

## Dialogues on the relationship between the role of research ethics committees and research methods in the field of education

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**ABSTRACT.** The Research Ethics Committee (CEP) aims to guarantee the fulfillment of the well-being of research participants through a detailed review of research protocols that involve human beings. There are several obstacles identified in the literature that demonstrate how slow the presentation process for the researcher can be, which potentially makes the type of research design proposed unfeasible. Our objective is to investigate possible relationships between research methods used in investigations in the Education area and the difficulties that researchers experience when presenting their research projects to the CEP. We consider that reflections on the obstacles that imply the presentation of investigations at the CEP could represent important indications for the improvement of research in Human Sciences. As a methodological procedure, we carried out bibliographic and documentary research in Scielo's scientific library. We assume that the type of methodological choice used in research in the field of Education may be related to the bureaucratic aspects of the presentation of investigations at the CEP. As a result, we were able to identify that no studies were found that analyzed possible relationships between the type of methodological choice adopted in research in the area of Education and the inclusion in the CEP. We consider it relevant to expand studies that aim to investigate possible relationships between the presentation of research projects at the CEP and the methodological options used in research in the Education area, as studies of a qualitative nature predominate.

**Keywords:** ethics committee, education, bibliographical research, research methods.

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## **Diálogos sobre a relação entre o papel dos comitês de ética em pesquisa e os métodos de pesquisa na área da Educação**

**RESUMO.** O Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa (CEP) visa assegurar o cumprimento do bem-estar dos participantes da pesquisa por meio da revisão detalhada dos protocolos de pesquisa envolvendo seres humanos. São diversos os obstáculos identificados na literatura que demonstram o quão moroso pode ser o processo de submissão para o pesquisador, podendo inviabilizar o tipo de delineamento de pesquisa proposto. Objetivamos investigar possíveis relações entre os métodos de pesquisa utilizados em pesquisas na área da Educação e dificuldades vivenciadas por pesquisadores quando submetem seus projetos de pesquisa aos CEP. Consideramos que as reflexões acerca dos entraves envolvendo a submissão de pesquisas ao CEP podem representar importantes indicativos para o aperfeiçoamento das pesquisas em Ciências Humanas. Como procedimento metodológico, realizamos uma pesquisa bibliográfica e documental na biblioteca científica *SciELO* (Scientific Electronic Library Online). Temos como hipótese que o tipo de escolha metodológica empregada nas pesquisas da área da Educação pode estar relacionada aos aspectos burocráticos de submissão de pesquisas ao CEP. Como resultados, pudemos identificar que não foram localizados estudos que analisassem possíveis relações entre o tipo de escolha metodológica adotada nas pesquisas na área da Educação e a submissão ao CEP. Consideramos relevante a ampliação de estudos que objetivem investigar possíveis relações entre a submissão de projetos de pesquisa ao CEP e as escolhas metodológicas empregadas nas pesquisas na área da Educação, uma vez que há a predominância de estudos de natureza qualitativa.

**Palavras-chave:** comitê de ética, educação, pesquisa bibliográfica, métodos de pesquisa.

## **Diálogos sobre la relación entre el papel de los comités de ética de la investigación y los métodos de investigación en el ámbito de la educación**

**RESUMEN.** El Comité de Ética en Investigación (CEP) tiene como objetivo garantizar el cumplimiento del bienestar de los participantes de la investigación a través de la revisión detallada de los protocolos de investigación que involucran a seres humanos. Hay varios obstáculos identificados en la literatura que demuestran cuán lento puede ser el proceso de presentación para el investigador, lo que potencialmente hace inviable el tipo de diseño de investigación propuesto. Nuestro objetivo es investigar posibles relaciones entre los métodos de investigación utilizados en investigaciones en el área de Educación y las dificultades que experimentan los investigadores al momento de presentar sus proyectos de investigación al CEP. Consideramos que las reflexiones sobre los obstáculos que implican la presentación de investigaciones al CEP pueden representar indicaciones importantes para la mejora de la investigación en Ciencias Humanas. Como procedimiento metodológico, realizamos investigación bibliográfica y documental en la biblioteca científica de Scielo. Presumimos que el tipo de elección metodológica utilizada en la investigación en el campo de la Educación puede estar relacionada con los aspectos burocráticos de la presentación de investigaciones al CEP. Como resultado, pudimos identificar que no se encontraron estudios que analizaran posibles relaciones entre el tipo de elección metodológica adoptada en investigaciones en el área de Educación y el sometimiento al CEP. Consideramos relevante ampliar estudios que tengan como objetivo investigar posibles relaciones entre la presentación de proyectos de investigación al CEP y las opciones metodológicas utilizadas en las investigaciones en el área de Educación, ya que predominan estudios de carácter cualitativo.

**Palabras clave:** comité de ética, educación, investigación bibliográfica, métodos de investigación.

## Introduction

When it comes to research in education, it is necessary to think about the ethical issues involved. The application of ethical standards is the responsibility of the research ethics committees in universities and research institutions, coordinated by the National Commission on Research Ethics (Comissão Nacional de Ética na Pesquisa - CONEP), which constitute the CEPs-CONEP systems.

The concern for ethics in scientific research began at an important moment in the struggle for respect for human rights, with the implementation of the Nuremberg Code in 1947 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Azevedo, 2022; Freitas Campos, 2020).

According to Diniz and Guillem (2002), the Nuremberg Code was a breakthrough in that it provided valuable ethical recommendations, including the guarantee of the voluntary consent of research participants and the proper clarification of the procedures to which they would be subjected. Obviously, ethical concerns arose because violations occurred that placed research participants in situations of vulnerability, discrimination, and disrespect for the human being, as we can see in Siquelli and Hayashi (2015). In this regard, the consent form can be understood, in the words of Goldin (2000, n.p.), as a "process in which the person receives a thorough explanation of the procedure, understands the information, acts voluntarily, has the capacity to act, and finally agrees or does not agree to participate".

In the mid-1970s, "with all the procedures in ethics and research with human beings, the term bioethics was born..." (Siquelli & Hayashi, 2015, p. 69), with the aim of including discussions about research with human subjects. Given the scenario we have described, we would like to emphasize that ethical concerns in research arose from the population's demand for a change in dehumanizing practices in the name of scientific progress (Diniz, 2002).

We believe that ethical concerns in research are essential. However, it is important to emphasize our initial understanding of ethics and its impact on science. We do not intend to provide a historiography of the term "ethics" since the beginning of philosophy. Therefore, we will present a panoramic view that facilitates connections with scientific research.

Schmidt (2008) states that although there is no single vision of what research ethics is, we can start from the perspective that it is necessary to consider "... the intrinsic and constitutive character of ethics in qualitative methodologies ... when practiced from

relationships of collaboration and interlocution between researchers and "researched" ..." (p. 47). (p. 47). This process of interlocution and collaboration presupposes, for the researcher, an incessant self-reflective activity and, in the humanities and social sciences, the elaboration of the problem of the other, who is not an "object" but also an intellectual part of the phenomenon we seek to know.

As such, the experience of the Other is the starting point for new perspectives that confront and dialogue with those of the researcher. In addition, because it unfolds in the dialogue and confrontation of social and cultural places, as well as in the clash of differences and convergences on the phenomenon under study, ethics becomes a prerogative because it demands self-reflection and respect for otherness.

As Chauí (1994) and Schmidt (2008) point out, autonomy, as a disposition to question the meaning of values with oneself and with others, and the ability to grant oneself rules of conduct (self-government), bring ethics and autonomy conceptually closer together, since an autonomous researcher has "... the ability to take responsibility for his actions in conducting research, to judge his intentions, and to refuse physical and symbolic violence against himself and others" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 49). ... the ability to take responsibility for their actions in conducting research, to judge their intentions, and to reject physical or symbolic violence against themselves and others" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 49).

We emphasize that we do not deny the normative nature of ethics, but we must overcome the idea that research ethics is just about following a rule or filling out a form. After all, "... the idea of research ethics as filling in a form is totally inadequate when it comes to using reflexive ethics, ethics of principles, and ethics of relationships" (Mainardes, 2017, p. 165).

In Brazil, ethical issues in research in the humanities and social sciences began to be addressed in 2016, with the approval by the country's National Health Council (CNS) of its regulation, Resolution No. 510/2016, which complements Resolution 466/12. This measure represents a significant advance in thinking about ethics in the human sciences (Freitas Campos, 2020; Mainardes, 2017), calling researchers to a necessary debate about their conceptions of research and the implications of the breadth of theoretical and methodological aspects used in the field (Lordello & Silva, 2017).

It is appropriate to note that the purpose of research ethics is the theoretical reflection on the practical action of researchers, and that this process of reflection is, above all, an

interested action and knowledge, which consequently ends up denying scientific neutrality, since it requires an ethical position. Based on this assumption, ethics is the concrete objectification of values, principles, choices, deliberations, and positions of conscious action in situations involving human rights and respect for others (Siquelli & Hayashi, 2015; Diniz, 2002).

In addition, there are four principles that to this day guide reflection on the ethics of research involving human beings (it should be noted that they are the Principles of Biomedical Ethics of 1979), which are 1) *Autonomy*: requires the researcher to take measures to promote and protect the capacity of individuals, especially those in vulnerable situations, and the consent of participants must be free and informed (the individual is free to participate or not and can withdraw at any time); 2) *Beneficence*: It is necessary to act for others, weighing risks and benefits to always consider the well-being of participants; 3) *Justice and equity*: it is a principle that guides the correction of inequalities between individuals, such as discrimination in the selection of research participants, lack of feedback that research can provide and burden on participants and public institutions, etc.; and finally, 4) *Non-maleficence*: it is the responsibility of researchers to foresee and avoid risks and harms to participants (Resolution No. 510, of April 7, 2016).

It should be noted that the importance of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) lies not only in the protection of the participant, but also in the credibility of the results and, consequently, of the researcher. It is worth noting that the REC also has an advisory and, why not say, an educational role, since it can ensure the continuous training of the institution's researchers and "... promote discussion of the ethical aspects of human research in the community" (Muccioli et al. 2008, p. 773).

This article presents the results of a bibliographical and documentary study, in which we aimed to investigate possible relationships between the research methods used in educational research and the difficulties experienced by researchers in submitting their research projects to the CEP. The interest in the subject arose from the hypothesis that the methodological choice used in research in the field of education may be related to the difficulties faced by researchers in submitting their research projects to the CEP.

The article is divided into three sections: first, we present the methodological procedures of the research to clarify how the research was planned, systematized, and carried out. Next, we present the analyses carried out because of the data generated in the research, in

dialogue with the scientific literature in the field to contextualize the discussions and analyses developed in this study. Finally, we present some conclusions, trying to highlight the main results of the research and indications for future studies.

## Methodological path

As a methodological procedure, the study was based on qualitative research (Merriam, 1998; Minayo, 2014) of a descriptive and interpretive nature (Erickson, 1985), with data generation coming from the bibliographical and documentary research carried out. Therefore, the methodology used in this article is consistent with most studies in the field.

We carried out an exploratory bibliographic research, searching for articles in the scientific database SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), chosen because it is a world-renowned indexer. As a search strategy, we used articles related to the subject of the study, published in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The period defined was articles published between 2017 and 2023, considering that the CNS Resolution No. 510/2016 (Brazil, 2016) deals with the ethical standards applicable to research in the humanities and social sciences (HSS), and our study refers specifically to the field of education. We used the descriptors: "research ethics" and "education", interspersed with the Boolean operator "AND".

The criteria for the selection of studies included Brazilian and foreign studies published in articles written in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, with the terms "ethics" and/or "research ethics" in the title, with a focus on results that proposed challenges related to the submission of research projects to the REC, and studies concentrated in the thematic area of Human Sciences.

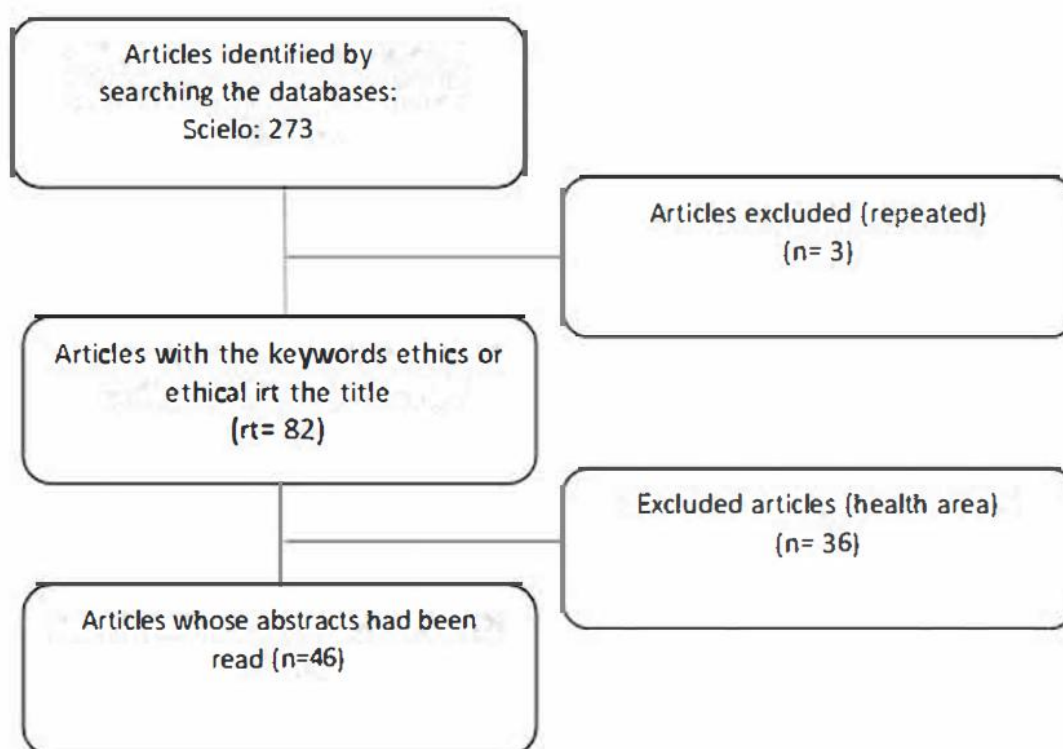
A total of 273 articles were found. Of these, 3 were excluded because they were repeated. After reading the titles and selecting those with the terms "ethics" and/or "ethical", 82 articles were selected to read the abstracts. We then made another selection, removing 36 articles related to health. This left 45 articles to read the abstracts. Based on this analysis, we found that none of them discussed the relationship between research ethics committees and research methods in the field of education.

In order to present the articles, we decided to draw a flowchart to make it easier to see how the search was carried out. After this contextualization, the results of the search are discussed.

After reading the abstracts of the articles, we tried to identify the thematic units

contained in the selected articles and identified the following themes: "ethics as human behavior" and "ethical care in the conduct of research".

Figure 1 - Flowchart for searching and selecting articles



Source: Elaborated by the author.

According to the search conducted, none of the articles selected for reading presented possible relationships between research ethics committees and research methods in the field of education.

## Discussions and Results

In general, of the 82 articles found that had the terms "ethics" or "ethical" in their titles, 41% belonged to the field of health. Among the topics, there are several studies that focus on discussing the ethical aspects of the work of health professionals, such as the study by Rodrigues, Lessa and Priolli (2022), whose aim was to analyze the use of palliative sedation and understand how it is related to medical training and the doctor-patient



relationship in Brazil. There are also studies such as that of Nora et al. (2022), which aimed to identify and describe the disciplines in which patient safety and health ethics are addressed in undergraduate nursing courses.

As for studies in the field of education, most of the articles identified focus on ethics as a principle of conduct in the classroom. As an example, we have the study by Da Silva, Ishii and Krasilchik (2020), which indicated that the lack of codes of ethics for the teaching profession in Brazil should be widely discussed in the academic community and addressed in teacher training courses.

On the other hand, we also identified research such as that of Rêgo, Mercado and Costa (2023), which aimed to answer questions about ethical care in the context of online teaching. The research presents interesting results, as it is concerned with investigating ethical care during synchronous classes, raising pertinent questions about ethical behavior in virtual environments.

Although the majority of studies focus on the issue of ethics as human behavior, no studies were identified that aimed to investigate the relationship between aspects related to ethics in research and the research methods used in the field of education.

Thus, the data suggest that, in addition to investigating the relevance of teacher training that leads to ethical professional performance, studies should investigate the dilemmas faced by researchers when submitting their research projects and ultimately opting for methodological designs that do not require submission to the REC.

Furukawa and Cunha (2010) describe the obstacles encountered during the process of submitting doctoral projects to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Among the difficulties, the authors highlight the amount of documentation required and the need to submit projects to different RECs. The authors report that the same project was submitted to eight different RECs and received different opinions, with one of the institutions suggesting that the project be restructured. The researchers suggest that research projects should be evaluated by analyzing the specificities of each field, since project evaluations follow the biomedical model, which sometimes does not consider the specificities of all research involving human subjects.

Silva et al. (2013) analyzed the perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students about the process of submitting projects to the Research Ethics Committee (REC). Some participants claimed to be unaware of the project submission process, stating that the projects

were submitted by the supervisor. In addition to the lack of knowledge about the submission process and the necessary documentation, difficulties were also identified regarding the acceptance deadlines of the institutions where the research would be conducted. The absence of this documentation can delay the REC's opinion.

We suggest that the delay by institutions in accepting research involving human subjects may be one of the factors contributing to the use of methodological options that lead to less bureaucracy, such as bibliographic research, which does not need to be evaluated by the REC.

We also have the hypothesis that researchers often end up choosing bibliographic qualitative research because of the "content of the reports," i.e., the reviewer evaluates the merit of the research and not the ethical issues, in addition to the instability of the Brazilian platform, which we experience and hear reports of this type in our daily lives.

CNS Resolution No. 510/2016 (Resolution of the National Health Council, 2016), which regulates the ethical standards applicable to research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), includes Art. 25, which ensures that the evaluation to be carried out by the REC/CONEP system must consider the ethical aspects of the projects, considering the risks and the due protection of the rights of the research participants. Thus

... Scientific evaluation should be assessed by academic research committees, postgraduate boards, and research funding institutions. The REC/CONEP system is not responsible for analyzing the methodological design itself (only when it involves risks to participants). Article 26 warns that the ethical analysis of projects should only be carried out in Research Ethics Committees that have equal representation of HSS members (Mainardes, 2017, p. 164).

However, the length of time it takes institutions to authorize research, and occasionally the refusal, can lead undergraduate and postgraduate students to opt for methodological approaches that do not require approval by the Research Ethics Committee (REC). These difficulties can result in the simplification of research project proposals submitted to the REC.

For Francisco and Santana (2017, p. 74), Resolution 510/16 focuses on qualitative research and not all types of methodological designs that are carried out in the Humanities and Social Sciences, although: "... The specificities of the field are presented at all times, although they are not clearly explained throughout the Resolution". You can see this right from the Resolution's preamble:

Considering that the humanities and social sciences have specificities in their research conceptions and practices, insofar as they have a pluralistic sense of science that leads to the adoption of multiple theoretical-methodological perspectives, as well as dealing with attributions of meaning, practices, and representations, without direct intervention in the human body, with a specific nature and degree of risk (Resolution No. 510, of April 7, 2016, n.p.).

Research passes through several stages, one of which is the formulation of the research problem, which must be clear, objective, and capable of being solved through scientific methods appropriate to the research in question. The choice of methods must therefore be consistent with the research problem and the objectives set. The methods used in the research have a direct impact on the way in which it is carried out, and it is important to consider the data collection and analysis techniques, as these aspects are indicative of the quality of the results obtained (Gil, 2018).

Research can be classified in various ways, one of which concerns research designs. The design includes the methodological foundations, the definition of objectives, the research environment, and the determination of data collection and analysis techniques (Gil, 2018, p. 27).

Bibliographic research is a type of design based on materials available both physically and on the Internet, such as theses, dissertations, books, journals, proceedings, and articles, among others. Meanwhile, a literature review is an important stage in conducting research, as it allows us to identify the current state of knowledge on a particular object of study. Although this type of research helps to identify gaps in knowledge about a topic, Gil (2018, p. 28) points out the possibility that the data "... available in written sources have been collected or processed in the wrong way. Thus, work based on these sources will tend to reproduce or even amplify these errors." Given this possibility, it may be relevant to expand the use of different methods in order to deepen our understanding of the objects of study we intend to investigate.

Lourenço, Hayashi, and Almeida (2009) examined dissertations and theses with within-subject designs produced in the Postgraduate Program in Special Education (PPGEEs) at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar). Based on an initial survey covering the period from 1978 to 2004, the authors identified only 21 theses and dissertations that focused on the use of within-subject designs. Based on these findings, the authors discuss the importance of using different types of designs in educational research, as diversifying methods can help fill knowledge gaps in the field.

Prezenszky and Mello (2019) raise relevant questions about the importance of the researcher knowing the differences between a critical review of scientific production and a reading review, the latter being an indispensable stage in any scientific work. The literature review helps the researcher to become aware of what has already been produced in relation to the object of study and to identify existing gaps. On the other hand, the critical review of scientific production aims to evaluate the scientific production systematically on a given topic. This type of study makes it possible to determine the quality of what has been produced in a given area and to point out ways of improving the quality of research that could be carried out in the future.

Siquelli and Hayashi (2015, p. 79) also draw our attention to the fact that because there are still different opinions on the issue of research ethics in education, "...many carry it out without submitting the research project to an ethics committee".

According to Nosella (2008), ethics in research is necessary because society needs new values and norms that can guide, regulate, and clarify important points in its development. In other words, for this author, a society that doesn't regulate the use of media, such as the Internet, is subject to the spread of more and more insults, lies, fake news, and other information that could harm the population. Therefore, there is a need for control bodies so that such problems can be avoided or mitigated. In fact, "...research without ethical guidance can be compared to a wheel that turns faster and faster, aimlessly, without direction, at random" (Nosella, 2008, p. 265).

In addition, in research with minors, it is important to note that ethical considerations are part of the process of obtaining parental permission and consent from children when they are minors and research participants. Because they are vulnerable due to their immature age, they need additional protection regarding their participation in research projects. This requires an understanding and careful handling of ethical regulations (Kipper, 2016).

In addition, the existing challenges in human subjects research, highlighted by the theoretical review carried out in line with the data collected in this study, allow us to make recommendations, some of which have already been reviewed by the scientific literature in the field and by CONEP's own regulations regarding the risks of human subjects research, but which are worth highlighting:

a) Understand that all research involving human subjects involves risks and that these must be made clear in the research protocol, as well as what will be done to mitigate them for the participants;

b) Consider that the harm or discomfort caused by the research may determine the degree of risk involved in the research;

c) Understand that the institutions responsible for conducting the research, in addition to the ethics committee, must continually evaluate and monitor studies involving human subjects so that risks and potential harm to participants can be resolved or mitigated.

Mainardes (2017) points out that most of the challenges related to ethical issues in the field of education are shared with other fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) because in Brazil there is still a single set of regulations for these two major fields of knowledge (biomedical and humanities and social sciences), which implies difficulties for HSS research. The author cites a survey conducted by the National Forum of Coordinators of Postgraduate Programs in Education (FORPRED) in 2013, in which the informants reported that researchers from the PPGEs (professors and postgraduate students); not only had doubts about the REC-CONEP system, but also had many disagreements with the requirements for submitting projects to the Brazilian platform; some indicated requirements that were considered inappropriate for an HSS project, such as suggestions for changes to the sample, disagreements about the theoretical framework, changes to the survey instruments, etc. More than a decade later, this scenario doesn't seem to have changed much.

## Final considerations

The intention of this study was not to superimpose qualitative methodology over quantitative methodology because in the humanities and social sciences, the value of a study is not measured by the prevalence of this or that approach, but rather by the guiding concept of the studies, the links established with the research participants, and the problems studied.

Considering that in a society increasingly influenced by cultural differences, individualism, and cultures subject to economic interests and neoliberal policies, along with the growing globalization and hegemony of this framework, qualitative methods are increasingly necessary to highlight and affirm differences as something positive and constructive, especially regarding the integral development of people.

However, the qualitative research approach can also contribute to the advancement of knowledge about education, as it helps to study social phenomena from different perspectives. We agree with Omote (2014) when he points out the importance of the researcher paying attention to the coherence between the research problem, the objectives set, and the methods of data collection and analysis, as this coherence is responsible for the reliability of the study.

A lack of rigor in the conduct of research can lead to poorly designed studies that produce unreliable results. In this sense, we reiterate that it is not a question of contrasting the qualitative approach with the quantitative one, but rather of proposing that research in the field of education should be conducted using designs that are appropriate to the nature of the problem and the research objectives. Therefore, the choice of the theoretical framework that will support the research is an important stage, but only one of the stages of the project. In this sense, it is important to point out that the attachment to "... a theoretical framework and the indiscriminate adoption of procedures and resources for data collection and analysis, regardless of the nature of the phenomenon under study, can be sources of bias..." (Omote, 2014, p. 17).

In light of the above, we consider it necessary to expand studies that investigate possible relationships between the submission of projects to the REC and the methods used in research in the field of education, since the choice of methods for collecting and analyzing data results from the nature of the research problem and the objectives set. This choice can help to understand educational phenomena from different perspectives and contribute to the construction of knowledge in the field, as long as reliability is guaranteed during the preparation and execution of the research project.

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