

UFV and Research in K-12 Schools Things to Consider in Relation to Ethics

Conducting research in K-12 schools can be complex with several things to consider. The HREB has been asked to create guidelines to help clarify the process and identify the challenges. Please speak with the ethics officer if you are unsure about anything.

The time it takes a submission like this to go through the HREB is usually four to six weeks, sometimes longer, as it usually involves revision given the many pieces involved. Depending on the research risk with children and/or which group of children are the participant, it could be bumped to above minimal risk and that will increase the time it takes to review and approve. Any missing information will increase the amount of time it takes to make it through the review process. If there are follow-up amendments, it will take additional time depending on the type of the amendment.

Considerations and approvals needed *prior* to submitting to the HREB:

- Superintendent (or designate) approval is required for any public school research. The HREB does not require principal approval in addition to the superintendent approval of public schools.
- Principal approval alone is acceptable only for private school research.
- The above approval is required for all research that involves/impacts teachers or the schools on or off-site, and if you will be recruiting children from the schools to participate on or off-site.
- Schools in the Fraser Valley area are aware of (and used to) these requests from UFV researchers. If you are going to be requesting permission from a school outside of the Fraser Valley, they may take longer or require more information from you before giving you permission and there are some that have their own research review board.
- Be generous with time frames in your requests to the superintendent or principal. A date range is preferable with some flexibility (e.g. a month, January to March) rather than a specific date. If you put in a specific date or week and you cannot get ethics approval in time, then you will need another letter. If you are unsure, please ask someone on the HREB for advice before agreeing to dates and times.
- The dates should be at least a month from your intended ethics submission date (e.g. if you are going to submit to the HREB in January, plan for the research to begin sometime in February or March. You can always start sooner if you get approval early).
- Consider Pro D Days, Spring Break, Summer Break, and other holiday breaks or school events in your scheduling. These differ between school districts and can change every year.

- Your letter of approval from the Superintendent or Principal should include the names of the researchers, supervisor if applicable, the title and purpose of the project, the approximate time frame, and that consent and, if applicable, assent, will be obtained from all participants. If there is anything additional the staff going to be doing (such as collecting consent forms) the support of this should be included in the letter. It should be signed on the letterhead of the school district.

Collaborating with a teacher/administrator:

- The teacher/administrator cannot be responsible for explaining the project and asking for consent as they are in a position of power over students and parents.
- Consent and assent forms will need to be collected by someone that is not in a position of power. This may be the principal if they agree, or another researcher on the team.
- This also means that all consent/assent forms cannot be viewed until after grades have been submitted. This will need to be considered in your timelines. This will also affect how one can withdraw.
- Declare any potential conflicts of interest you may have with the school or teachers to the HREB (e.g. the PI's child goes to the school, the PI is related to someone at the school) and address how the conflicts are resolved.

Participation:

- Excluding students within the same class (e.g., only wanting high- or low-performing students) is challenging given the inclusive focus of schools. If you do exclude, this will need to be justified. Sometimes this is necessary for the research question.
- Not all parents will consent. Some children will not assent. Think about how this will look in real time – those kids will know who is and who is not participating.
- If you are collecting additional data on top of gathering their materials (e.g. an interview in the classroom), make sure to detail the additional data collection and the materials generated from it, and what the withdrawal will look like – this is not material that the children would have created in the classroom anyway.
- Parents talk. Children talk. If you are wanting to only use a certain group of students, other parents/students will know who those students are. This affects confidentiality.
- If this is an activity that would be part of the curriculum anyway or fits in with the curriculum, it would be better to get consent and collect the data after the activity is over (remember that if the teacher is involved, then you will have to wait to collect these consents after the term is over). Given that this is a school environment, this application for secondary use should still be submitted several weeks in advance since there are limits to when you might be able to get into the classroom.
- Clearly describe the consent and assent process. Will consent happen outside of the classroom? You also need an appropriate amount of time for the parents to consider the project. If you get low turnout, will you need to go back?

Research vs School Activities:

It is important to be clear about research vs school activities. There are different scenarios that may be helpful and expand on the points above:

- If: (a) all students are participating in an activity delivered by a researcher, (b) that activity aligns with regular school activities or curricula, and (c) the only data being gathered is from student products (e.g., reflections, drawings, worksheets, etc), then that activity is **not part of** the research project. While it may be appropriate to note these activities in the application, be clear that these are not part of the research project and do not go into too much detail about it. In this case, the researcher can have students and parents/guardians complete consent forms after the project requesting permission to use student products as data.
- If conditions (a) and (b) above are met, but (c) the researcher wants to use additional data gathered during the activities (e.g., classroom observations, interviews, group work audio recordings, etc), then these activities **are part of** the research project. They will need to be described in detail. There are then many considerations that the researcher must address:
 - Consent forms will need to be completed in advance of any of the activities.
 - Withdrawal can occur throughout numerous points of the activity. Who is monitoring this? What reminders are being given?
 - Students and/or parents/guardians will have the right to not have their child participate. If it is visible to others in the class who is participating and who is not, that affects confidentiality and must be discussed.
 - What will students be doing if they are not participating in the activity? This is not just a supervision question. Given that the activity addresses curricula (or is a school-like activity), these students should not be missing out on this opportunity. They should have access to an equally enriching activity that meets the same outcomes.
- If a teacher is responsible for teaching and the researcher only wants access to student work, consent forms can be completed after the assignment. In this case, the teaching activities are **not part of** the research project. The products should be minimally described as they are not part of the research project until after they have been given permission to access. The teacher will provide access to those products that were given consent to share. This then affects confidentiality as the teacher will know who chooses to be involved or not. Given the close relationship between the teacher, students, and parents/guardians, having the teacher know who chooses to be involved would likely be a source of comfort for students and parents/guardians.

- If a teacher is responsible for teaching and the researcher wishes to observe what is occurring in the classroom, this is not an experimental or controlled research project. It is also not naturalistic observation where the observer works to minimize their presence in the community. There are many observers in classrooms every week; it is not something unusual. In this case:
 - The researcher needs to minimally describe what is going on in the classroom that they will be observing.
 - Consent forms will need to be completed prior to the start of observations. Researchers should be the ones explaining the project.
 - The consent form needs to clearly outline what the researchers will be observing and why, and how they may interact with students (e.g., are they just observing, are they asking students questions, are they audio recording anything, are they taking pictures, are they gathering student products).
 - If a participant and/or parent/guardian does not want to participate, that would require the researcher to not engage, record (i.e., observations), question, or gather anything from those students. While the teacher will know who chooses not to participate (and this should be noted in the confidentiality section of the consent form), no one else in the class should be aware of those who chose not to participate.
- If a teacher is responsible for teaching and a researcher wishes to interview students with regards to an activity completed in class (whether observed or not), there are many things to consider.
 - If a student and/or parent/guardian does not want a student to be interviewed:
 - (a) will other students know who chooses not to participate and how will this be handled as it threatens to isolate students, and (b) what will those students be doing while others are being interviewed?
 - In most cases, an interview would be considered time away from schoolwork. As such either:
 - This will be part of the consent form that time away from studies will be needed to participate, or
 - This will occur outside of school hours (this may then negate the previous problem of those who choose not to participate as it would not be as obvious, but this may impact the number who are willing to participate).
- If researchers choose to use a focus group, the same issues exist as above (while also impacting confidentiality because of group activities).

Bottom line, it is important to be clear about what is considered part of research and what is not. It is important for researchers to not get too wrapped up in describing teaching and learning activities if they are just part of regular class activities and not part of the actual research or data gathering process.

Other tips:

- If this is a regular classroom activity that you are collecting data on, the ethics officer cannot be the point of contact for concerns.
- If a researcher is conducting research at a school site, the school is not considered a collaborator; they are just an institution where research is taking place.
- At no time should deception be used in school research.
- Schools, especially public schools, are potentially contentious places when it comes to private funding or benefit. Given the position of power that schools, principals, and teachers have over students and their parents/guardians, it is critical that schools are not perceived to pressure students (or teachers) to participate. If a school may/will acquire funding or resources if research is completed, that would constitute pressure.
- Benefits of the research alone need to be clear to the parents/guardians giving consent. If there is a classroom activity that you are collecting data on, the classroom activity is not a benefit of your research.
- Risks should include reference to not only risks in participating, but also risks in relation to not participating and exclusion.