



Action research and ethics

Description and context

This exercise pertains to action research, and it is done within a course on advanced qualitative research methods for students in teacher education and education. Students read book chapters and articles on different approaches and methods accompanied by examples from real research and enriched by sessions of practical hands-on exercises. When pertinent, we use examples of research related to diversity and social justice, as there are crosscutting themes running of the teacher training program at University of Helsinki.

The novelty of this exercise lies in the way it connects qualitative research methods, action research more specifically, with the program profile and embodies one aspect of the idea of research-based teacher education. Students get an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a critical analysis of several action research studies, and to reflect on how the examples may connect with the educational settings and circumstances that they are familiar with.

The “messy ethics” angle provides a perspective that is less often explored, i.e. what is the downside of failing ethics despite good intentions. Such an analytical lens is suitable for advanced level studies in research methods. When done using the jigsaw method, there is enhanced opportunity to engage all students and to broaden the perspectives from one case to several. Furthermore, this exercise helps to bridge a gap that often exists between theoretical-methodological understanding and the application to practice even though students may not have the opportunity to conduct action research within the current course.

Implementation

Course: Qualitative research methods II

Level of studies and task difficulty:

The task is relatively demanding but fits, well with a course in qualitative research methods at an advanced level (in our case, MA studies for elementary teachers and education majors).

Session on Action Research:

Action research is a relevant approach for teachers/soon-to-be teachers. Action research is the type of research that is often carried out in a school context and teachers can conduct such research even if they do not otherwise perform research.

Time: 90 minutes

This task is based on an article by Kuriloff, P. J., Andrus, S. H., & Ravitch, S. M. (2011).

The article contains five cases where the researchers collaborated with the school and had good intentions to increase justice, reduce discrimination, and address marginalization. However, there is something that has “gone wrong” in each case, which emphasizes both ethical issues and the consequences for those already exposed.

Preferably, students read the article in advance so that lecture time is not spent on the reading.

The task can be executed in different ways. We give two suggestions, A or B.

ALTERNATIVE A

A review of the task can be done, for example with the jigsaw technique, as follows:

- **Individually:** The students read through one of the case reports presented in the article (Kuriloff et al. 2011) (15 minutes)
- **In the base group:** The students discuss their case in the base group, that is a group where each student reads the same case. Students are asked to discuss the case and reflect on it in relation to a Finnish / Finnish-Swedish context (for example: Can students envision that researchers face such questions in our context? Do they have examples of similar cases? What are the ethical consequences for the research / participants?) (20 minutes)
- **In mixed group:** The students divide into new groups so that each member has read a different case. The students briefly describe to each other the reflections from their base group. Students are asked to identify similar or different themes and solutions. From each case, they must pick out one insight per case, which they then take back to their base group. (15 minutes)
- **In the base group:** Comparison between different insights that each member picked up from the mixed group discussion. (15 minutes)
- **Commonly:** We compile a "Take home" –list for the action researcher where we describe what the researcher should remember to think about, how to maintain a high ethical standard in the research and on the other hand, constantly relate the ethical aspects of the research to whether the own context. The discussion is linked to the examples that the students draw from the first basic group discussion. (20 minutes)

ALTERNATIVE B

In groups, the students familiarize with one of the five cases and discusses it based on ethical analysis (see Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017), namely they should

1. identify what/ which ethical principles are at stake or I danger of being overridden (we had previously reviewed ethical principles that apply to practically all research),
2. identify the partners who are affected or have an interest in the situation,
3. identify which guidelines may be relevant and provide guidance, for example a gender equality plan or school rules of procedures; and
4. identify possible alternative approaches to how the situation in the case could have been avoided.

Based on the ethical analysis, design the corresponding study in our Finnish/Finnish-Swedish context so that you would mitigate the challenges that materialized in the cases described in the article.

Alternative B is a little more challenging than alternative A. As students may begin writing their Master's thesis after an advanced course in research methods, the assignment can encourage students to tackle a theme related to diversity and social justice. Even if they do not choose to do action research themselves, they must think on a critical level about the consequences of research (in this case, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups or individuals).

References:

Kuriloff, P. J., Andrus, S. H., & Ravitch, S. M. (2011). Messy ethics: Conducting moral participatory action research in the crucible of university-school relations. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 5(2), 49-62.

Mustajoki, H. & Mustajoki, A. (2017). *A new approach to research ethics. Using guided dialogue to strengthen research communities*. Routledge.

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