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# Ethical Issues in International Educational Research

## Year

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## Description

During a research project studying factors that contribute to the professional identity of primary school teachers in West Africa, the supervisor of a number of teachers from one school requires that all of the teachers consent to participate in the research. What should the researcher do in this situation?

## Body

Dr. Sheridan has been examining factors that contribute to the professional identity of primary school teachers in West Africa. In developing her study, she has worked with many non-governmental and governmental agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to gain access to her target population as well as to gather preliminary data based on programs that have included school-based teacher training. Based on her experiences with the agencies, the schools, and the Ghana Teacher Education Division over the last three years, Dr. Sheridan has selected ten schools in each region in Ghana for interviews and observations of primary school teachers, their students, and their communities.

Dr. Sheridan has selected her sample from a pool of schools that have collaborated in the past with at least one of the aforementioned agencies where school-based teacher training had been administered. Teachers in these schools have worked with researchers as well as school-based in-service trainers, but this study will be

conducted and administered by Dr. Sheridan and her research assistants. Dr. Sheridan will observe the teachers and will conduct interviews and focus groups to examine their individual and collaborative concepts of teaching as a profession. She will also conduct interviews with students and community members and participate in community meetings at the start of her project. Dr. Sheridan has already received approval from her home institution's IRB for the study, and as part of the approved protocol, she must obtain informed consent from all of the study participants.

Kwaku Konadu is a head teacher at one of the primary schools in Kumasi. Head teachers tend to hold higher status and also wield significant power over the other teachers at the primary school level. When Dr. Sheridan visits the school to provide the study information materials to the teachers, Mr. Konadu has all of the teachers together in the school block to listen to the presentation and receive the materials. Following Dr. Sheridan's presentation in which she stresses that this is an independent project that is not being funded by any external agency, Mr. Konadu tells all of the teachers they must sign the informed consent form because of Dr. Sheridan's connections to the USAID. He reminds the teachers that they would not have the teaching and learning materials they have without funding from USAID, and they must sign the forms so they can continue to receive funding.

Dr. Sheridan tries to interject, but she is quickly silenced by Mr. Konadu. Knowing the traditional gender roles in the community, Dr. Sheridan does not contradict Mr. Konadu in front of the teachers. She knows that speaking out publicly in front of him would indicate a loss of face for Mr. Konadu and could upset the balance at the school. In their private conversation, Dr. Sheridan brings up the issue of teacher participation, and she tells Mr. Konadu that the teachers have a choice in whether or not they participate. Mr. Konadu lets her know that all of the teachers will be participating no matter what since the Kumasi District Director of Education has already informed all of the head teachers in the district that they are required to participate in Dr. Sheridan's study and comply with any of her requests.

## **Questions**

1. How could Dr. Sheridan have prevented the coercion for consent implied by Mr. Konadu? How did the inequality of power impact voluntary consent?
2. What, if anything, could Dr. Sheridan do to render the consent voluntary?
3. Should Dr. Sheridan proceed with her study at this school? Should Dr. Sheridan proceed with her study in this district?

4. If Dr. Sheridan does proceed with the study, should she contact her home institution's IRB before proceeding with the study or after data collection? Why? Will the data collected be reliable and/or valid? Why?
5. What are Dr. Sheridan's ethical responsibilities to the teachers at the schools? What are Dr. Sheridan's ethical responsibilities to her home institution's IRB?

### **Contributor(s)**

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