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Ethics and data protection in research in geography education

Introduction

Ethics is fundamental underpinning of our work as geographers and educators. Every day teachers of geography navigate, and engage with, a complex web of ideas and influences to make informed choices in their practice. These decisions include thinking about how best to support students academically and pastorally. They also involve making decisions about if, how and why, ideas, people and places are included, and represented, in teaching and curricula resources. The decisions teachers of geography make often implicitly and/or explicitly relate to ethics, and ethics is a powerful lens through which to consider our work.

Teachers of geography often engage in research and/or practitioner inquiries through Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and some will continue to do so by undertaking a Masters' degree or doctoral study. In addition, teachers engage with research as they progress and develop in their roles, and/or become mentors or school leaders. It is of critical importance that teachers consider both ethics and data protection in their day-to-day work and in, and through, research.

In this article, we introduce and explore some key guidelines and literature about ethics and data protection. We begin by introducing ethics, before considering how we might research with, and for, children and young people. We use the terms children and young people interchangeable to reflect the literature we engage with, and to acknowledge that teachers of geography work with young people of varying ages. We then introduce the idea of positionality in research, before outlining and considering how the data protection principles inform and guide the choices teachers of geography make when carrying out research in schools. We conclude by restating the importance of teachers as ethical practitioners.

It is important for us to state at the outset that this article does not in any way provide a guide to research ethics or data protection, or engage with all debates in these fields. Instead, in writing this article, we aim to introduce and explore some key ideas which may be useful in informing decisions teachers make in research in, and about, geography education.

What are ethics, and why do ethics matter to research in geography education?

Geography and education are both methodologically and substantively diverse academic disciplines. As Geoghagen et al. (2020, p.262) explain, geography ‘ranges across the physical and social sciences into the humanities and the performance arts. It's a discipline with a whole heap of different ways of doing what it does.’ However, research in the field of geography education is often connected to, or situated within, institutions such as schools and done by insiders working within those institutions. This is a significant area of consideration as the researcher may have to navigate gatekeepers (e.g. headteachers) when planning and conducting research (Brooks et al., 2014), and they will also likely have pre-existing relationships with young people, colleagues and communities.

Put simply, research ethics are the moral and ethical decisions we make in planning, conducting and disseminating research. Many organisations, institutions and funders offer guidelines on research ethics (e.g., BERA, 2018), and researchers engage with ethics to:

- First, promote ‘the rights of individuals, communities and environments involved in, or affected by, our research’, and in doing so, avoid or minimise doing any harm;
- Second, ‘ethical behaviour helps to assure a favourable climate for the continued conduct of scientific enquiry’ (maintaining public trust);
- Third, so that individuals and institutions protect themselves legally and morally (Hay, 2016, p.31-32).

While guidelines and processes are of critical importance, it can also be helpful to recognise ethics as a complex and debated area. As Brooks et al. (2014, p.18) explain

‘the question “What ought I to do?” is of fundamental interest in philosophy’, with the answer varying with the ethical position the researcher adopts.

To help make decisions in research, it can be helpful to think about what Hall et al. (2021, p.50-51) term ‘the five key premises of ethical research’: autonomy, beneficence, avoidance of harm, confidentiality and anonymity, and integrity. In Figure 1, we utilise Hall et al.’s (2021) key premises of ethical research and suggest some questions to consider when engaging with each one when planning and conducting research in geography education.

Figure 1 Engaging with the key premises of ethical research in geography education

Key premise of ethical research	Hall et al.’s (2021: p.50-51) definitions	Some questions you might consider when researching in, and about, geography education.
Autonomy	‘Participants must freely agree to take part and not feel coerced’	<p>Have you followed ethical processes at your institution, and engaged with ethical guidelines (e.g. BERA, 2018)?</p> <p>Have you sought permission to conduct the research from the headteacher and/or other appropriate people?</p> <p>Have participants been given information about the purpose and nature of the research, and been able to ask questions, and, where appropriate, shape the research?</p> <p>Have children and young people, and where appropriate, their guardians been asked to give informed consent/assent to take part in the research?</p>
Beneficence	‘There must be a sense that the research is worthwhile and have benefits that outweigh the risks’	<p>What is the purpose of the research?</p> <p>Who will the research benefit and how? Here, you might consider both benefits from the research design (e.g. young people as co-researchers) and dissemination of the research.</p> <p>Who will you disseminate the research to, in what format, and why?</p> <p>What do you hope the impact of the research will be, and how will you evaluate the impact?</p>
Avoidance of harm	‘Any possible harm must be avoided or at least mitigated by robust precautions’	<p>What are the potential risks of this research, to whom?</p>

		How will you mitigate any risks in the design of the research, collection and storage of data, and dissemination of the project?
Confidentiality and anonymity	‘Personal data must remain unknown to all but those carrying out a piece of research’	How will you represent the people and places in your research, and why? How can you protect individuals/ communities from being identified in any research output? Can participants choose their own pseudonyms? Or, how will you represent them, and why?
Integrity	‘Researchers must be open about any conflicts of interest and be honest and fair in all their research’	Have you declared any conflicts of interests in your ethics application, to the gatekeepers giving permission for the research and/or your research participants?

These key premises can help researchers to consider the potential ethical issues they might come across, and more broadly, how they can carry out research ethically. We now move on to consider research with, for and by, young people.

Research with, for and by children and young people

Children and young people are at the centre of teachers’ everyday practice and are also often one of the primary reasons why people choose to teach geography. Whilst not all research in geography education involves young people as participants or co-researchers, supporting research with, for and by young people is critical to empowering them in both geography education and their everyday lives. As Alderson and Morrow (2012, p.137) ask ‘what models of childhood are assumed in the research? Children as weak, vulnerable and dependent on adults? As immature, irrational and unreliable? As capable of being mature moral agents? As consumers?’. These questions, and how the researcher responds to them, are important to consider as they inform the research design, and how the researcher positions both themselves and young people in the research (Ibid.).

Respecting and valuing children and young people as social actors, whose lives are worth studying and perspectives worth engaging with, is an important element of ethical research (Bodén, 2021). Reflecting on the value and methods of research ‘on’ or ‘about’ young people is important for teachers of geography, as they often work in wider

educational ecologies which are informed by ideas about, and systems which support, accountability and performativity. For example, those related to national standardised assessments systems and performance related pay in England. The language and ethical positioning researchers use is significant in considering how ‘the child’ is constructed and represented in, and through, research. With some ‘methodologies positioning the children as objects – like a standardized test – as conducted *on* children; methodologies positioning children as subjects – such as interviews or participatory action research – as conducted *with* children; and newer innovative methodologies positioning children as co-researchers as done *by* children’ (Bodén, 2021 p.5). The language of conducting research *for* children and young people reflects the idea of research which will be of benefit to them. These ideas have been engaged with by geography educators, for example, through the BERA (2021) Manifesto for Education for Environmental Sustainability, and Hammond’s (2020) PhD research exploring the value of children’s geographies to geography education in schools.

The importance of positionality in research

When conducting or engaging with research, it is important for teachers to consider (their own) positionality. The term positionality is commonly used ‘to suggest how our identity, including age, gender, politics, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, sexuality, religion, personality, background and life experiences shape us as researchers and ‘position’ us in relation to research participants and settings’ (Horton, 2021, p. 21). Positionality is important to consider in research in, and about, geography education as our ‘positionalities come to matter in/through research relationships and encounters’ (Horton, 2021, p.22), sometimes in dynamic, complex or unexpected ways. Teachers of geography conducting or engaging with research, must carefully consider how they navigate power dynamics e.g. between teachers and students, teachers and school leaders, and also in terms of institutional and wider educational policies and socio-spatial structures. This is because external factors, such as assessment systems, shape educational experiences and expectations, and teachers may wish to research these factors. Teachers may also wish to try to alter power dynamics; for example, by co-producing research, and sharing research findings with children, their families and wider communities.

Why does data protection matter in geography education research?

Unlike ethics, there are very clear legal obligations to comply with when processing personal data in educational research. This section introduces and explores some of the key issues.

Personal information is anything relating to a person that identifies them, either directly or indirectly. For example, a name or candidate number can easily and directly identify a student, whereas a couple of identifiers combined such as a student's age, address, gender or grades could indirectly identify them. Personal data is used in school for a range of purposes including tracking attainment and progress, identifying individual needs and support, and informing teaching and learning. By law, the school in their role as data controller must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as implemented in the Data Protection Act (2018). This means processing and storing personal information securely and confidentially and informing the Information Commissioner's Office annually about the personal data they collect, use, store and share.

Data protection principles

In order to comply with GDPR and assist in making decisions about how data are processed, it can be helpful to think in terms of the data protection principles. Figure 2 outlines these principles, as set out in the DPA (2018), and suggests some questions to consider when engaging in geography education research.

Figure 2 Applying data protection principles in geography education research

Data protection principle	Meaning	Some questions to consider when researching in, and about, geography education.
Data processing	The use of personal data is fair, lawful and transparent.	If you plan to use personal data in your research, do you know how to gain ethical approval and comply with GDPR?
Purpose limitation	Only relevant personal data for a specific purpose are collected.	When designing data collection tools, have you considered not asking for personal data (e.g. age, gender) unless necessary?

Data minimisation	Only use personal data for a specific purpose.	When writing up research, how will you anonymise individuals and schools?
Data accuracy	Personal data records should be accurate and complete, inaccurate or outdated data must be erased or rectified.	Have you checked the accuracy of the data you will be using in your research?
Privacy information	Individuals are informed about how and why their personal data are processed.	Have school leaders and participants been given information about the personal data you will be processing and why?
Storage limitation	Personal data cannot be kept for longer than it is needed.	How long do you plan to store personal data used in school? Or collected for research? How will you destroy electronic or paper copies of personal data?
Integrity and confidentiality	Personal data must be stored securely and protected from unauthorised access.	How do you plan to securely store personal data? How do you limit access to the personal data you use and process?
Accountability	By law, organisations must comply with GDPR if they collect, use or store personal data.	What data protection policies are in place in school? Have you completed data protection training this year? Have you discussed your research with the people in school responsible for research, safeguarding, GDPR where appropriate?

These key principles can help researchers to consider how to process and protect data and comply with GDPR when conducting research.

Conclusion

In writing this article we wanted to have an open conversation with teachers of geography about taking an ethical approach when engaging with, and carrying out, research and practitioner inquiries. In doing so, we have signposted data protection laws and ethical guidelines, and some useful literature for teachers of geography to engage with. There are some scenarios available as a download that are a useful stimulus for discussion about ethics and data protection for teachers of geography who are engaged in research in, and about, geography education.

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