ethics’ refers to moral principles of guiding conduct, which are held by a group or even by a professional” (1). It may look out of place to talk of ethical considerations in relation to educational research, but so many malpractices have crept into the process that it seems need of the hour to talk about ethical considerations in relational to educational research.

Research in the field of Education has lost its credibility. Society no longer regards it as an instrument, which can bring change. Various acts like duplication, manipulation of data, plagiarism etc. has put a question mark on the relevancy of educational researches. We have to decide whether, research is simply an attempt leading to a degree or a process of modifying the system of education, aiming to improve the life of individuals, society community and ultimately the nation as a whole. Below are given certain areas where educational research has gone wrong:

1. Subjected to too much research i.e. certain areas have been intensively explored, are still being explored and others have been neglected.
2. Carried out by incompetent researchers in most insincere manner.
3. Conducted in unprofessional manner for personal gains without giving any consideration to society.
4. Commercial gain has become the motive of a few.
5. Duplication, forgery, plagiarism have become so common and are not treated unethical.
6. Nobody bothers about dissemination of results. Even if results are disseminated, society does not rely on.

The present time is passing through the phase of renaissance. All the sectors of the country are progressing fast. There is, of course, enormous quantitative development in educational sector also. Unless this development is based on the sound plinth of research based results, it would be meaningless in the long run. There is an urgent need of having well defined code of conduct for educational researches so that quality of education may improve.

2. HISTORY: Interest in ethical consideration is the recent origin. Previously, technical consideration used to dominate the scene. Even up to 1979, people were unaware about the ethical considerations in educational research, although its derivatives such as ‘technical’ considerations were strictly followed. For the first time, American Educational Research Association (2) developed ethical standards of educational researches in 1992 and revised them in 1996 & 2000. The purpose behind issuing the code of conduct was to evoke voluntary compliance by normal persuasion. After it, British Educational Research Association (BERA) published guidelines for members to comment upon and finally adopted as ‘BERA Ethical Guidelines’(3) at the Association’s annual general meeting in August 1992. These guidelines were revised in 2003 and were finally endorsed with minor amendment in 2004. Based on the guidelines issued by BERA AERA, Scottish Educational Research Association (4) published its code of conduct for educational research in 1997. With the change in Educational legislation in 2000, SERA updated its code of conduct and issued guidelines in 2005.

In India, researchers in the field of education have been glorious past. The basic purpose of defining ethical code of conduct is simply a ‘commitment to honesty’ and morally force a researcher to have respect for the dignity and privacy of those people who are the subjects of research. Ethical codes may serve as guidelines in the pursuit of truth to do the work as carefully and accurately as possible.

Research activities have been carried out since 1965. A sizable number of researches are being produced every year. But we don’t have any association exclusively devoted to education neither we have well defined code of conduct like BERA, AERA and others.

Educational research whether at small level or higher level has a purpose to fulfill. The beneficiary may be any one, but there are various people involved in the process directly or indirectly. Educational research is conducted in highly complex context, with a moral purpose of improving quality of life in the society (5). The purpose of defining ethical guidelines is to enhance the quality of research. They familiarize researchers about the areas of responsibility and also the extent of responsibility. Since educational research has the fundamental purpose of improving the lives of individuals, communities and societies, ethical consideration must lie at the core of educational research. The guidelines don’t provide a ‘formula’ or blue print for the research rather shows the guidelines so that research may be carried out in a sound justifiable and ethically acceptable manner (6).

The four important areas, where the educational researcher has responsibility are:

- a) Participants
- b) Sponsors/administrators/teachers/or beneficiaries
- c) Area of knowledge
- d) Fellow researchers

3. RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS PARTICIPANTS: ‘Participants’ in educational research mean all those people who are involved in the process of research directly and indirectly. They are entitled for four types of rights, to be secured by the researcher: (a) right to maintain privacy (b) guaranteed anonymity (c) guaranteed confidentiality and (d) avoiding harm, betrayal or deception (3). Keeping in view the rights of participants, the following considerations should be kept in mind.

1. Educational researchers should work ‘within an ethic of respect’ for all the people involved in the research process. No distinction should be made on the grounds of age, caste, color, religion, race, political belief living style etc. unless the nature of the work warrants so.

2. Scottish Educational Research Association (4) recommends voluntary informed consent from the participants. “The essence of the principle of informed consent is that the human subjects of research should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of research”. Voluntary informed consent means that participants must have the prior knowledge of the work, expected of them. Besides, they must also know why their participation is necessary, what the benefits of it are and how that is affected with it. A pro forma may be given to them mentioning the details of the study relevant for the participants (Appendix 1).

3. Simply getting the informed consent is not enough. Participant must be in a position or old enough to understand the choice that are making. In case of minors, permission should be sought from parents or

guardians. The Performa for informed consent should clearly mention the purpose of the research and involved risk (if there is any) to participants.

4. If some cases, it may not be possible to obtain informed consent as it may affect the results (e.g. specifically in observational studies). In such cases, appropriate authority must be informed about the purpose of the study.
5. Obtaining the written consent of the subject does not imply that he or she is bound to participant throughout the process. He has the right to withdraw at any step after intimating the researcher. If changes occur in the process of research, the subject must be informed accordingly. He is free to withdraw at any stages.
6. Freedom should be granted to participants to express their views freely in all the matters affecting them.
7. Sometimes researchers use incentives to encourage participation. It should be rarely used and also very much is good sense.
8. Attempts should be made to minimize the impact of research activity in the normal working and workload of the participants.
9. Participants are entitled for knowing the results of the research. It is a healthy practice to provide them copy of the results, written in a manner comprehensible to them. If it is not possible to do so, alternatively means such a website should be used to ensure participants of the results.
10. The participants have the right to maintain privacy. If the information obtained from the subject require confidentially it should be maintained at any cost. Even if the researcher has to mention raw scores in the publication, even then confidentially and anonymity should be maintained.
11. The relationship between the researcher and participant should be based on the basic value of honesty. Deceiving in any form should be discouraged. Sometimes, complete information is not given to participants, due to the fear that information may influence the responses of the participants. In such cases also, appropriate authority should be informed about the purpose.
12. Generally, educational research does not cause any psychological harm to the participants. If any case of excessive stress is noticed, the participants may be exempted from participation.
13. Maintenance of absolute confidentiality if the responsibility of the researcher. To disguise any individual or institute, a fictional name or letter may be used. The individual has every right not to respond on any information which is not acceptable to him.
14. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that no force should be applied on the participants to compel them to participate.
15. Sometimes research activity may disturb the ongoing institutional activities. Attempts should be made to minimize the disturbance in the routine working of the institute.
16. The participants in the research may be passively engaged in research activity, but they are entitled for all the rights, which their counterparts are enjoying by being participated actively.

4. RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS USERS: Another consideration of a researcher is towards the customers or users of educational research. Research in education has, basically two types of customers: (a) teachers and school administrator and (b) policy makers. Teachers and administrators look at researches as a means to provide solution to their day to day issues and routine problems within the context of current educational provisions and prevailing views. In this way, research is expected to provide recipes for the solutions of classroom problems. Policy maker, on the other hand, expect educational research to provide them dependable data base, helpful in planning and execution of research to provide them dependable data base, helpful in planning and execution of reforms; so that quality of schools and colleges may improve. It is the responsibility of the researcher to draw the attention of policymakers towards the results. If research results are not disseminated properly, the whole community is bound to face the consequences (SERA, 2005). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make the society aware of the results in order to provide impetus to the process of change. The following are the considerations towards users of research results.

1. Generally, users of research results are the people who are not involved in the research process. Therefore, it is the duty of the researcher to ensure that he or she is rightly understood.
2. Research results should be written in the language of customers, free from verbal jargon and technical phraseology.

3. Research findings are rarely prescriptive. They never tell a teacher or administrator what to do rather points out the options. It is the duty of the researcher to make it clear 'what the data from a specific study can and can't contribute to the thinking a particular issue or set an issues' (7).
4. Dockrell (7) suggests that researchers should participate in the interpretations, ensuring that any conclusions are in accordance with the nature of results.
5. Raw data belong to the researcher. It is his property but may be asked to produce it is, situation arises.
6. Every researcher is free to interpret his or her findings but his freedom is restricted as 'there should be justifiable rational for every interpretation.
7. Different reports are to be prepared for different users. While preparing reports decorum of language should be maintained. Language should not hurt the feeling of some.
8. While disclosing the results, honesty should be the key word for any process.
9. Limitation of research should be disclosed simultaneously. Research must communicate in clear terms the extent of inferences, and also the reliability, validity and limits of generalization.
10. While reporting the results, certain parameters should be followed such as:
 - a) The results should not be reported as the final voice.
 - b) The report should not be in sensational manner.
 - c) Words, which are undignified, defamatory or unprofessional, should not be used while quoting the other author.

No attempts should be made to under limit the work of others in the area. Rather, all the people who have contributed in the production of the intellectual product, should be given due regards.

Most of the research finding suffers the lack of dissemination. If the nature of the findings warrants more generalization, the technical media may be used for the dissemination of the findings. But special care has to take in preparing report for the media.

5. RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE AREA: The researcher has a responsibility towards the area, in which he or she is going to conduct research. A researcher should keep in mind the following considerations.

1. The researcher should assess the appropriateness of the selected area in wide spectrum. Every research work should either aimed at solving a problem or contributes to the existing body of knowledge. In any case, the output should justify the input.
2. There are certain areas, which have been sufficiently explored. If the researcher is interested in such areas, he should go through the works already done in the area.
3. Completion of every research work requires a lot of time, money and resources. Therefore, the importance of the study should justify the expenditure.

6. RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY: A researcher is also responsible to the research community or colleagues. Research community to a researcher involves teachers, administrators, school managers and others working in this area. After the completion of the research work, it is the duty of the researcher to prepare 'technical research report' addressed to the research community. This report should include sufficient about 'how the data was collected, measured, analyzed and interpreted', so that 'an adequate professional evaluation' of the findings may be made, available for reanalysis and reinterpretation (2). The following are the consideration, which a researcher should keep in mind.

1. Through raw data belongs to the researcher who has conducted the research, but he may be asked to reproduce it, if circumstances demand so because "research data are not private property. They are an individual contribution to the wealth of knowledge and understanding".
2. The method employed for the study must be the most suitable for the purpose. The researcher must be fully acquainted with the other options available. He must have sufficient justifications for adopting the one he has used in the study.
3. The sample chosen for the study must have the rationales convincing to the authorities. Every possible effort must be made to make it free from biasness unless situation warrants so.

4. Limitations of the study must be clearly mentioned. The validity, readability and the extent of generalization should get appropriate place in the report.
5. “The sense of good practices” should prevail throughout the study.
6. Dishonesty, fake practices, plagiarism, concealing the facts or distorting, misinterpretation of ideas should be avoided as such practices cause humiliation to the entire community.
7. Extra caution should be taken in report writing. It should be complete in itself. Every reader must get the holistic view of the work done.
8. The report in no way should consist of defamatory language to any practice, person or institution i.e. direct criticism should be avoided. Even if the nature of the work demands criticism, it should be constructive and positive. It should not hurt the sentiments of the people. Mutual respect should be maintained.
9. Special care should be taken mentioning acknowledgement. All the people who have contributed in any way, must get due regard and place in the report.
10. While mentioning authorship, all the criteria should be taken care for.
11. Educational researchers must try their best to protect the integrity and reputation of educational research by maintaining highest standards.
12. Educational researcher must give due respect to the community spirit of “critical analysis and constructive criticism” as it encourages improvement and contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

Various countries have a separate body for examining educational research like AERA (American educational research association) in America, BERA (British educational research Association) in Britain, SERA (Scottish educational research association) in Scotland. These associations have their own code of conduct and serve as quality control machinery in their respective country. Although in our country, we have many governing bodies but this sector requires exclusive treatment i.e. an association with ‘sharp strong teeth’.

Prevalent foul practices should be immediately checked. Stern steps need to be taken against those found involved in such practices. In this regards, attempts of UGC are praise worthy. Very recently, it made it mandatory that soft copy of every research proposal should be sent to it for review. This practice will prevent duplication and various acts of forgery to a certain level and would help in the maintenance of quality. Some universities conduct entry level and would help in the maintenance of quality. Some universities conduct entry level examination for selecting students. In some universities research work is considered as a regular course and the attendance of students for specified period is compulsory. These steps are really praise worthy, but not sufficient. The problem is so serious that this sector requires special treatment. Simply familiarizing the researchers with ethical issues will not serve the purpose, rather these guidelines should form the part of the research practice itself.

APPENDIX-1

1. Title of the project.....
2. Name and address of the researcher/s.....
3. Total no. of participants needed for the research.....
4. Age range....., class.....
5. Task/s to be performed by the participants
6. Time involved
7. Risk of the participants (if any)
8. Benefits to the participants
9. Change in daily schedule required (if applicable)
10. Types of personal information sought

DECLARATION

I agree to participate in this research work. I know the type of work to be done by me. I understand that my personal details may be included in the research but I will not be personally identifiable. I give my consent

without any force. I have the right to withdraw from the projects at any stage without any force. I have the right to withdraw from the projects at any stage after informing the researcher. I know that I will be informed about the changes taking place during the project.

Signature of the participant/guardian (if under 18)

Signature of the participant

Address of the participant with phone number

REFERENCES:

1. Wellington, J., 2000, Educational research: contemporary issues and practical approaches, London Continuum
2. AERA, 2000, Ethical standards of AERA, American Educational Research Association, <http://www.aera.net/about/policy/ethics.html>
3. BERA, 2004, Revised ethical guidelines for educational research: Southwell: British Educational Research Association, <http://www.bera.ac.ukguidelines.html>
4. SERA, (2005), Scottish educational researcher associations, Ethical guidelines for educational research
5. Lewis, G., 2004, Developing the framework for social science research ethics, Conference on Ethical framework for research, Milton Keynes, 4th Nov.
6. Small, R., 2005, Codes are not enough: what philosophy can contribute to the ethics of educational research. M.McNamee& D. Bridges (eds.) The Ethics of educational research, Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 89-110
7. Dockrell, W.B., 1990, Ethical consideration in research, Educational research methodology & measurement, An international Handbook, Ed. By. J.P. Keeves, Pergamon Press, pp 180-185