

# Ethics in Mindset Interventions

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The first assignment mindset champions submit is a project plan. Within the plan, there is an expectation that champions have specified their intervention, its timeline, and how it will be evaluated. When this is marked, tutors are looking for rationale, context, feasibility, and risk. Project plans must also include a consideration of the ethics of carrying out the project; without this, champions are given feedback and encouraged to update and resubmit their assessments.

This document is a guide about ethics for mindset champions to use as they prepare their classroom interventions, to be read as part of their planning process.

## What are ethical considerations?

Ethical considerations are important in all forms of work and life, and essentially mean 'doing the right thing'. This does not mean that it is simple to determine what is right in any given situation. In proposing and carrying out research, especially research with children, it is important to consider whether plans and actions do no harm.

Ethics are not confined to a checklist added at the end of a proposal and before the 'real work' of collecting data begins. Instead they are an ongoing process of reflection about who is benefiting, and who might be negatively impacted by the research process and product.

Ethical considerations for a piece of research are varied and can be complex. Ethical approval for research at university level can take a lot of work to achieve, work carried out by the researcher and the ethical review board.

For the purposes of the small scale inquiry that mindset champions carry out, I suggest that the following ethical considerations are necessary.

1. Confidentiality
2. Consent
3. Right to withdraw
4. Do no harm (to participants, peers, families)
5. Honest reporting
6. Language used – not discriminatory or deficit-based
7. Reflection on the position of power the teacher-researcher has

## Context

The academic discipline this sits in is educational research. In particular, practitioner inquiry, 'close to practice' research, and/or action research. These are mature sub-fields and as such approaches have been developed and debated which can be further explored.

Some sources, among many, about practitioner inquiry are (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2012).

Action research (teachers researching their own practice) is a useful frame for the mindset projects which students undertake. It is worth reading A Guide to Ethical Issues and Action Research (Zeni, 1998), in particular pages 16 and 17 (ask your tutor for the pdf if you need). This shows the importance of reflection in ethics, and the role that methods play.

## Children's rights and ethics

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) is being incorporated into Scots Law at the moment. The convention has been used to inform and reform the way research with children should be approached and interpreted. Of course none of us will be intentionally undermining anyone's rights, but some of our adult thinking and practice can have this effect.

The following articles from the UNCRC are of particular importance to doing research with children:

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*Article 12 – children's perspectives must be integral to the research;*

*Article 13 – methods must allow the child to express their perspectives freely;*

*Article 33 – research must be conducted to the highest possible standard;*

*Article 36 – children must not be exploited or harmed in any way.*

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(See Lundy & McEvoy, 2012b, 2012a).

While the course itself does not discuss rights, there is an obligation upon all the adults (champions, leaders and course tutors) to be aware of them, which I suggest includes using the UNCRC and the understandings it has generated about how research with children should (and should not) be carried out.

## Research Premise for Mindset Course

The premise of the research projects for this course is not 'does mindset work', but 'can I create a positive mindset culture in my classes'. This is an important distinction and has implications for the design of the data collection. We are asking teachers to consider how their teaching impacts their pupils' mindsets towards challenge, believing that mindset is an important facet of resilience and persistence.

## Categorising children

A criticism of some of the work in growth mindset has been that it allows practitioners to blame their pupils for their lack of achievement. This is an individualised deficit model of education and it has inherent problems. Any proposal or write up which uses this lens will require feedback and guidance to reframe. Our duty is to care, uphold rights, and do no harm. Deficit-based language does harm. Focusing on the culture of learning, rather than the 'problems' with individuals is suggested.

## Control groups

Control groups are used in Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) which work on the premise that if two groups are large enough, similar enough, and randomly assigned, any difference between one that has had an intervention and the other can be attributed to the intervention. Large scale RCTs are happening in educational research (e.g. Torgerson, 2009) and many funders and policymakers rely on this sort of experimental approach as proof. They must be rigorously designed and

conducted, and for statistics to be valid, must have large amounts of data (this avoids any effect being down to chance). For validity in the data collection, the researcher should also not know to which group participants have been assigned.

These conditions are not met in practitioner inquiry. Champions committed to using control groups will need to read and reference sources to aid them in designing their data collection (e.g. Denscombe, 2007). However it is very unlikely they will be able to design something randomised or blind, or with sufficient data.

### Education research is social

Social research differs to medical research in very significant ways. Social research requires that the researcher is conscious of the systems, power relationships, beliefs and behaviours of the groups studied. In social research it is well understood that the researcher impacts the research, and objectivity ('positivism') is not possible. It is important to remember that something being quantifiable does not mean it is itself objective (Ercikan & Roth, 2006).

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