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RESEARCH ETHICS **REVIEW**

This is a sample research review analysing the use of research ethics while conducting a study.

**A sample analysis for research
students**

Disclaimer

This is a sample research review analysing the use of research ethics while conducting a study. Due to privacy and professional standards, I have removed the link to the study that was used to write this research review. Students enrolled in research papers or studying in higher education can use this writing as a sample, an exemplar to develop their understanding of how to analyse research methods used in particular studies.

About the author

The author and creator of Learning to Learn Inquisitive-mind.com is a self-published author, researcher and educator. Her credentials include Master of Educational Leadership, Post Graduate in Coaching and Mentoring, a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics and many more. She has a range of teaching and leadership experience.

Introduction

In 20XX, Researchers A and B investigated the perspectives of XX secondary school leaders and governors responsible for the development of middle-level pedagogical leaders. Their study captured insights from middle-level leaders - their understanding and experiences of leadership development. A and B (20XX) acknowledged that there was no national initiative to support middle leaders with leadership development. XX schools were approached for the study however X agreed to participate, thus a purposive sample of XX middle leaders, XX senior leaders and X governors (Board of Trustee members) from X large secondary schools was used. The methodology included a literature review, justifications for the research topic, identifying and seeking consent from the purposive sample, and data analysis. The chosen method to gather data was an online questionnaire with structured and open questions on participants' understanding of leadership development, its importance and adequate development for middle leaders. A thorough and convincing explanation of the chosen method would have demonstrated the rigorous nature of the study. This survey, including the method is repeatable and similar conclusions can be reached.

Participants' responses were collected via google forms and analysed using google sheets. Only XX out of XX questionnaires was completed, giving an XX% return rate (A & B, 20XX). Findings were reported using two perspectives despite having three different participant groups - Board of Trustee members' feedback was combined with senior leadership members' feedback. Researchers mentioned that the two groups had similar responses hence they grouped them.



The discussion section included contradictory and concerning understandings of leadership development, conceived perceptions of skill and training levels of middle-level leaders and what equated to the substance of leadership development. Adequate and relevant direct quotes were linked to the literature review however the arguments were not compelling enough. A and B (20XX) concluded that the two main groups for the study had little shared understanding of what leadership development middle-level leaders needed in order to succeed as leaders.

Ethical processes

The researchers protected the participant's anonymity throughout the procedure. They sought permission from XX schools. The X schools that agreed to participate shared participants' email addresses with the researchers – as readers, we assume that schools sought permission from the participants because the authors do not explain the process used to gain individual participants' informed consent, raising the question of the possible use of proxy consent.



In fact, the participating schools were also kept anonymous, apart from their location and their being large XX secondary schools. What is missing from the article is how the researchers communicated to the participants their vision and overarching goals for this survey, the ethics for the procedure and guidelines for completing the survey.

Ethical processes

Section (4) of Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (2008) clarifies principles and procedures that should be followed to gain informed consent. Therefore, the validity, manner, and nature of informed consent taken for this survey are questionable. We can assume that the authors have followed all possible codes of practice and ethics while conducting this study. More details on the above methods employed will help readers understand the validity and consent details.

Direct quotes used in the report were kept anonymous. There was no mention of gender, ethnicity, age, qualification, experience or any other information that would lead to a specific school, leader or participant. All efforts were made to maintain anonymity. Participants' privacy and rights were also respected as incomplete surveys were not followed up. Researchers complied with the Privacy Act 1993 and the Official Information Act 1982, as advised in subsection 12(2).

Participants' right to withdraw was also honoured. The analysis included participants' roles only. It is unthinkable that direct quotes could lead to any person or organisation. To achieve high-quality evidence, researchers used carefully structured, open-ended questions with no parameters. They acknowledged the need and value of this study and used a range of literature to support their claims. We can conclude that no harm came to any participants as the ethical guidelines of anonymity, confidentiality and privacy were highly maintained. A few ethical guidelines like social and cultural sensitivity, and conflict of potential interest are not included in the article.



Informed or uninformed consent

Vilma (2018) stated that 'for informed consent to be ethically valid, the participant must understand what has been explained, ...given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered by someone fully conversant in the research study particulars' (p. 23). The methodology does not indicate any opportunities for collaboration or communication between the two parties on the purpose of the survey and the 'why' behind it etc. This opportunity was taken away from the participants as there was no interaction between them, raising concerns about the nature and manner of informed consent taken. My understanding and interpretation of informed consent are influenced by Donnelly's (1984) concept of cultural relativism; culture being the critical lens to validate what is ethically correct and not. And as researchers, we need to use an explicit ethical procedure to gain consent from our participants so that we are confident that both parties are fully aware of their rights, and the details of the study and are following the research ethics principles, as stated in UoW's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (2008).

Power dynamics

A and B designed a less controlled, qualitative questionnaire that was emailed to the participants. There is no mention of collecting participants' email addresses on the form however their roles were recorded. Researchers can explain how they addressed power differentials and their influence on participants' responses. For example, misuse of power by the senior leaders to compel the middle-level leaders to participate in the survey, and leadership structures within schools. Were participants 'constrained by the imbalance of power' (Schulz, 2011, p.3) and 'coerced' (Mockler, 2013, p.153) to partake in the study? This is further supported by the low percentage of completed questionnaires - a lack of understanding of the purpose behind the survey, thus a lack of engagement. Lack of collaboration, uninformed consent and power dynamics – all lead to the question of how valid and reliable the findings were.

Disclosure and quality of evidence

The fact that many schools decided not to participate left the authors with X schools. It is indeterminate if demographic details including decile rating, school roll, private/public schooling, school achievement data or any other factors were considered when identifying the sample. The survey does not reflect and include perspectives of a range of XX secondary school middle-level leaders because there are XX secondary schools in XX. When drawing conclusions, the X schools' background, culture, type of leadership, well-being initiatives and other contributing factors were not taken into consideration. Mockler (2013) refers to 'evidence being collected with the intent not merely of celebrating that which is to be celebrated, but also developing an understanding of that which is more problematic' (p.149). This was overlooked. Researchers can include a disclosure in their report on the possibility of a lack of a range of voices from the experts which may have impacted the quality of the outcome and the survey's overall implications. With no disclosure or attention to the small-scale purposive sample used, academics can question the scale of the evidence and conclusions reached.

Research misconduct - analysing data

Collecting feedback through online form reduced the chances of losing data and collating responses on a spreadsheet made it easier to group and analyse data. One of the main ethical guidelines on the use of data is data interpretation and misrepresentation; one cannot manipulate, misrepresent or misinterpret data. We can argue that combining two key participant groups' viewpoints as a joint senior/executive leader perspective was dishonouring the participants. These two distinct groups are two different bodies of an education system and their views should be equally respected. A researcher needs to show utmost respect in terms of their interaction with the participants, including 'not judging them, not discrediting them, in ensuring that their views are faithfully recorded and given due consideration' (Vanclay et al., p.246). Researchers failed to mention if this was communicated to the two parties and whether there was consent to combine the two groups. Their misconduct makes us question the trustworthiness of this survey.

Researcher bias concerns

Were the researchers biased (either consciously or subconsciously) in their interpretation of senior leaders and Board of Trustee reps' responses or were the responses really similar? It is definitely challenging not to be subjective in this area however, 'research in social science and education must take care of its moral transparency, ensuring that research processes and research findings or otherwise called results/findings are reliable" (Sieber, 1982, as cited in Vilma,1982). A and B's actions undeniably impact the credibility of this survey as only one method was used to collect participant's voices and that too, was highly interpretive and they combined their groups. Baldwin, et al. (2022) refer to cognitive biases such as apophenia and confirmation bias that can 'lead to particular analytical choices and selective reporting of "publishable" results' (p.1). A strength of this study was that the researchers worked as a team therefore professional judgement may have guided them. A and B analysed their data using literature, supported by direct quotes. What was missing was a declaration of personal and professional stance on the topic. Chenail (2011) shared strategies such as journaling that help mitigate researcher bias concerns in qualitative research, ensuring that one is following the ethical guidelines of research at all times. This would have added value to the case study in question.

Ethical diversity

The ethical guidelines that we follow during the research should be based on the principle of cultural responsiveness and inclusiveness. In this survey, researchers neither gained participants' 'freely-given informed consent' (Msoroka and Amunden, 2017, p. 5) nor had clear communication on the research aims, objectives or benefits. Their method was not culturally responsive, affirming the need to 'develop indigenous research paradigms and processes that focus on empowering institutions and communities' (Koster et al., 2012; Tauri, 2014, as cited in Msoroka & Amunden, 2017). The survey reflects how advanced forms and methods of research coming into existence complicate research ethics, making them more complex. It also signifies how universal ethics can be unresponsive to cultural ethics as researcher actions that are 'assumed as 'right' in reference to ethical norms endorsed in one culture or society may not always be considered 'right' in reference to ethical norms in another culture or society' (Melé and Sánchez-Runde, 2013, as cited in Msoroka & Amunden, 2017). Our researchers failed to acknowledge the impact culture, values and XX context had on their findings; indicating the growing complexities for researchers in today's environment.

Procedural ethics

Strategic reflection on procedural ethics was required. The methodology needed an in-depth explanation of the ethical procedures followed; this would have added credibility to the work. 'A research plan may be approved as ethical but may not prove to be practical when the researcher tries to enact it, thus necessitating modification' (Amundsen et al., 2017, p.10). Therefore, there was a need to include justifications for the modifications made to the initial research design. As researchers tried 'to make sense of the experiences of participants, to interpret the stories, and determine if there may be theories that explain the behavioural phenomenon' (Stein & Mankowski, 2004, as cited in Schulz, 2011), they needed to ensure that ethic procedures and principles were upheld at all times.

Reflection

Reviewing this study allowed me to develop a clearer understanding of how important my role as a researcher is, and how planning, preparing, and seeking guidance during the initial stages of research design determines the survey's success. Following the ethical guidelines helps achieve research goals, and adds credibility and authenticity to the study. It encourages collaboration and brings in accountability. Conducting research in an ethically and morally acceptable manner requires comprehensive planning and rigorous literature study. This review introduced me to researcher reflexivity and I wonder how power differentials will impact the credibility of my planned research. In order to enhance research validity, I will take into account all the ethical dilemmas identified in this analysis, and the new learnings through literature readings and ensure my study is culturally and ethically responsive.

You have clearly engaged with and developed your understanding around several critical ethical principles, such as power differentials and informed consent, while the need for comprehensive planning that anticipates ethical issues and then ongoing reflexivity during the research was discussed well too.

Conclusion



Research ethics can be rephrased as moral principles that guide us to conduct ourselves as researchers without deception, and to be true to ourselves and



the cause. Researchers must include a comprehensive methodology that justifies the methods used in the survey and the ethical decisions and procedures followed in the process.

Research practices are based on culturally bound concepts that demand collaboration, respect, negotiations and reciprocity. These strengthen our understanding of the ethical principles of research, allow us to work within the University of Waikato's Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (2008) and observe the Treaty of Waikato. A and B's study highlights areas of concern as well as teaches us how to make our work trustworthy, reliable and valid. There is no discredit to the work they have accomplished. In fact, they highlighted how complicated yet rewarding educational studies can become.

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