ETHICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING CHILDREN

HARMS AND BENEFITS

Dilemmas at school: How and when to support the inclusion of students with disability

Background context:

In our ethnographic work with children with disability at school, our research team has observed a number of situations where children and young people have been marginalized and excluded from the curriculum, social life and wider activities of the school. In this study we followed seven young students with disability as they transitioned from primary to secondary school to explore how their school experiences impacted on their developing sense of self and group identity. This is one example of exclusion and the ethical dilemmas it raised.

Sam is 13 and has a long list of unofficial labels, although his view of the world is not well understood and funding and support for his education has been elusive.[i] He is a proficient reader but struggles to understand social situations and aspects of his school work, becoming upset and angry when stressed. He was excluded from one primary school because of his behaviour, and was subsequently taught at home. Thanks to a welcoming teaching-principal, he attended a small rural primary school for 1½ years before making the transition to secondary school. He had been at secondary school for three months when these observations took place.

The ethical challenge:

Sam is in the hallway outside the social studies class, the students are retrieving their books from their schoolbags before entering the classroom. It's a busy and noisy time with lots of jostling and banter, particularly amongst the boys. One of the boys pushes Sam as he tries to retrieve his books, and calls him "a retard". Sam retaliates, shouting back at the boy. He is clearly upset. He enters the classroom and sits at a desk in the centre of the room, next to the teacher aide. He is agitated and unable to focus on his work. The teacher explains the purpose of the lesson to the class, but Sam is noisily complaining to the teacher aide, and pointing to the boy who bullied him. The teacher asks him to pay attention, but Sam cannot settle. The teacher tells Sam that his behaviour is unacceptable in class and points to the door, asking him to leave. Sam storms out of the class and goes to the Learning Support Centre.

Questions relating to researcher boundaries and responsibilities, and to matters of primary accountability to the child are raised here. To what extent, and how, should the researcher intervene in this incident? In the case of challenging issues that arise when gathering data in the field, guidance for researchers can come from research protocols

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[i] Sam is a pseudonym.

developed in advance (for example, we can encourage the young person to talk to appropriate adults, or they may agree to the researcher doing this on their behalf). Yet while advanced preparation is always desirable, we cannot predict every situation that will arise and we will encounter situations like this one that require us to 'fly by the seat of our pants'.

The options:

Bullying is an insidious problem that is often poorly understood by teachers as much goes unseen.

Sam was actively trying to be part of the peer group at school, and this impairment-related abuse was a barrier to his inclusion and well-being. The teacher misunderstood the context and Sam's anxiety and the effects were exclusion from class and from the opportunity to learn. The bullying went unrecognised and was not addressed, but the researcher's observations provided a context in which teachers could come to understand bullying as a barrier to Sam's learning and participation. The researcher has several options:

• Do nothing (the researcher is a 'fly on the wall');

• Intervene in the hallway bullying (as a proxy teacher);

• Discuss the matter directly with the teacher and inform him of the context;

• Discuss the matter with Sam and take action (or not) from that point.

The choices made:

I stayed in class for a while after these events then went back to the Learning Support Unit to see Sam. I asked him whether he wanted to report the bullying, but he was adamant that he did not wish to do this. He did not want the teacher to know as he was concerned about retaliation. He worried that some of the boys would find out and that this would damage his attempts to be accepted in the peer group. We discussed the implications of not following up with the teacher, and the negative effects that repeated bullying was having on Sam. He agreed that it would help if the researcher informed the social studies teacher in a general way, and without naming names, that bullying often happened in the hallway and it made it hard for some students to learn. He also said that it was okay for the social studies teacher to share this information with other teachers in the school.

Reflexive questions/considerations:

The researcher's role is in a state of flux in this scenario as they shift between researcher and advocate for the young person. A key principle guiding the researcher's role and behaviour is their responsibility and primary accountability to the young person. Research is justified through the potential benefit to children and young people themselves, not to our own curiosity (Munford & Sanders, 2001), and in this scenario the researcher is balancing harm and benefit for the young person.

1. What is the primary role of the researcher in this scenario? The researcher could:

- Be a fly on the wall;

- Be an informant to the teacher and/or respond to teacher's comments, questions and observations with or without Sam;

- Behave as another teacher in the classroom;

- Focus on the rights of the young person and advocate for them.

2. The researcher moves into an advocacy role (which is not neutral) in this scenario. Under what circumstances is an advocacy role appropriate?

3. Where does primary accountability to the child begin, and keeping this in mind, how would you respond to this scenario as a researcher? You might like to consider the following:

- Should the researcher intervene when the bullying occurs outside class?

- Should she advise the teacher about the circumstances leading up to the student's eviction from class?

- Was it appropriate to follow-up with the student after the event and discuss possible solutions with him, or should the researcher go directly to the teacher?

References

Munford, R., & Sanders, J. (2001). Interviewing children and their parents. In M. Tollich (Ed). *Research Ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand: Concepts, practice, critiques* (pp. 99-111). Auckland: Longman.

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