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and Margy Whalley

ABSTRACT

The EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers outlines underpinning ethical principles as well as practice guidance to ensure that research undertaken globally within the field of early childhood is done so ethically. This revised ethical code has been expanded to ensure that current global issues such as sustainability and the advancement of technology are evident. It also considers a rising prevalence of desk-based research as we recognise that all research warrants sufficient ethical consideration. International early childhood researchers, under the direction of the EECERA board of trustees, have drawn upon their research experience in this collaborative document which has been reconsidered in light of specific challenges to our field. It is hoped that this revised EECERA Ethical Code will encourage all researchers to acknowledge the layers of ethical complexity that invariably occur when working within the field of early childhood research.

Introduction

The EECERA ethical code is intended to provide a framework of guidance for all those involved in early childhood research and the publication and dissemination of its results. 'Early Childhood' in this context is delineated within the aims and scope of the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (EECERJ). These ethical principles and protocols have been developed and subsequently refined by a collaborative working group appointed by the EECERA Trustees and providing an extensive combined experience of undertaking internationally focused early childhood research. The revisions of the EECERA Ethical Code are necessary to ensure major shifts in our world are fully acknowledged, including: developments in technology, such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and the rise of social media and online communities; new legislative requirements; and the importance of addressing issues of sustainability, internationalism and globalisation. This latest revision acknowledges the substantive contribution offered by

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the previous EECERA working group who developed the last version of the EECERA Ethical Code (Bertram et al. 2016).

The most recent working group, with international representation, met online to discuss the focus of the required revisions and determined six aspects that warranted careful consideration. Separate electronic copies of the ethical code were then shared amongst the working group so that each aspect could be considered in light of the previous version and asynchronous dialogue could evolve despite time zone differences. Each of the documents sought to foreground: (1) power, voice and rights; (2) equity and diversity; (3) sustainability; (4) technology (including generative AI); (5) policy focused and desk-based research; and (6) positionality. These separate documents were then amalgamated to produce a final revised version of the ethical code which reflects the combined focus of the working group in our rapidly changing world.

We hope that this framework of guidance will support Early Childhood researchers in their research design decisions and ensure that all research, whether desk based or involving human participants, is conducted to the highest ethical standards in all contexts. It is also presented to promote the safeguarding and the well-being of all participants, particularly the very young and those experiencing challenging circumstances, and also generates the highest standards of scholarship and research practice. The ethical principles and subsequent practice guidelines are set out in distinct sections to support the researcher in systematically embedding ethics in *all* aspects of their work.

The EECERA Ethical Code sets out the expectations of ethical conduct expected of early childhood researchers using a diversity of approaches in their research. It is intended that all research conducted by EECERA members, or published and disseminated through EECERA platforms, including its journal, books and annual international conference, will be evaluated according to its adherence to ethics embodied in this code.

EECERA ethical principles

These principles are set out with the intention of encouraging Early Childhood researchers to work in the spirit of aspiring to achieve these high ethical expectations within all aspects of their work, whilst acknowledging that all aspects will be challenging. We believe that Early Childhood researchers should have an ethic of respect for:

1. the child, family, community and society;
2. democratic values;
3. justice and equity;
4. knowing from multiple perspectives;
5. integrity, transparency and respectful interactions;
6. quality and rigour;
7. academic scholarship;
8. social contribution;
9. human rights;
10. global sustainability.

The child, family, community and society

The ethic of respect should:

- i operate for all research participants from pre-birth throughout the course of life;
- ii ensure all the research participants are seen as individuals developing in the context of their families and communities, which are culturally situated as part of wider societies;
- iii ensure that all individuals and communities are treated in a way which promotes inclusion and honours all identities.

Democratic values

The ethic of respect should

- i acknowledge that human sciences are vital in a democratic society and research should be inclusive and represent different interests, values and the rights of individuals, groups, communities and organisations;
- ii ensure the values involved in any research focus and approach, whether desk based or involving human participants, are made visible, and the values embodied in evidence sources and choices are made explicit;
- iii ensure all participants and communities involved in research are treated equitably, sensitively, with dignity and without prejudice, and respectful of age, religion, language, disability, neurodiversity, health condition, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, class, national origin, culture, social economic status or marital, domestic or parental status;
- iv acknowledge the rights of others to hold values, attitudes and opinions that differ from those held by the researcher, who, where necessary, should make their own positionality or privilege clear;
- v examine and reflect upon the researcher's own positionality to remediate issues of personal, invisible power;
- vi be sensitive to culture, individual and role differences and strive to eliminate bias of any kind;
- vii aim to share power between all participants as far as possible and in a way that allows all involved to actively have voice in the research process and contribute equitably and appropriately to the research process.

Justice and equity

The ethic of respect should

- i operate within a code that actively promotes democratic values and contributes to social justice and equity both within and between communities and societies;
- ii be respectful of plurality at the level of paradigms, theories, disciplines and methodologies, arriving at a prismatic process of research that illuminates the complexity of human beings and gives credence to diverse voices, answers to different realities and promotes equality.

Knowing from multiple perspectives

The ethic of respect should

- i promote research that is original and informing, whilst showing respect for existing work and disciplines;
- ii aim to extend knowledge of understanding in all areas of early childhood activity and from all participants' perspectives, including learners, educators, practitioners, parents, policy makers and the public;
- iii acknowledge the legitimacy of diverse educational research philosophies, paradigms and methodologies that exist and seek to reassure that its results do not selectively judge or constrain, directly or indirectly, whilst selecting the most appropriate research methodology for the research question;
- iv acknowledge context and adopt a global perspective
- v ensure the author acknowledges their own positionality and privilege where discussion of perspective requires it.

Integrity, transparency, explainability and respectful interactions

The ethic of respect should

- i make public the set of ethical principles and actions which guide research practice;
- ii ensure researchers do not knowingly act in ways that jeopardize the welfare of others;
- iii ensure the avoidance of deception or non-disclosure towards research participants and that all research actions are transparent and documented fully, explaining, where required, any AI systems used, with data and methods made open for external scrutiny and critical review;
- iv ensure research processes and outputs are conducted in ways that are honest, fair and acknowledging of all contributions in the research and dissemination process;
- v support researchers in making public the results of their research to all involved and the wider public unless to do so would cause harm;
- vi ensure research findings are communicated in a clear, straightforward fashion and in language judged to be appropriate to their intended audience;
- vii ensure that researchers never compromise ethical behaviour in favour of collegiality or use that collegiality to promote their own research outcomes;
- viii personal, professional or financial relationships should be disclosed.

Equity and rigour

The ethic of respect should

- i ensure that research designs rigorously serve the questions and objectives of the study;
- ii ensure free, independent, critical and informed choices of authors, articles, theories and concepts included in any literature review and research design with full acknowledgement and citation;

- iii ensure the highest ethical standards for working with participants which guarantees participants their rights;
- iv ensure the highest standards of academic and professional rigour in presentation and dissemination of research, conducted in a mutually respectful manner, without self-promoting by reducing or undermining others.

Academic scholarship

The ethic of respect should

- i ensure all those who have made a substantive contribution to the generation of an intellectual product are listed as authors/contributors;
- ii acknowledge that it is improper to list people who have not directly contributed to the research or written outputs of research;
- iii ensure that academic status or other indicators of power should not determine first authorship, but rather the order of authorship should reflect the relative leadership and contributions made by the researchers concerned;
- iv acknowledge the obligation on authors to attribute visibly all external sources of support, including sponsors or financial support for a project in which the researcher is involved directly or indirectly;
- v ensure authors disclose the publication history of articles they submit for publication; that is, if the present article is substantially similar in content and form to one previously published, that fact should be noted and the place of publication cited.

Social contribution

The ethic of respect should

- i ensure research embodies an awareness of social responsibility towards the communities and societies in which it is conducted;
- ii ensure research strives to advance scholarly knowledge and practice and serves the public good;
- iii ensure research has utility and meaning for all those involved in the research process;
- iv promote research which contributes to the wider research community in a spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism, and which generates impact on both policy and practice and the enhancement of knowledge in the field;
- v ensure the topic of any research, whether desk-based, policy oriented or participatory and practice led is value based, evidence-informed and action oriented to secure beneficence and social justice.

Human rights

The ethic of respect should

- i ensure all participants in the research process are viewed as individuals with rights to participate in the research activity, either, directly or indirectly, actively or passively;

- ii require research to embody a deep respect for the rights of people, especially children and potentially marginalised members of a community, to have a voice and participate actively in all decisions and actions which affect them;
- iii acknowledge where active participation cannot be realised and discuss the potential implications and limitations of this;
- iv promote human rights (as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) and specifically acknowledge children's rights (as expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

Global sustainability

The ethic of respect should

- i ensure that all research actions and publications acknowledge the importance of the global sustainability goals and strive to embed these within their work;
- ii acknowledge the intergenerational contract of sustainability, to provide for present needs while not compromising the ability for future generations to meet their needs;
- iii recognise the potential tension between providing the best quality of life for the child and preserving the environment;
- iv be responsive to equality, inclusion and diversity challenges and uphold human rights and labour laws.

Research practice guidelines/protocols

Responsibilities towards participants

Voluntary and informed consent and on-going assent

- i Researchers must ensure that participation in research is voluntary, informed and consensual. This means that all those involved, including young children, are provided with full and honest information about the content, purpose and process of the research and given the opportunity to agree or disagree to participate in the light of this information. At no time must a participant be put under any form of duress to participate.
- ii The sampling of large populations through online platforms should provide sufficient information that participants can determine whether they meet the research criteria and care should be taken to ensure responses are authentic.
- iii Where young children are involved, parental consent should be sought in line with national guidance and the child's informed consent should be obtained in a manner that is meaningful and child friendly.
- iv Where very young or preverbal children are involved, researchers can use the principles of ongoing assent which take account of children's nonverbal communications to ascertain their willingness to take part in the research process.
- v Obtaining consent (oral, written or other forms) or assent should be viewed as an active and ongoing process. Participants should be given the right to withdraw from the research at any point.

- vi Participation should be renegotiated if the original research content, purpose or process changes significantly.
- vii Where data collection is online only there needs to be a mechanism for obtaining informed consent and clarity over a participant's right to withdraw after their data has been submitted.
- viii Policy oriented and desk-based research should also ensure, as far as possible, that there is consent to use any documents or reports included in the study noting that some are produced with the expectation they will be available for public use or accountability and would not normally need consent for use in the research process. Other documents and reports which have been produced for another purpose, and with an expectation that they would not sit in a public domain, require consent to be used. If consent is not achievable, researchers should evidence their attempts to gain consent.
- ix In those few cases where it is not appropriate or possible to obtain informed consent, careful consideration must be given to the reasons for this, and these should be recorded formally and checked with a local ethics body.

Anonymity and confidentiality

- i Researchers must recognise all individual's right to privacy. The confidentiality and anonymity of research participants should be seen as the norm at all stages in the research, from data collection to analysis and publication, unless they specifically and explicitly waive this right.
- ii Researchers should take care that all data is kept in a secure format and location so that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be breached. This is especially important when using social media and online mechanisms for data collection where storage is managed by a third party. Research leaders must provide clarity about responsibility for data storage and security.

Participants seen as individuals with rights not objects

- i Participants should be always viewed as individuals with rights and never objectified or 'othered' in the research process.
- ii All research participants should be respectfully viewed as individuals with the right to agree to, or withdraw from, the research process at any time.
- iii All research must be conducted with the human rights and capabilities of all respondents being given absolute respect and acknowledgement.

Non-discriminatory and inclusive participation

- i Researchers should aim to be inclusive and non-discriminatory in their identification and selection of research participants.

- ii Where participation in the research for some individuals or communities is difficult, steps should be taken to actively address the barriers preventing participation.
- iii Researchers should also explore methodologies which allow alternative means for less enfranchised groups, including young children and those experiencing challenges, to make an authentic contribution to the research process.
- iv Researchers should take steps to avoid research designs that advantage one group of participants over another.

Use of incentives and non-exploitation

- i Researchers should acknowledge that offering incentives to encourage participation can sometimes be problematic and has the potential to produce bias in participant sampling and responses.
- ii In general, the use of incentives should be the exception rather than the norm in research, and where incentives are proposed, the nature of these should be carefully considered.
- iii Researchers must be careful to avoid the exploitation of participants for the purposes of their research, including over reliance on one group, overuse of goodwill and the lack of power by participants to resist demands and requests.

Non-malevolence, no harm should come

- i Researchers must be aware that the research process may put pressure on participants, or lead to potentially harmful consequences. They should take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion, pressure or stress which may flow from participation in the research. This may be a particular challenge in relation to newer visual imaging and tracking technology and the consequences of using these methods should be carefully considered.
- ii Researchers should see themselves as 'answerable' for any issues raised as a consequence of their research process.
- iii Researchers must immediately desist from any actions which cause distress to participants.
- iv Researchers should aim to minimise the impact of their research on participants, either bureaucratic, emotional, physical or otherwise, seeking to adhere to an ethic of 'minimal intrusion' on the lives of participants.

Feedback to all participants

- i All participants should be briefed at significant stages in the research process and at the conclusion of the research.
- ii Researchers must be prepared to reconsider the research process following feedback from participants.
- iii All participants must be provided with access to copies of any reports, information or other publications arising from their participation.

Responsibilities towards the research process

High standards of professional integrity, rigour and competence

- i Research should be conducted with the highest ethical standards as set out in these guidelines and recognised locally, nationally and internationally.
- ii The rigour of the research should be evident in the transparent criteria for choice of theoretical and literature sources which should be meticulously and independently located and accurately cited to agreed conventions.
- iii The research design should rigorously serve the research objectives and questions.
- iv Research outputs and publications should be carefully and meticulously prepared and published to the highest academic standards.

Participatory approaches with shared power in research process

- i Researchers should operate within the spirit of articles 3 and 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child where the research involves children, or marginalised young people and adults.
- ii Researchers must give all participants the opportunity to express their views freely and ask questions on all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age.
- iii For participants who are non-verbal or pre-verbal, researchers should work in an attuned way being sensitive to the other ways young children communicate.
- iv Researchers in a position of power or authority in relation to participants must indicate the steps taken to reduce the power differential.
- v Researchers should acknowledge possible alternative approaches and methodologies and give a full and honest justification for the final choice of methods, whether desk based or involving human participants.

Data storage, protection and security

- i Research should comply with Data Protection legislation which ensures that all participants know about and have access to personal data stored in relation to them. Consideration should be given to the impact of such legislation on children who may not legally be able to provide consent for the management of their data.
- ii Storage protocols and parameters should be disclosed to participants and consideration should be given to the increasing levels of data being gathered around our youngest children; stored data needs to be purposeful.
- iii Researchers should ensure confidential data, information or communications are kept securely and are protected from external intrusion and disclosure.
- iv Researchers must have permission from participants to disclose personal information to third parties or to grant third parties permission to access such data. A record must be kept of any disclosures.

- v The above guidelines are particularly important when using visual imaging and tracking technology, and appropriate risk assessments are carried out before fieldwork begins.
- vi Where data collection is via a third-party site (such as social media, shared files or survey sites) researchers must provide clarity to participants regarding data ownership and storage.

Openness and disclosure

- i Researchers who believe confidentiality and anonymity agreements may allow illegal behaviour to continue must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. Limitations to confidentiality will be clearly communicated to participants.
- ii The use of AI to support the research process must have human oversight and be disclosed to participants, as must subsequent data storage protocols.
- iii If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or others, the researchers must seek to protect children from harm, following appropriate safeguarding procedures. Researchers should apprise the participants involved if they intend to disclose wherever possible.
- iv Researchers should keep careful documentation on the reasons for disclosure and their actions in making the disclosure in case of misconduct allegations or other serious consequences.

Duty of care to researchers

- i Researcher's rights and interests should be protected and risks to research staff in conducting research must be carefully assessed and minimised, especially when lone working.

Regular and open feedback to all participants

- i All research participants, including young children, have a right to feedback on the research process and outcomes. Researchers should debrief participants at significant points in the research process and at the conclusion of the research, providing copies of any reports or publications arising from their participation.

Employment of sustainable approaches, methods and activities within the research process

- i All researchers should strive to implement the global sustainability goals in their research process and actions.

- ii Research processes should safeguard human dignity, rights and inclusive practices while recognising the interconnectedness of all life and promoting the well-being of the planet.

Responsibilities towards research outputs and dissemination process

Disclosure of sponsors and interested parties

- i Sponsors or interested parties are considered to be any person or body that funds the research or facilitates it by allowing and enabling access to data and participants. The relationship between researchers and sponsors should be defined in a written agreement and disclosed in all research outputs and publicity.
- ii All interests in the research should be explicitly stated, including sources of financial support and relevant personal or professional relationships that may have the appearance of, or potential for, a conflict of interest with all those with an interest in the research.
- iii Researchers must give due respect and acknowledgement to all methodologies and related methods.

Confidentiality and anonymity

- i Any decisions to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation, and participants must be informed beforehand of the intention and reasons for disclosure.

Intellectual property rights

- i Sponsored research should follow the norm that researchers have a right to independently publish the findings of research, and that this right should not be lightly waived or unreasonably denied.
- ii Researchers have the right to disassociate themselves publicly from accounts of research they have conducted if they feel its presentation is misleading or selective.

Reporting and publishing standards

- i A wide range of dissemination strategies should be used to ensure greater reach of research outputs, including technology and websites.
- ii Reporting should adopt a communication style which is accessible with clarity and fluency for those interested and involved in the research, and in a language that is appropriate to the intended audience.
- iii Researchers should take steps to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of all public communications about the research.

Utility and social beneficence

- i Research outputs should contribute to the generation of improvements in early childhood policy and/or practice and to the enhancement of knowledge.
- ii Researchers have a responsibility to seek to make public the results of their research for the benefit of a broader understanding of early childhood policy and practice within wider society.
- iii Readers of research have a responsibility to engage with authors professionally making use of appropriate channels for critique and collaboration.

Research publication guidelines

Authorship and sponsors

Order of authors, credit and non-citation

- i The academic status or other indicators of power should not determine first authorship. All contributing authors should be credited in the order of the significance of their contribution in the authoring process.
- ii All those who have made a substantive contribution to the generation of an intellectual product are entitled to be listed as authors.
- iii There should be no 'ghost' authoring of publications and it is improper to list people who have not directly contributed to the research or written outputs of the research.

Status of authors and location of authors

- i The status and institutional location of all authors should be made visible in all research materials and outputs.

Transparency, conflict of interest, funder visibility

- i There is a fundamental obligation on authors to acknowledge and attribute all external sources, financial or in kind, such as organisations or sponsors who have contributed to the research programme directly or indirectly. This obligation extends to the acknowledgement of artificial intelligence in the authorship of the output.
- ii Authors should disclose the publication history of articles or books they present for publication. If a present article or book is similar in content to one previously published, that fact should be noted and cited.

Rigour and integrity

Honesty, trustworthiness, reliability and validity

- i Researchers should ensure that their research processes and findings are transparent, honest and trustworthy, and that inferences and generalisations drawn from their research evidence are valid, reliable and credible.

- ii Authors are accountable for the integrity of their content including full disclosure of any generative AI used.

Robust, appropriate and ethical methodology

- i Researchers must protect the integrity of the community of researchers by ensuring they conduct their research to the highest standards.
- ii Research should promote methodologies and methods that are both robust and ethical in their execution.
- iii Researchers must employ methods that are fit for the purpose of the research, and where a specific method, approach or philosophy of research is promoted, an awareness of alternatives should be clearly visible, with the justification of the chosen approaches and methods being honest and justified.

Transparency of process and results

- i Researchers should report research processes and results transparently, accurately and in sufficient detail to allow knowledgeable and trained researchers to understand, interpret and critically appraise them.

Purpose and value

Current, relevant, pertinent and utility

- i Research should have clear purpose, meaning and value to those who are involved in the research process and/or who are subjects of the research focus.
- ii Research should have current relevance and utility to the wider communities and societies in which it is located. The impact of the research should be planned for and documented.

Knowledge generation, originality, innovation and challenge

- i Research should aim to generate new knowledge which makes an original contribution to the field.
- ii Research should aim to be innovative and challenging of existing orthodoxies and assumptions, adopting a respectful but critical stance towards existing knowledge and practices.

Social contribution

- i Researchers should acknowledge the professional responsibility they hold towards the communities and societies in which they live and work. In undertaking research, they should strive to advance scholarly knowledge which makes a contribution to the quality of life of those communities and societies and serves the public good.

Malpractice

Multiple submissions

- i Researchers must not submit a manuscript for publication to multiple publishers unless the publisher explicitly permits the practice in the submission guidelines.
- ii Manuscripts can only be submitted to a second publisher after an official decision has been received from the first publisher or the manuscript has been withdrawn.
- iii On submission of the manuscript, the author grants that publisher first claim to publication.

Plagiarism or self plagiarism

- i Researchers and authors in their teaching, writing and presentations should explicitly identify, credit and fully cite any author(s) that they take material, data or ideas quoted verbatim from their work, whether it is published, unpublished or electronically available.
- ii Researchers and authors in their teaching, writing and presentations must provide acknowledgement and reference to the use of other's work even if the work is not quoted verbatim or paraphrased, and they must not present other's work as their own whether it is published, unpublished or in electronic form.
- iii Researchers must not submit for subsequent publication work that has been previously published unless it is published with citation of the first publication.

False claims, misrepresentation, fabrication, sensationalism, distortion

- i. Researchers must not make false claims, fabricate or misrepresent, research evidence, data, findings or conclusions.
- ii. They must not sensationalise or distort findings in a way that compromises knowledge generation for public exposure.

Illegal use of research

- i Research must not be used for illegal or fraudulent purposes.
- ii Researchers must not knowingly or negligently use their position for illegal or fraudulent purposes.

Defamation and libel

- i Researchers must not criticise other researchers or research practice in a defamatory or unprofessional manner.

- ii Researchers must respond appropriately should an ethical complaint be raised against them including not retaliating or engaging in defamation.

Communication and publication

Clarity and accessibility of communication

- i Researchers should strive to present their findings to a wide audience in a clear, unambiguous and accessible style which is appropriate to the intended audience. Research participants may have the opportunity to support dissemination.
- ii Researchers should use a wide range of dissemination strategies, including electronic and web-based forums, to enhance knowledge transfer and the impact of the research findings.

Responsibilities of researchers, authors, editors and reviewers

- i It is the responsibility of all those involved in the generation and publication of research to ensure that the highest standards of professional competence, integrity, ethics and scholarship are safeguarded and promoted.
- ii Where researchers, authors, editors and reviewers become aware of malpractice they must present their concerns, in the first instance to those involved. Where possible, public accusations and allegations should be avoided as they bring the research community into disrepute. However, in the absence of resolution, or if it is in the public interest, then concerns should be made public.

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Reference

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