Research Ethics: Deontological Perspectives

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Abstract

The training of Further Education teachers has been debated since the incorporation of Further Education colleges in the UK in 1992 but, to date, moves by governments and their agencies to professionalise the FE teaching sector have been unsuccessful. The continuation of a homogenous initial teacher training programme within the FE sector has resulted in this sector failing to respond to the changing needs of society and the complex needs of the new FE teacher. This study explored the FE teacher training programme within one college in the UK. The research questions focussed on four elements: the concept of professionalism in FE teaching, the FE teacher as an agent of change, the changing professional identity of the participants and the ways new FE teachers managed multiple professional identities.

Using a case study approach, twenty-two new FE teachers undertaking the initial teacher training programme participated in the research as they took on their new professional role as FE teachers. The project used mixed methods of data collection including self-completion questionnaires, focus groups, observations and semi-structured interviews.

Thematic content analysis identified that the FE teachers experienced changing and multiple professional identities, from vocational experts to qualified educators, whilst retaining elements of their previous professional identities. Through this process of change, new FE teachers acted as change agents and helped FE students realise their own aspirations.

This research demonstrates that Further Education teaching can be categorised into three distinct areas based on the subjects taught: the vocational teacher, the professional teacher, and the academic teacher. Teachers from each area require a different focus in their initial teacher training. The study identifies the need for different approaches to Further Education initial teacher training for the three areas and offers opportunities to develop distinct teaching qualifications and career pathways whilst capturing the generic sociological aspects of FE teaching.

Keywords: Further Education, Multiple Professional Identity, Initial Teacher Training, The Vocational, Professional and Academic Teacher

As a Senior Tutor my role was to support new Further Education (FE) teachers in their new roles. I was responsible for mentoring trainees and those teachers requiring support. These FE teachers form the participant group in my research study. It was apparent that the new FE teachers were novice research participants and the presence of a power relationship between myself and the participants may have caused some harm to the participants. There are many reasons why research ethics are important; the moral integrity of the research is critically important to ensure the research process and findings are trustworthy and valid. A significant reason as to why ethical practices are adhered to is to promote the objectives of the research project, including the attainment of new knowledge, whilst avoiding error or harm, in an honest and open manner. Ethical practice in research has a long history. In 1880 Hansen discovered the leprosy bacillus, but was expelled from medicine as he failed to gain consent from one participant in his study. The results of his work were deemed invalid as a result of the participant's complaints, regardless of the obvious benefits to many. According to Ruyter (2009), scientific communities have always operated within a self-imposed ethical regulation in respect of social norms and general ethics.

Figure 1 Ethical Research. Source BERA (2018)

Figure 1 outlines BERA's (2018) ethical code of practice which has been applied throughout the course of this study. Newby (2010) outlines the researcher's responsibilities including academic honesty in relation to accurate reporting of the data collected and the level of researcher responsibility for others involved. Newby (2010) also questions whether researchers should report evidence of criminality. The participants in this study have authority over and access to young people and adults. In the case of this study, should any criminal activity or child protection issue have come to my attention during the research, I would have had no choice but to report such activity to higher authorities. I made this clear to the potential research participants before they were invited to participate. The college operates rigorous safeguarding polices to protect young people and vulnerable adults; I have a legal obligation to report any incident which may harm students of the college. I did however engage with a deontological approach, choosing not to disclose information to others when the participants made technical mistakes.

Shaw (2009) is very clear in his perspective of ethical practice in qualitative research. He claims there is a risk of compartmentalising ethical aspects of research and shutting them off into a preamble to the research (Shaw 2009, p10). I agree that this could be an issue, and have avoided compartmentalising ethics. Instead, I have followed Peled and Leichtentritt (2002) who argue an ethical standpoint should be part of all aspects of educational research. I have adopted this view throughout this study by ensuring no person involved in the research will come to any physical, emotional, professional or psychological harm.

I also gained permission from the principal of the college to conduct the research and gained approval from the university's research ethics committee.

A formal introduction to the research was made during the Diploma in teachingcourse induction, from which I recruited the participants; and my justification for completing this research was presented to the group of trainee students. The introductory presentation was the first stage of the process to ensure ethical research. One aim of the presentation was to establish an ethically sound framework, ensuring my research activities fully complied with the university's and the college'spolicies on research ethics. I wanted to meet all the potential participants and provide an opportunity for the trainee teachers (participants) to question the purpose of my research and choose whether or not to participate. All trainee teachers agreed to participate in the research activities. It was explained that my role within this research was that of primary investigator and not that of formal teacher education tutor or a staff mentor. Newberry (2010) explains the complexities of power relationships in a research environment and the ways in which a power relationship can frustrate the quality and accuracy of the research data. I took care to avoid such dangers. The presentation included a full explanation of the context and reasons for the research, including an outline of the ethical dilemmas, and was delivered in a seminar forum.
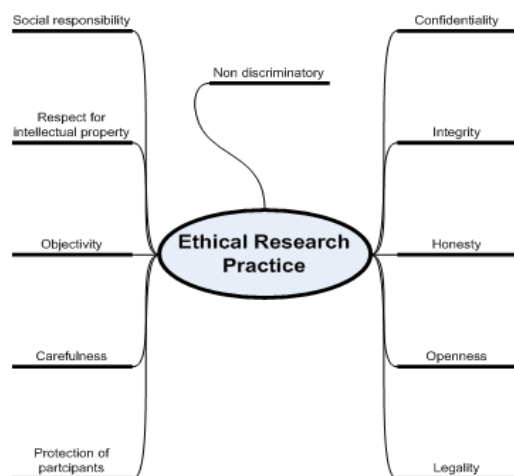

Figure 2 Model representing the self-imposed and devised ethical framework used throughout the study

The Figure above captures the feedback from the participants' plenary meeting (a screen-shot of the electronic marker board),which has informed a self-imposed ethical framework.

A concern throughout this study was to gain voluntary informed consent from the participants by ensuring they were fully aware of their roles, rights, and responsibilities within the context of the study. All participants were provided with information about the purpose and scope of the research in written and verbal formats.

The participants had been given an opportunity to opt into the research before enrolling onto the Diploma in teaching course. An email had been sent, outlining the nature of the research with an invitation to a briefing meeting. A reminder to the trainee teachers (participants) about their proposed involvement in the research took the form of a letter containing a participant consent form, personal email and, in addition, an announcement was uploaded onto the students' individual learning plans advising them of their proposed involvement in this research and their right to withdraw from the research process without reason. Finally, as outlined above, the proposed research activity was presented to the potential participants at the formal course induction. The participants gave consent in written and verbal formats.

The participants' respective students are aged from 16 to 19 and above, however they are NOT the participants of this study. The setting of the research (the college) follows strict operational codes of practice and conduct in terms of child protection and the protection of vulnerable adults, which provided an additional ethical, professional and legal framework.It was my responsibility to reinforce ethical and moral codes of practice throughout this study.

Ethics or morals are considered as a set of rules which outline the difference between right and wrong (Newby 2010). Most professions have norms and codes of conduct and researchers' responsibilities are clearly described in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the British Sociological Association codes of conduct.

The term ethicism was used by Hammersley (2002) when he attempted to describe the characteristics of ethical practice as part of contemporary qualitative research, moving away from knowledge production to social justice. The protection of the participants' welfare is a significant aspect of all research activities, reflecting Hammersley's (ibid.) position and my commitment to adopting a deontological approach to the research activity. The BERA Charter (2011) refers to researchers as professionals, that they should be treated as such and that these qualities should be reflected in the treatment of the participants. This study will rely on the collection of rich data by close observation and interviewing of the participants whilst training and practising. The purpose is to develop an understanding of the participants' perspectives whilst recognising the ethical dilemmas. Secrecy

As an employee of the college and a researcher, there were possible conflicts of professional interest. The Teacher Development Manager agreed to help and act as the college gatekeeper by ensuring the welfare of the participants was not compromised. Gaining informed consent is demonstrating respect for personhood. Mason (1996) suggests there are two core features: in-depth engagement between the researcher and the participants, which could evoke sensitive and sensitising information; and considering what the data contains and how it will be used. Morrison and Galloway (1996) warn that the research interests could change direction as the research progresses. Silverman (2011) concurs with Pole (2003) and Mason (1996) that framing of ethnographic and case study in the early stages is essential, using approved and robust ethical frameworks.

The first of three stages is to decide on the purpose of the research, examine the potential participants and those who may be affected, and to consider the implications of the results on the interested parties. The BERA (2011) guidelines (although voluntary) outline the researchers' responsibilities which are applicable to this study.

1. Participants have the right to be informed of purpose, aims, and likely publications.
2. There should be honesty and openness between the researcher and participants.
3. The participants have the right to withdraw without reason.

4. Diversity and any other issues of individual differences should be embraced.

Adopting and applying this and my own self-imposed framework ensured that my identity as a researcher was clearly overt. I did consider conducting non-participant observations without informing the participants of my intentions in terms of data collection. Although this strategy would have minimised the Hawthorn effect and provided an accurate account of the participants' professional behaviour, Mayo (1924) argues that employees are more productive when they know they are being studied. The results of Mayo's studies disclosed an increase in worker productivity which was produced by the psychological stimulus of being singled out and made to feel important. The participants were expected to modify their behaviours to the perceived expectations of the observer. The presence of an observer promotes perceived best practice; the observer gets to see the best of the participants' professional behaviour (Silverman 2011). The results of Mayo's work in 1924 concluded that the researchers were not just investigating the effects of changing physical working conditions, theywere inadvertently researching participant attitudes, values and norms. My relationship with the participants of this study developed to a state of mutual trust based on consistent application of the ethical research practices outlined in my own framework and assurances that the participants would not come to any harm as a result of participating in this study. Easterby-Smith et al (2008) explain that the observed will develop a sense of trust with the observers as the studies progress. They also state that participants are social actors wishing to assume the role of experts.

Newby (2010) refers to covert ethnography as unequivocally wrong because it infringes on the participants' rights to informed consent. Ethnography and research is ethically complex: the participants could be referred to as social actors, willing to tell their individual stories without fear of recrimination. To protect the identities of the participants and to go beyond the obligations of the Data Protection Act (1998) the use of pseudonyms and measures to remove identifiers will be adopted to prevent the use of 'Broad-banding' or 'Micro-aggregation' as defined by Robson (2007):

"Broad-banding is combining different identifying variables; Micro-aggregation is grouping observations and replacing with a single meaning." (Robson 2007, p208)

Robson (ibid.) also argues that research participants may be less likely to provide personal information if they could be identified. In contrast some participants may happy to be identified in areas of practice worthy of praise and recognition. Grinyer (2001) considers the apparent underestimated likelihood of research participants wishing to be acknowledged in published research thus enabling them to retain ownership of their stories

Deontology and its theoretical perspectives suggests researchers should adhere to their obligations and duties when conducting empirical research. Kant's (1804) theory is an example of deontological, or duty-based, ethics: it judges morality by examining the nature of actions and the will of agents rather than goals achieved (deontological theory looks at inputs rather than outcomes). Adopting a deontological approach ensured consistency in my research behaviour. Deontology also recognises those who exceed their duties and obligations. Pole and Morrison (2003) refer to this approach as supererogation, a feature of the measures to protect all directly involved in the research process. Although deontology has many positive features there are a number of challenges, as there is no logical basis for deciding on my responsibilities as a researcher other than the guidelines issued by BERA. This consideration prompted the construction and implementation of additional measures to protect the participants from any harm. The BERA (2011) guidelines are designed to protect the participants from physical and psychological harm; although the participants' professional and developing practice is under scrutiny by the college, I resisted intervening by not offering professional formative feedback throughout the research process.

Measor and Sikes (1992) recognise that research participants are not fearful victims; they open up their lives because they are asked to do so, but they have boundaries and personal strategies to protect themselves in research situations. I made a decision to observe the start of every lesson, attempting to capture the context of the lesson,

but this was not always possible – room changes and class cancellations disrupted and frustrated the research plan. Capturing synchronous evidence from informal discussions and observations could have been viewed as unethical however; but the additional measures implemented and reinforced throughout the data collection process ensured the participants' protection from harm. Although the approach of capturing synchronous evidence generated rich accurate data, I was aware of the research objectives, the self-imposed ethical framework, and my role as a researcher and not as a supporter. As with any ethnographic study, interference by observers in the natural order of events would have frustrated the quality and trustworthiness of the data.

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