A Guide to Completing and International Review Board Proposal for Preservice Teacher Action Research

Does your preservice teacher action research require International Review Board (IRB) approval? This question will be answered differently according to your university and teacher education program policies. In some institutions, preservice AR may not be considered subject to IRB oversight, while other institutions may require that you engage in the full IRB process. Your institution may fall somewhere in between. This guide does not tackle the sometimes contentious issue of IRB approval for research. Nor is this a comprehensive guide for completing IRB proposals. However, we will attempt to give some specific suggestions and raise some points for further discussions with your professors, mentor teachers, and colleagues.

As the authors of *Becoming a Teacher through Action Research*, we maintain that whenever preservice teacher action research is going to be made public, specific ethical concerns must to be addressed (see BTAR Chapter 3). *These ethical concerns should be addressed whether or not you are required to engage in the IRB process.*

A Very Brief History of IRB

Governments, universities, professions, religions, and citizens have long been concerned about ethics and research. The primary focus of these concerns involves medical research involving humans. Historical developments prior to the twentieth century have much to do with the way research is conducted today and the regulations that govern this research. The current Institutional Review Board (IRB) process of overseeing research has evolved over the past several decades.

The importance of regulatory oversight of research became apparent after World War II, when two
particularly public cases of human subjects abuse came to light. First, in Nuremberg, Germany, 23 Nazi physicians and scientists were found guilty of inhumane treatment and murder of concentration camp inmates. These inmates never gave their informed consent to be used as research subjects. Following these trials and the atrocities they exposed, the *Nuremberg Code* established basic ethical guidelines for human research (see http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/nuremberg.html).

A second catalyzing case of human subjects abuse occurred in the United States. The *Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male* included the unethical and inhumane treatment of poor African American men for 40 years starting in 1932. Until it was halted by Congress in 1972, critical medical treatment for syphilis was withheld from Tuskegee subjects without their knowledge or consent (see http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm). The resulting public outcry moved Congress to form the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavior Research. Basic ethical principles were established by the commission, and published in 1979 as the *Belmont Report* (see http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html).

The Belmont Report highlights three principles central to any research:

- *Respect for persons.* People are able to make their own decisions and to enter into research as a subject voluntarily and with full disclosure of risks and benefits. *Individuals are to be treated as autonomous human beings.* Those who have limited abilities deserve extra protection – this includes children.

- *Beneficence.* Key to beneficence is “do no harm.” Maximize the benefits of the research; minimize any harm.

- *Justice.* Participants are to be treated fairly; burdens and benefits distributed equally. Researchers must avoid the exploitation of vulnerable populations.
These principles are now law in the United States. The Office for Human Research Protections, housed within the US Department of Health and Human Services oversees this law and the related regulations. The American Educational Research Association, an international educational organization, offers practical advice and ongoing discussion of ethical research implementation for educators. Any university receiving money from the US government to support research must comply with the federal law.

**IRB Approval and Preservice Teacher Action Research**

In the light of the history of human subjects research, it may seem that preservice teacher action research is devoid of risk to participants. The genre of preservice teacher action research supported by *BTAR* reflects the process of becoming a teacher and the daily process of teaching and learning and using assessment in the classroom. In this sense, “doing research” as a way of practicing teaching as advocated by the authors of *BTAR* is not subject to IRB approval. But, when research “goes public,” when we share our results with others, then care needs to be given to ethical considerations, especially since (a) our “subjects” are children and are less able to give informed consent than adults; and b) we are their teachers, which places us in a position of power and authority in the classroom. Whether or not we are required to seek formal IRB (or other) approval, we need to make certain that students and their parents or legal guardians have given their consent for us to use data generated by them in public presentations. If students are covered by US protections such as Section 504 of the US Constitution or an Individual Education Plan or if English is not their first language or if they could be described in any way as more vulnerable, then as teacher/researchers we must be particularly careful in exercising ethical means for securing informed consent.

Many research projects carried out in the classroom and using normal educational practices are
considered “exempt” from IRB approval. Generally, preservice teacher action research as described in this book would be considered exempt from IRB approval; however, many institutions still require proposals to be submitted to the IRB for consideration and possible exemption. While this step may seem superfluous, approach the completion of the IRB proposal form as a final check of the ethical treatment of your students and other participants. You may gain insight into areas of your study in which principles of informed consent and confidentiality need to be strengthened.

Some Typical Questions on an IRB Proposal Form

Completing an IRB proposal form as a preservice teacher conducting action research can be tricky because the form is typically designed (1) for studies using a quantitative experimental, quasi-experimental, or correlational research design; (2) to protect subjects in clinical studies involving some kind of “treatment,” often using some kind of “placebo.” Therefore, some typical IRB questions will not seem to apply to your study.

For example, here are four common questions. We have italicized some of the specific terms that have puzzled our students over the years:

- Describe the purpose of this study. Include information relevant to allow the IRB to determine the scientific merit of the proposed research, including study hypotheses.
- Describe relevant characteristics of your intended sample, including relevant demographics of the sample and exclusionary criteria.
- What materials, measures, and/or apparatus do you plan to use?
- What is the study procedure? List in step-by-step fashion how the study will unfold so that the IRB reviewers can imagine exactly what it would be like to be a participant in every condition of the proposed research.

Note the italicized language: scientific merit, hypotheses, exclusionary criteria, apparatus, and the

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requirement to list every step in every condition that a subject will encounter. Imagine doing this for
the daily work of teaching and learning in the classroom! What’s an action researcher to do?

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<tr>
<th>The Question</th>
<th>Guide to Responding</th>
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<td>Describe the purpose of this study. Include information relevant to allow the IRB to determine the scientific merit of the proposed research, including study hypotheses.</td>
<td>Key to answering this question is clarity of the purpose: “This is a study of my own journey of becoming a teacher.” Follow this statement with your critical question. Explain the critical question in educational terms. There are no hypotheses, so don’t try to make one up. Remember, action research isn’t about trying to prove something true or not true. It is about describing the use of specific techniques, studying your own becoming, perhaps program evaluation, curriculum analysis, or an ethnographic study. Make this very clear. The merit of the study is how it will: (1) inform your practice as a teacher; (2) instruct you in using instructional data and interpreting this data; (3) improve learning for students.</td>
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<td>Describe relevant characteristics of your intended sample, including relevant demographics of the sample and exclusionary criteria.</td>
<td>Be very clear here in describing the demographics of the classroom where you will be collecting data. Some projects may focus on a small group of students. If this is true, you have “exclusionary criteria.” For example, perhaps you are working with young readers who have not yet met certain standards. The purpose of your study is to introduce specific teaching techniques to help the readers with comprehension. Be very clear in describing this and demonstrating why this group of students will benefit from the concentrated teaching you will be providing.</td>
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<td>What materials, measures, and/or apparatus do you plan to use?</td>
<td>This question assumes that some kind of treatment is going to be used. Don’t be concerned about the language – measures and apparatus sound a bit intimidating! What you can list and include: specific kinds of curriculum; any kind of standardized test results that may inform your study; specific kinds of instructional strategies. For example, if you are introducing a writing workshop, that is the “materials.” Describe the structure of a writing workshop.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the study procedure? List in step-by-step fashion how the study will unfold so that the IRB reviewers can imagine exactly what it would be like to be a participant in every condition of the</td>
<td>Again, this question assumes a clinical trial, say the use of a particular eye drop for a specific eye disease. Patients may react, experience pain or discomfort. For your project, describe the procedure of the strategy you will be introducing.</td>
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A second set of question often on an IRB proposal deals with risks. Again, consider the history of the IRB – medical research injecting unknown subjects with viruses that are life-threatening. For example. The intent of the IRB is to make sure subjects know about risks and accept these risks prior to agreeing to participate in a research study.

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<td>What risk does this study pose to participants? How will each risk named be minimized?</td>
<td>The standard response for most preservice teacher action research is: “There are no known risks associated with this research project.”</td>
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<td>Adverse Event Reporting</td>
<td>Adverse event reporting is primarily concerned with a treatment that turns out to be harmful to participants. Therefore, the standard response for most preservice teacher action research is, “Because there are no known risks associated with this research project, there is no need for adverse event reporting. Any event associated with daily life in the classroom that may be upsetting to a student will be reported to parents as per school policy.”</td>
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Another common question is often, “What benefits will the participant receive for participating in this study?” Many clinical trials pay participants for their participation or are promised long-term medical care or other such rewards. This isn’t true for preservice teacher action research. However, the participants, the student, should benefit from the project. How? Through increased learning in whatever subject areas is being studied. Be sure to list this as a benefit.

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Perhaps the most important part of the IRB proposal for educational purposes is the informed consent. A range of questions may ask how you as a researcher will make sure your under-age participants know that data generated by them will be made public and how you will keep this information confidential. Most universities have an informed-consent form that is normally required for all research studies. However, for classroom action research, these same institutions usually allow teacher/researchers to use a letter home rather than a form that uses difficult (and inappropriate) “research” language. There is a template for such a letter in your BTAR text (see Chapter 3).

Keeping data confidential is critical as a teacher. This is discussed in your BTAR text. Articulate how you will keep this data confidential in the IRB form. For example:

- the use of pseudonyms or descriptions for the school district, school, mentor-teacher’s name, students’ names and anyone else associated with the school site.
- where your researcher’s notebook will be kept;
- how data will be handled and where your analysis will be kept (i.e. not at the school site, on a secure computer – not on the backseat of your car!)
- how and where the research will be made public.

The institution of IRB is a critical and important step in research, safeguarding the research participants from all disciplines. Perhaps the most important principle from the Belmont report is this: Do no harm! This is a worthy motto for all of us as teacher/researchers!