

School District Research Review Procedures: State of the Art in Ontario

Report on Findings

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The research discussed in this document is part of a comprehensive qualitative research study, “Research Ethics Boards and School District Research Review Procedures: Exploring the Ethics Review of School-based Research,” designed to advance knowledge regarding the ethics review of school-based research. The goal of this phase of the research project was to construct an overview of current school board research review procedures in Ontario. The information gathered might be useful to school boards making decisions related to the oversight of research conducted within their jurisdictions, as well as, faculties of education who have faculty members and students seeking approval from school boards. In addition, we were interested in understanding the connections (or lack thereof) between school boards, faculties of education, and university Research Ethics Boards in relation to school-based research in general, and teacher-research in particular.

The Study

For this study we employed a qualitative, interpretive design with methods of data collection and analysis drawn from qualitative research traditions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Freeman, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to language limitations of the researchers, participation was restricted to Ontario English Public and Catholic District School Boards. Data were collected through two sources, school board websites and a questionnaire.

Phase 1: Website Search

The website search was completed over the time period October 2007 to January 2008. We accessed all available district school boards identified on the Ministry of Education website (60 English Speaking Public and Catholic school boards) and collected materials accessible on-line such as policies and procedures, information about research review committees/procedures, and research application forms. We also made telephone contact with personnel at the school boards when we had difficulty locating a website or finding information related to research review.

Websites were often unique in the way information about research review was organized. For instance, research guidelines were located under a variety of hyperlinks posted on the websites including: policies and procedures, research, committees, administration, staff, and business with board, to name a few. For those boards that did not have a policy focused on research, all policies and procedures related to students, schools, and community were searched with the following key words: research, ethics, and committee. We conducted a content analysis (Constas, 1992) on all documents (e.g., review policies and procedures, research application forms and guidelines, researcher agreements, sample forms) collected through our website searches.

The website search produced important information about school board research review policies and procedures; however, our search also highlighted a number of issues related to potential researchers’ access to such information. We address some of these issues in the Discussion Section of this report.

Our primary database, which was built using responses to completed questionnaires, produced significant data that offset the limitations of data collected through the website search.

Phase 2: Questionnaire

In preparation for recruiting participants to complete the questionnaire, telephone calls were made to the 60 school boards to acquire the names and contact information of the individuals responsible for implementing research review policies and procedures. Individuals such as Directors, Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, Research Officers, Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) leaders, district personnel and administrative staff were identified as the appropriate potential participants. Based on the information received, the Principal Investigator made telephone contact with individuals identified to explain the project. Recruitment materials Invitation Letter, Consent Forms, and questionnaire were sent electronically to these individuals who then decided whether or not to participate based on the information they received. In some cases, before agreeing, individuals vetted our request through their informal or formalized school-board procedures.

The 9-page questionnaire contained the following four main sections as well as multiple sub-questions:

1. General information
2. Current practices of district school boards in Ontario in the ethics review of school-based research
3. Relations between district school boards and university research ethics boards
4. District school board connections to faculties of education

Reminders were sent to individuals who agreed to participate but had not responded within a six-week period. Additional reminders were sent at later dates. The majority of questionnaires were returned electronically, with a few participants choosing to mail hard copies. The process took approximately 10 months (May 2007 – March 2008). Thirty-nine individuals representing 36 school boards participated in the study. In cases where more than one person had responsibility for oversight of research review and chose to complete a questionnaire, we combined the information to create a single response for that board, resulting in a total of 36 questionnaires included as data and a 60% response rate.

The data analysis of questionnaires was performed using data analysis software. NVivo7 qualitative data analysis software program was used to analyze open-ended sections of the questionnaires. SPSS quantitative analysis software program was used to analyze yes/no and multiple choices questions in the questionnaire. We had a number of checking procedures in place to ensure credibility of findings. For example, one person was

responsible for imputing the SPSS and NVivo7 data with an additional person checking to ensure that the data was transferred from the documents to the software program accurately.

Findings

Website Data

We considered number of students as the bases for defining school board size and classified all 60 English speaking Public and Catholic District School Boards in Ontario into small size, medium size, and large size school boards. By our definition, a small size school board had less than 25,000 students; a medium size school board had 25,000-75,000 students; and a large size school board had over 75,000 students (See Table 1).

Table 1: English Speaking Public & Catholic District School Boards by Size

Board Size (by Number of Students)	Categorization	Number of Participating School Boards	Number of Non-participating School Boards	Total Number of School Boards
Less than 25,000	small	16	18	34
25,000-75,000	medium	15	5	20
over 75,000	large	5	1	6
Total		36	24	60

Based on our website data we also categorized the 60 school boards in terms of their degree of formalization (See Table 2).

A **Formalized** research review process indicated a written policy was in place and a Research Review Committee (RRC) met regularly to review research applications.

A **Semi-formalized** process indicated that policy and procedures were in place. Responsibility for oversight may have been assigned to individuals or a committee within the board that had primary responsibility for something other than the review and approval/denial of research.

A **Non-formalized** research review process indicated we were not able to access any information that suggested a school board policy or set procedures existed or a Research Review Committee with the responsibility for overseeing review requests was in place. Non-formalized school boards often did not have a written policy but had developed a process that was followed.

Table 2: English Speaking Public & Catholic District School Boards by Degree of Formalization

Degree of Formalization	Number of Small School Boards	Number of Medium School Boards	Number of Large School Boards	Total Number of School Boards
Formalized	6	15	4	25
Semi-formalized	6	3	1	10
Non-formalized	9	1	0	10
No Information Available	14	0	1	15
Total	35	19	6	60

The information gathered through the website search indicates that more than half of the school boards in this province have formalized their research review practices to some degree, while 10 school boards have a non-formalized process and no information was available for 15 school boards to indicate that they had research review procedures in place.

Questionnaire Data

Individuals located in 36 school boards responded to our invitation to complete questionnaires. The participating school boards were identified as having different degrees of research review formalization in place (See Table 3). In the discussion that follows we address the findings related to general information about the school boards participating in the study, current policies and practices in the review of school-based research, and school board practices related to teacher-research.

Section 1: General Information

Table 3: Participating District School Boards by Degree of Formalization

Degree of Formalization	Number of Small School Boards	Number of Medium School Boards	Number of Large School Boards	Total Number of School Boards
Formalized	4	13	4	21
Semi-formalized	5	2	1	8
Non-formalized	7	0	0	7
Total	16	15	5	36

We analyzed the responses received and categorized the school boards' research review processes into three main groups according to our definitions of the degrees of formalization. Eighty percent of the participants (29/36) reported having a research review process in place while 20% (7/36) reported not having any formal processes related to research review (See Table 3). Specifically, 58% (21/36) of the participants reported having a formalized process, 22% (8/36) semi-formalized process, and 20% (7/36) non-formalized process. Among small school boards all three degrees of formalization were identified.

In the case of school boards with formalized review policies and procedures, participants described the membership and positions represented on their Research Review Committee (RRC). Table 4 provides an overview of the various positions represented on the RRCs.

Table 4: Research Review Committee Representation

Committee Representation	Number of School Boards Out of 21 Formalized School Boards
Principal	17
District School Board Personal	16
Research Officer	12
Psychologist	7
Director of Education	4
Curriculum representative	4
Teacher	3
Superintendent	3
Trustee	2
University faculty member	2
Lawyer	1
Other	3

As indicated in Table 4 principals, school board personnel, and Research Officers are positions most often represented on the RRCs. Trustees, university faculty members, and lawyers are more unique to these committees. One of the participants described an RRC operating with the following membership: an Elementary Principal, Secondary Principal, Psychologist, Trustee, Research Officer/Coordinator, Curriculum Representative, and Student Services Representative. Under the category of Other, participants listed members such as: Union Representative, Student Service Representative, and Freedom of Information Officer.

Sixty-two percent (13/21) of participants from school boards with formalized research review reported having more than five members on their RRC, 33% (7/21) reported 3-5 people, and 5% (1/21) reported less than 3 members on their committee. When asked on the questionnaire the number of times the RRC met, 48% (10/21) of participants noted that their RRC meets more than four times per year, 48% (10/21) indicated 3-4 times per year, and only one participant indicated twice a year.

One participant reported that the role of his/her RRC was to coordinate research review process. Nineteen percent (4/21) of the participants who served on RRCs described the role of the committee as one of review and recommendation of research proposals, and 71% (15/21) of the participants indicated that their committee had the authority to approve and deny research proposals. One of the 21 participants did not respond to this question.

Thirty-nine percent (14/36) of the participants completing the questionnaire identified themselves as research officers, research coordinators, or research consultants. One of the research coordinators (within a large school board) reported having the authority to approve or deny proposals, “independently, however, consult with school and system staff as needed.” This participant also noted that s/he has worked more than five years in this capacity. Interestingly, 36% (5/14) of these participants described their professional background as psychology and research rather than education and school administration. This information might be viewed as evidence of further research review formalization within these school boards. The decision to hire experienced researchers to oversee coordination and facilitation of research review within the board may indicate the school boards’ interest in producing more in-house research as well as reflect a desire to more systematically monitor current school-based research demands.

School boards with a formalized process followed a common pattern. However, participants in school boards categorized as having semi-formalized procedures and with some practices in common, described unique review processes constructed to meet the needs of their specific contexts. Alternative practices were reported as Other. For instance, two participants reported the collaboration of several small school boards to meet their needs for research review. Another participant described a consortium of several school boards with all research proposals needing consortium approval. In another instance, a medium and a large board joined forces to implement their research review processes.

Two of eight school boards that described their research review process as Other responded in the following manner: “Submitted and reviewed with my Director and principal that is hosting the research piece.” and “Not a written policy rather a process that is followed.” These and similar responses were categorized as non-formalized processes.

According to our data, the number of applications school boards received ranged from none (one school board reported not receiving any research application to date) to over 60 applications (two school boards) per year (See Table 5).

Table 5: Number of Research Applications Submitted to District School Boards/Year

Number of Research Applications/Year	Number of Small School Boards	Number of Medium School Boards	Number of Large School Boards	Total Number of School Boards
Less than 5	8	0	0	8
5-10	3	2	0	5
11-20	2	3	0	5
21-40	2	7	2	11
41-60	0	1	2	3
Over 60	1	0	1	2
Don't Know	0	2	0	2
Total	16	15	5	36

The maximum number of research applications per year reported in the study was 80 applications. Thirty-one percent (11/36) of the school boards received 21-40 research applications annually while 22% (8/36) received less than 5 research applications per year. Small school boards received mostly less than 5 applications, medium school boards between 5 and 60 applications, while large school boards received between 21 and more than 60 applications annually. Although one of the small school boards received over 60 applications per year, small and non-formalized school boards received fewer applications than medium, large, and formalized school boards did.

In the review process the most frequently requested items were consent forms, evidence of researchers providing feedback of some form, evidence of university Research Ethics Board (REB) clearance, data collection tools, application form, and letter of intent. The least frequent items requested were identified under the category Other and included parent permission letter and consent form; CV of researcher; a written commitment to the anonymity of the district schools, staff, and students in any reports generated by and from the research; and police check.

When participants indicated a review process required REB clearance, the school board had connections to a university REB (in 19 out of 21 cases). For example, a school board that had connections to the local university REB requests “Evidence of submission and approval of the project by the institution’s Research Ethics Committee or, where none exists, satisfactory proof that the research will be conducted according to the national guidelines of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)” (School Board Policy).

Eighty-six percent (31/36) of participants listed university faculty and university students as the most frequent researchers asking to conduct research in their school boards.

Participants also identified college students, teachers and principals, media (Globe & Mail), private organizations, Ministry of Education, health organizations, and hospitals as submitting research proposals to school boards.

Students were identified in the data as the most frequent participants (50% or 18 times/36 responses) followed by Students and Teachers (14% or 5 times/36 responses), Teaching Staff (8% or 3 times/36 responses), and Support Staff (6% or 2 times/36 responses) respectively (See Table 6). The remaining participants listed Students and Parents, Parents, and Other as the most frequent participants in research conducted within school board (8%). Fourteen percent of the participants did not respond to this question.

Table 6: The Most Frequent Participants in District School Board

Participants	Number of Participants Responded
Students Only	18
Students & Teachers	5
Teaching Staff	3
Support Staff	2
Student & Parents	1
Parents	1
Other	1
Missing Information	5
Total	36

Section 2: Current Practices in the Ethics Review of School-based Research

Decisions. Participants in the study indicated approximate approval rates of research applications submitted to their school boards. While Approval with no changes (“As Is”) and Approval with minor changes showed significant variations (from 0% to 100%) across the school boards, approval requesting major changes did not exceed 25%. The rate of denial reported ranged from 0-75%. The most frequent denial rate (9/36 school boards) was 6-10%. Ninety-two percent (33/36) of the participants in the study listed determining factors leading to denial of research proposals. The main themes emerging from their responses included: ethical concerns; time, timing, and intrusiveness to the life of school; low educational relevance; not relevant/in opposition to Board’s strategic directions; poor methodology; and sensitive topics (See Appendix 1 for sample of responses).

Eighty-nine percent (32/36) of the participants in the study indicated that they had not had a situation where they withdrew permission from a researcher to begin or continue her/his research. The 11% (4/36) of participants who reported having such an experience

gave the following reasons: inadequate consent obtained at school level, incomplete information provided at the beginning of the project, procedures breached personal privacy of students, or protocol was breached.

Types of research prioritized in District School Boards. Approximately half (47% or 17/36) of the participants indicated that the school board had developed research priorities they were supporting. The participants reporting research priorities were situated in large formalized school boards, medium formalized school boards, and small non-formalized school boards. The school boards prioritizing particular types of research to the lowest degree were medium semi-formalized school boards and small semi-formalized school boards. Participants reported three main types of research prioritized in District School Boards: relevance to Board's strategic priority, educational relevance and benefits to students, and Ministry initiatives (See Appendix 2 for sample of responses).

Teacher-research. The teachers-researchers applying to conduct school-based research are connected in various ways to their chosen research contexts. For example, they may be asking permission to conduct research from their employer or seeking approval from authorities in unfamiliar school board contexts. They may be actively employed as teachers at the time of their request or on leave from their teaching positions. Although many of the teachers-researchers requesting permission to conduct research from school boards and REBs are connected to faculties of education, they may also be connected to other faculties and disciplines of study (e.g., Child and Youth Studies, Psychology). A main goal of our research is connected specifically to understanding the research review procedures for teaches-researchers who want to conduct research in schooling contexts. Teacher-research (action research, teacher inquiry) is often the occasion when the work of faculty members, Research Ethics Boards (REBs), and school boards intersect. We focus specifically on the applications teachers, who were also in the process of completing degree requirements, submitted related to conducting teacher-research.

Table 7: Specific Practices or Polices Related to Teacher-research

Specific Practices or Polices	Yes	No	Don't Know	Missing Info	Total
Teachers Conducting Research in Their School	20	14	2	0	36
Teachers Conducting Research in Their Classroom	18	14	3	1	36
Support Provided for Teachers-researchers in DSB	13	19	4	0	36

When responding to a question asking if specific practices or policies were in place in their school boards when teacher employees asked for approval to conduct research in

their classroom, school, and/or school board, 56% (20/36) of the participants indicated that there were specific policies and practices, while 39% (14/36) responded that no specific practices or policies applied (See Table 7).

Half (18/36) of the participants reported having specific practices or policies in regards to teachers conducting research in their own classrooms while 39% (14/36) of the participants reported neither having practices nor policies in place. Eight percent (3/36) of the participants, however, reported not being aware of such practices or policies being in place while 3% (1/36) of the participants did not respond to the question.

Participants described the policies and practices related to teacher-research in the following manner: (a) Board's Administrative Procedure is followed (12 out of 20 Boards), (b) permission/accountability of principal requested (9 out of 20 Boards), and/or (c) action researchers are exempted from the requirements as outlined in the Administrative Procedure (4 out of 20 Boards). When considered in light of other data, the action researcher designation here may apply to teachers conducting research connected to school board priorities rather than completing degree requirements. Fourteen participants reported having the same practices and policies for teachers conducting research in their school and for teachers conducting research in their classrooms. No distinction was made between the two research contexts.

Individual board practices were described as requiring the following: (a) permission of parents required, (b) a completed internal research project form and approval from principal/superintendent, (c) informal conversations with the teacher-researchers to outline the "special issues" that may arise, (d) REB clearance, and (e) professor supervision (See Appendix 3 for sample of responses).

More formalized (67% or 14/21) than semi-formalized (50% or 4/8) and non-formalized (29% or 2/7) school boards reported having policies and procedures related to teacher-research in place. Most of the formalized school boards that had policies and procedures related to teachers conducting research in their school (71% or 15/21) were the medium size boards.

Table 8: Support Provided for Teachers-researchers Conducting Research in Their Classroom, School, and/or School Board by Degree of Review Process Formalization

Support Provided for Teachers-researchers	Formalized School Boards	Semi-formalized School Boards	Non-formalized School Boards	Total Number of School Boards
Yes	7	3	3	13
No	14	5	4	23

One third (13/36) of the participants reported that school boards have supports such as release time or funding provided to teachers-researchers employed by the board. More than half of the participants reported not having any support available for teachers-researchers conducting research in their own classroom, school, and/or school board. Four participants indicated that they were not aware of any support provided.

Almost half of the participants of the non-formalized (43% or 3/7) and semi-formalized (38% or 3/8) school boards reported providing supports for teachers-researchers employed by their boards, while only one third (7/21) of participants of the formalized school boards reported providing support for the teachers-researchers they employed (See Table 8). The most frequent types of supports noted were (a) funding, (b) release time, and (c) informal support. Innovative ways of supporting teachers-researchers such as opening a Teacher Researcher position and establishing a Teacher Book Club were described as well.

Participants from formalized school boards identified Ministry of Education funded action research projects and action research projects related to school planning as projects supported by their school boards. Release time was the type of support most frequently mentioned. Participants from formalized medium school boards also reported supports provided through ministry-funded projects (e.g., release time) as well as through MISA Regional Centre (e.g., small portions of funds provided to facilitate action research projects). One participant noted teachers in his schools would not be eligible to receive release time to undertake research external to school board initiatives, including teacher-research conducted to fulfill degree requirements.

It is clear from the data that there is a wide range of different policies and procedures that regulate teachers' research in their schools across school boards independent of the school board size or degree of formalization. We had, for example, formalized, semi-formalized, and non-formalized as well as large, medium, and small size school boards reporting "permission of the principal" and/or "approval at the Board level" as their practice or policy requirement. We also identified an array of responses ranging from action research encouraged to action research denied. In some cases, participants described supports available for graduate student research and in other responses participants wrote no support for graduate student research. On average, school boards with a formalized review process provided fewer supports than other school boards formalized to a lesser degree.

Data also indicated that many school boards make a distinction between teacher-research connected to school board initiatives and teacher-research conducted as a requirement for the completion of graduate degrees. The former is valued as professional development while the latter was characterized and treated through the review process as external research. School board and ministry initiatives involving teacher-research did not require venting through any formal review process, while teachers asking permission to conduct research in their schools and classrooms for the purposes of completing graduate degrees were scrutinized through a more formal research review process often inclusive of an application to Research Review Committee and permission of the principal. The

“middle” position on review of teacher-research was represented by the following policy, “Generally, need to review internal requests for ethics, but not subject to external process.”

Overall impression about the research review process. When asked to describe strengths of their research review processes, participants identified the following strengths: (a) formalized and comprehensive process including standardized and clear criteria, consistency, regular meetings/deadlines, and transparency; (b) established RRC and wide/good RRC representation; (c) ethical research based on Tri-council criteria, protection of students and staff, and voluntary participation; (d) collaboration in decision making or between boards; (e) concise and less administratively cumbersome process; and (f) process acknowledges and respects the role of school principals (See Appendix 5 for sample of responses).

The wide representation of membership on RRCs was frequently reported as a strength among formalized DSBs and the processes described were often similar to REB practices and procedures. Participants from non-formalized and semi-formalized school boards, however, often described unique research review processes constructed to meet their needs (e.g., collaborations across school boards).

When reporting weaknesses of their research review process, however, the participants most frequently reported time involved in research review (53% or 19/36). The “time involved” issues were frequently represented with the comments as follows: (a) time consuming for researchers to complete application - turn around time sometimes too long or researchers must wait/inconvenient deadlines, (b) time consuming for committee, (c) finding time to meet for review, and (d) time disconnect between external research and board’s system goals. The rest of the responses represented a variety of different issues such as limited number of projects approved, grey areas of teacher research, low priority of research review, and subjectivity of the process, to mention a few (See Appendix 4 for sample of responses).

When asked how long it took from the research application submission date to approval or denial date, most participants (28% or 10/36) identified the category Other as the best description of the process length. Eight participants out of the ten included in this 28% came from formalized school boards. Their responses often fit within the category “less than a month” but were included under Other because the multiple factors influencing the actual length of the process made it difficult to determine. For example, time requirement frequently depended on RRC meeting dates when decisions were made, as well as on the frequency of the committee meetings per year. Usually it took less than one month to review a research application if it was submitted prior to a committee meeting date.

The second most frequently reported length of research review process was “less than a month” (25% or 9/36). One participant from a non-formalized and four participants from formalized school boards described their research review length as “one month (14% or 5/36), two participants from formalized and two participants from semi-formalized school boards described their research review length as “3-6 months” (11%), while 16%

(6/36) of the participants did not respond to the question. Two participants from formalized school boards (6%) reported having a research review process two months long. In spite of the time concerns participants pointed to in relation to formalized review processes, formalized school board data often indicated a shorter length of research review process than semi-formalized and non-formalized school board data.

Current conversations occurring in school board contexts about changes to be made in research review practices. Sixty-four percent (23/36) of the participants reported current conversations occurring in their school board contexts about changes to be made in their research review practices. Proposed changes included (a) revision of research application forms, (b) change to the composition of the review committee, (c) yearly review of school board procedures, (d) creating additional policies that relate to visual data collected and the protection of participant identity, and (e) creating more time efficient procedures. One of the participants reported, “Ongoing conversations with staff at other boards regarding how we could improve the process. Also how we can make the process more efficient so it takes less time.” Participants without a formalized review process in place wrote of implementing a more formalized process and/or hiring personal to work in a research capacity.

Section 3: Relations between District School Boards and University Research Ethics Boards

Fifty-eight percent (21/36) of the participants reported connections between RRCs and REBs and described those connections in various ways. Two participants indicated that a university faculty member sat on their school board committee. Ninety-one percent (19/21) of the participants indicated that a researcher connected to the university (student or faculty researcher) would have to have clearance from their REB before gaining approval to conduct research in the school board, while 9% (2/21) of the participants indicated that REB clearance was not a requirement. Five out of 21 participants reported having communication links between RRCs and REBs as well as collaborations on past and current research projects (3/21). One participant wrote that the school board used the REB application in their review process. Another stated, “We have communicated with most universities concerning our procedures and requirements.”

Section 4: District School Board Connections to Faculties of Education

Eighty-three percent (30/36) of all participants reported school board connections with faculties of education (FOE). Participants listed professional development, current collaboration on research projects, past collaboration on research projects, and curriculum development as examples of connecting activities (See Appendix 5 for sample of responses).

In some instances, however, participants (14% or 4/30) described their connections with FOEs as Other providing the following examples: (a) a Faculty of Education member is RRC member, (b) faculty members are part of the New Teacher Advisory Committee and a senior staff member sits on the Faculty of Education Advisory Committee, (c) Pre-

service Internship, and (d) teaching staff from the board are involved with the delivery of courses at a university and a college.

When asked if they would like to see changes to these connections, participants responded “yes” (26% or 8/30), “no” (14% or 4/30), “don’t know” (6% or 2/30), or left the section blank (54% or 16/30). A participant expressed a desire to see a change to the connections in the following way: “Increased partnerships with universities would be welcome, as district staff doesn’t always have the time/resources/subject-specific expertise to review literature, design a study, collect the data, and analyze/report on outcomes.” Another participant wrote, “I would like to see collaboration on research projects. This will likely happen in the future. Our board did not have a researcher, research department, or data analyst until 1 year ago.” (See Appendix 5 for sample of responses).

Discussion Section

Although multiple issues emerge as a result of our data analysis, due to space limitations, we limit ourselves to the discussion of four points. We hope this section, which is based on our interpretations of data, the perspectives we hold on school-based research, and our positioning within a university context, will be used as a resource to initiate future communication and collaboration across school boards and faculties of education.

POINT 1: Question of Standardization

It is clear from the data that school boards are formalizing their research review policies and practices. We have encountered individuals situated in both university and school board contexts, but particularly the former, who have suggested that there needs to be a standardized process for school-based research review throughout the province. At the conclusion of this phase of our research, we are not convinced that a standard process is either possible or desirable. School board idiosyncrasies (e.g., size, geographical location, school board priorities, and connections with local universities) influence what policies and procedures are useful in the review of school-based research.

For example, small school boards receiving few research applications per year might be more efficient in their individual approach to research review than reforming their practices to reflect a formalized process that better suits other contexts in the province. Or, small and medium size school boards might find it more beneficial for their research review to join a consortium of school boards (reflecting what is already happening in some contexts) rather than develop complex and demanding individual review processes. School boards are finding unique ways to construct review procedures and much can be learned from their examples.

Participants from a variety of school boards, differentiated by both size and degree of review formalization, indicated that time issues created difficulties for individuals and committees involved in the review process and for researchers applying for permission to conduct research. Often much individual and committee time is required to organize and

review applications to conduct school-based research. School boards with formalized review processes and large numbers of applications to review will have different types of time challenges than the semi-formalized or non-formalized boards. All boards need to access resources to complete the work. School boards with formalized processes require RRC meetings before decisions can be made so are often the boards with specific yearly deadlines in place. Such review deadlines have significant impact on teachers-researchers who answer to internal deadlines of universities and program requirements as well as the school board requirements. Some school boards are flexible in terms of their deadline requirements while others give no extensions.

We agree that time is a factor that often poses challenges for the review of school-based research; however, the implementation of a provincial standardized process may not alleviate those challenges. We also caution that although many participants identified time challenges as an issue, a case may be made that on occasion more time dedicated to research review may actually contribute to stronger, more rigorous, and more beneficial research.

Recommendation

Rather than attempting to construct standardized policies and procedures that all boards follow in the review of school-based research, school boards might collaborate to produce core principles of research review that are central to review processes regardless of school board characteristics (e.g., size, location, degree of formalization) but that work in conjunction with the policies and practices individual school boards implement, in light of their specific needs. It might be helpful to ask faculties of education to contribute to the discussion that produces workable core principles, for example, a core principle that relates to teachers conducting research in their schools as part of a degree requirement. Constructing core principles not only creates a venue that encourages collaboration across school boards and faculties of education, but also provides the context for educational discussions that inform both school board and faculty participants about underlying ideologies, beliefs, and purposes of review decisions and research designs, among other things.

POINT 2: Shaping Research

Clearly, school board research review processes, regardless of the degree of formalization in school board contexts, has an important influence on what research is ultimately conducted in schooling contexts. Part of the goal of this research was to develop a better understanding of review practices in place. In addition to contributing to the compilation of information about review processes, the data also made visible the significant influence research review procedures and practices have on the shaping of school-based research.

Many school boards, regardless of size or degree of formalization, identify and support research areas they deem of significant importance for their contexts. The emphases given to particular areas often emerge out of school board interests or ministry initiatives, and shift over time. Participants completing the questionnaire indicated that school

boards often limit research approvals based on the number of initiatives in place at the time of the request.

If a school board is supporting multiple internal and Ministry initiatives, particularly projects that require substantial time on the part of teachers and students, little room is left for approval of individual requests to conduct research. Teachers requesting permission to conduct research focused on areas they have a desire to investigate and as part of their degree requirements, what is often deemed as external research, may have minimal opportunities for receiving approval. As well, university researchers with valuable research initiatives involving school-based research may be denied access. Research that is important in terms of its educational value to schools and students may be dismissed.

Although Research Ethics Boards and school boards are considering the ethical dimensions of research proposed for schooling contexts, school boards are analyzing applications with a lens that considers more than the ethical implications. School boards also take into account concerns and desires of parents, the community, and other stakeholders. An area that is influenced by school boards needing to meet the needs of its stakeholders is research that may be construed as sensitive either ethically, politically, or socio-culturally. Such research may not be approved or have to go through a re-shaping process that creates substantial changes to the original research design. In some cases, outright rejection is the appropriate decision for a research application that is deemed too sensitive or intrusive. However, if such designations are applied to all research that has the potential to disturb stakeholders then issues that are relevant to the educational worlds of students and teachers may not be explored. Faculty members and students who, in the past, may have chosen to research important but sensitive issues might choose to shift their areas of focus because they fear the review process will take a too-lengthy time period that will be detrimental to the research process or culminate in a decision to deny.

Research that involves students as participants creates opportunities for student voices/perspectives to be represented in the research and to inform educational decisions being made on their behalf. Although research with student participants often needs additional oversight to ensure this vulnerable population is protected, respectful, ethical research involving this population is possible. When research review practices are made unnecessarily onerous because of individual or institutional practices, we risk losing potential knowledge to assist us in making wise educational decisions in the future.

Recommendation

Currently, school boards develop and implement research initiatives to achieve important district-wide and individual school goals. However, other research may contribute to areas in need of exploration that are not addressed through these specifically designed initiatives. School boards, who normally limit research based on allowable number of initiatives over specific time periods, might consider designating a portion of their research agenda to proposals not connected to in-house projects. This would allocate space for relevant research not falling under the umbrella of district and ministry

initiatives creating opportunities for faculty-proposed research and for teachers conducting school-based research as part of their degree requirements.

School boards might consider applying an additional layer of review to applications that propose what is deemed as sensitive research. Rather than dismiss the research based on the degree of sensitivity judged solely on the application, school board research review procedures, that are not already doing so, might include an opportunity for researchers and review committees/individuals to discuss the value of the research and ways in which the researcher might conduct the research meeting necessary review criteria but without substantially changing the design and decreasing the usefulness of the findings to the participants or schooling contexts in general.

Point 3: Teacher-research

Data suggest that teacher-research completed as a part of a teacher's degree requirement is often viewed in the same light and given the same scrutiny as research proposed by organizations outside the school board jurisdiction. In such cases, teacher-research is characterized as "external" research. This category of research often attracts additional scrutiny in the review process than more in-house research and these teachers-researchers may have less access to supports to conduct their research. We are not arguing against the important role school board research review may play in terms of ethical considerations and educational value for various forms of teacher-research. However, what is interesting to consider is the separation many school boards make between teacher-research as part of DSB or Ministry initiatives (only permission of principal requested) and teachers conducting research to complete university degrees (a more comprehensive review process requested) (See Appendix 3 for sample of responses), the former understood as professional development and the latter considered somewhat of a more self-serving exercise. We would argue, however, that many practicing teachers completing university degrees use this opportunity for sustained research to shape their pedagogical and curricular practices. Their research experience may be a very rich professional development experience from which students and schools benefit.

We agree there are differences between the categories of teacher-research, for example, research required for degree completion culminates in accessible written documents and may possibly lead to instances of public presentations and wider publication than a school board or ministry driven action research projects. Therefore, the review process needs to address issues of anonymity and confidentiality of participants and school boards that is not always necessary for in-house projects. A formal research review process, which is often required from the teachers-researchers completing their university degrees, may foster the teachers-researchers' professional and academic development and result in a stronger and more ethical research study. We argue, however, that the teacher-research conducted as part of a degree requirement is more closely aligned to what school boards characterize as internal research rather than the more distanced category of external research. We emphasize the importance of teacher-research of various kinds as a means of teacher professional development. School boards need to find ways to support

teachers-researchers when proposing to conduct sound, school-based studies that contribute to educational goals.

Recommendation

We encourage those involved in assessing and approving teacher-research to assess the research proposed for its potential contribution to the teacher-researcher's knowledge and pedagogical practices, rather than considering research that teachers conduct as part of their university program requirements as disconnected from their professional development. If supports are available for in-house teacher-research, school boards might consider extending those supports to teachers-researchers who continue to teach as they complete their degrees. When no support is available for teacher-research, we encourage school boards to re-consider the value placed on teacher-research projects they review and when possible, to implement some form of support for the teachers they employ. The school boards that have already found ways to support their teachers to conduct school-based research are well positioned to assist others who decide to make this their goal.

Point 4: Communication across Contexts

Individual school board websites are main sources for researchers to access information regarding research review policies and procedures. When conducting our website search, we had difficulties accessing research review information on-line using words we considered descriptive of the information we were seeking (e.g., research, policies and procedures). At times, we had to resort to a trial and error approach to locate many of the documents we needed. In some cases, we explored a wide range of hyperlinks labelled in various ways (e.g., About Us, Staff, Departments, Board Highlights, Assessment and Evaluation) that had no clear connection to research review policies or processes, even though this was where the information was housed.

Interpretation of the information we were collecting was made challenging because the dates for the latest postings of information were not available on the websites. We were not sure how current the information posted was. As well, there were websites that clearly indicated that updates had not taken place for a year or more. In such cases, we questioned if the information available on the website was still reliable. The information intended for communication to researchers was often difficult to access.

Many school boards have the desire to promote and support educational research. Communication lines already exist between some school boards and faculties of education. They have collaborated in various ways including through curriculum projects, research initiatives, and connecting through ministry projects. Two participants reported having a faculty member sit on their RRC. Considering that faculty members and university students submit the majority of research applications to school boards, the development of more comprehensive and effective university-school board communication lines, as well as, productive relationships and collaborations between researchers and school boards is extremely important.

Faculty members, who are often very familiar with REB requirements, do not always understand school board review processes, and are not aware that the lens school boards apply to school-based proposals is much wider than the REB's focus on ethical issues. As well, school board personnel may have expectations of REB review that are not part of the mandate of the Tri-council policy that demands the focus of review be kept to the ethical implications of the research proposed and not on methodology, methods, research design unless connected to ethical concerns. Communicating the commonalities and differences across the review processes within these different jurisdictions would be beneficial to school board personnel, faculty members and graduate students in education.

Recommendation

Making information accessible related to research review is extremely important. How websites are constructed can enhance or obstruct the availability of necessary information. School boards need to continually update websites that communicate their research review policies and procedures.

In cases where relationships exist between school boards and faculties of education, we need to build into those connections an emphasis on school-based research and research/ethics review. When few connections exist between school boards and faculties of education, which we fear is the more likely scenario, strategies need to be constructed to develop lines of communication. Ministry initiatives such as the annual Ontario Education Research Symposium and the other ministry initiatives are helpful. However, school boards and faculties of education need to strengthen ties beyond the conversations that occur in such contexts. We recommend that individual people in school boards and faculties of education be assigned the specific work of developing these connections and collaborations. Many school boards have designated people, in various capacities, for oversight of research. At this point, faculties of education need to take seriously the development of connections and collaborations with school boards.

Within the faculties there will be individuals who have a keen interest in conducting, supporting, and advancing school-based research in the province because they believe this research makes an important contribution to schools and children and contributes to the advancement of education. Faculty members' work consists of responsibilities in terms of teaching, research, and service. We recommend that a faculty member be designated as a liaison (for 2-3 year period) between the faculty of education and school boards in his/her area. Individuals who step into the liaison position would be fulfilling the service requirement of their positions for the duration of the term.

Conclusion

A main purpose of our research was to construct an overview of the "state of the art" of research review in school districts in Ontario. Our data, although limited in some regards (e.g., participant numbers), does provide a window into the review of school-based research. We expect that those who participated, who are positioned in school boards, will read the report and make connections to their experiences and priorities.

We acknowledge that the individual participants who completed the questionnaire may not hold views similar to all district personnel but they are the individuals most involved in the review of school-based research. Questionnaire data provide useful information rather than proof of procedure.

In addition, we find this study to be a basis for future research. We argue that research exploring school board review policies and practices, not only through web searches and document analysis but also through the lens/personal stories of DSB personnel and researchers, might actually discover that the “public” procedures (formalized or not) are not always capturing what actually happens in the process. Such research would provide data that bring us closer to understanding the strengths and limitations of current policies and practices and contribute to a re-visioning of procedures that support important school-based research in the province.

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Appendix 1

Reasons for Denial Sample of Responses

[1.1] Research that is not approved by the Ethics Review Board. (small formalized school board)

[1.2] Any research that would affect the privacy, safety of our Catholic principles in our Board. (small non-formalized school board)

[1.3] Congruency with programs. Efficiency of research on teaching/learning process. (small non-formalized school board)

[1.4] We will not approve proposals from organizations that have demonstrated impropriety on other research studies. Research that impacts the safety and well being of students and/or staff and research that is unreasonable in the time commitment and resources available in our school. (medium semi-formalized school board)

[1.5] Surveys with sensitive issues that may cause anxiety in students. (large formalized school board)

[1.6] Not relevant to our strategic directions. Too time consuming for teachers or students, particularly at peak times of the year. Sensitive topics in which the potential costs outweigh the benefits. Sometimes topics that have already been studied in depth and to ask for involvement from schools again would feel redundant (e.g., a couple years ago a professor wanted to do a bullying survey, we already have one that is completed annually). Research with poor methodology (e.g., we often provide assistance to Board's teacher-researchers because we see it as a good investment to assist them in producing a high quality study – building capacity via these ambassadors – but all too often we receive proposals from outside researchers that are extremely weak and we have found that making suggestions to improve consent forms, etc. is quite time-consuming. It has felt on many occasions that we are working harder than they are. Excessive amounts of staff/student time. No alignment with strategic directions of Effective School Direction.” (medium semi-formalized school board)

[1.7] ...there are concerns about confidentiality/protection of students and staff and the Board and/or information related to students/staff/the Board. Denied if no provision of criminal record check for those working in schools. Denied if university ethics approval is not provided by a university researcher. Denied if infringement on student/teacher instructional or class time. Denied if personal or classified information is required from school board or school records. Denied if there are foreseeable risks, harms, or inconveniences to student/staff/ the Board. Denied if appropriate consent procedure for participants is not in place. Denied if participation is not voluntary. Denied if the identity of the researcher and/or sponsor agency are not disclosed to all stakeholders. Denied if benefits to students/teachers/Board and/or academic knowledge are unclear (i.e., research design is not linked to research questions).” (medium formalized school board)

Appendix 2

Types of Research Prioritized in DSB Sample of Responses

[2.1] [The research must be] consistent with our system priorities. (Improving student learning and achievement, literacy, numeracy). Building capacity to teach and learn. (large formalized school board)

[2.2]...relevance to policies of the school board. (medium formalized school board)

[2.3] We prioritize research that benefits our students, i.e., research that lends itself to improved student learning...Practitioner Action Research has a prominent place. (medium, formalized school board)

[2.4] We prioritize the usefulness that the research offers to the school Board and the success of previous studies undertaken. We will not approve proposals from organizations that have demonstrated impropriety on other research studies. It is important to do good quality research!" (medium semi-formalized school board)

[2.5] Relevant to Board's strategic priorities/improvement plan. (small formalized school board)

[2.6] Research that is closely linked with Aboriginal education. (small semi-formalized school board)

[2.7] Related to current Ministry initiatives. (small non-formalized school board)

[2.8] Research related to our Strategic Plan i.e., Literacy and numeracy are given priority. Must be congruent with our key program focus areas. (small non-formalized school board)

[2.9] Special Education, Literacy, Student Success/Learning to 18. (small non-formalized school board)

[2.10]...[research that has] relevancy to education, value to system and consistency with school board policies and priorities take precedence over unrelated topics. (large formalized school board)

Appendix 3

Specific Practices or Policies Related to Teacher-research Sample of Responses

[3.1] No Board policy exists with respect to this; individual schools may have developed their own/follow the guidelines established for external research projects. (large formalized school board)

[3.2] We always have a conversation with teachers re: the special issues that can arise in this situation; e.g., dual relationships, the need for parent/colleague consent, voluntariness of participation, etc. (medium semi-formalized school board)

[3.3] Although we don't have any formal policies, 'student teachers' who are doing their practicum research are not required to go through our formal research review process. However, it is important that they have clearance from their own university's ethics review, have the supervision from their professors, and approval from the school principals involved. Regular teachers doing 'action research' within their own classrooms also do not have to go through our external research review process. However, for teachers who are doing research outside their own classroom (even within the same school) and who are conducting the research as part of their graduate programs/publishable thesis, they are required to follow the Board's complete research review protocol – either for an expedited or a full review. (large formalized school board)

[3.4] If the research is not for publication or to fulfill university requirements for a university degree then it does not have to go to the research committee. There is a separate form for this situation that gives principal approval. (medium formalized school board)

[3.5] Teacher conducting research to satisfy requirements of graduate studies may not conduct research on their own students. (medium formalized school board)

[3.6] Every classroom is a research project if teachers are conducting innovative practice. There are policies, acts, & regulations through the Board, the Educational Act, & the Ontario College of Teachers that guide the ethical & professional conduct of teachers. But when does teaching cross over into research? I don't have an answer to that, nor am I sure that an answer exists. Teachers should not be conducting research for application with projects not associated with his/her professional responsibility to educate the student in his/her classroom. (medium semi-formalized school board)

[3.7] If teachers are conducting research for the purpose of their graduate degrees, there is no support provided. However, if they are doing action research for the purpose of school planning, there are supports available. (Action research proposals are not reviewed by the committee). (large formalized board)

[3.8] [Support] for thesis or graduate work. (small non-formalized school board)

Appendix 4

Overall Impression about the Research Review Process Sample of Responses

[5.1] Strengths of the Process

[5.1.1] Formalized process; committee members bring various expertise and perspectives. (medium formalized)

[5.1.2] Based on tri-council criteria. (medium formalized school board)

[5.1.3] Fair and thorough. (medium formalized school board)

[5.1.4] Protects students and staff from inappropriate research, through, transparent. (medium formalized school board)

[5.1.5] Relatively informal and therefore relatively quick. (small semi-formalized school board)

[5.1.6] Procedures and application forms available to all board staff. Medium formalized school board)

[5.1.7] Our process works for us and we have received no negative feedback. (small formalized school board)

[5.1.8] Committee decisions. (medium formalized school board)

[5.1.9] It involves the key players in the process. Medium formalized school board)

[5.2] Weaknesses of the Process

[5.2.1] The process is very time consuming.

[5.2.2] Gray areas re: teacher inquiry; where does action research stop and more formal research begin? (medium formalized school board)

[5.2.3] Not many projects are approved. Is very time consuming to complete application. External research does not align with board's system goals/initiatives. (small semi-formalized school board)

[5.2.4] Could be more standardized. (small non-formalized school board)

Appendix 5

District School Board Connections to Faculties of Education Sample of Responses

[4.1] Communication of progress and findings is generally 'restricted'/limited to those in the know and not extended to a broader audience of users or others who may benefit from knowing. (large formal school board)

[4.2] We are always open to collaboration on high quality research projects that will enhance student learning and contribute to the scientific literature. As part of our Region MISA (Managing Information for Student Achievement) consortium, we are planning a series of Research Roundtables with researchers from the universities in our region, particularly from the FOE. (medium semi-formalized school board)

[4.3] As we move into more work with data and the subsequent research component...yes, partners and relationships are critical to moving forward. (small non-formalized school board)

[4.4] SOME current collaboration on research projects & past collaboration on research projects. (large formalized school board)

[4.5] We would be happy to collaborate on research projects that met our needs as well as theirs. (medium formalized school board)

[4.6] We were one of the founding and supportive DSBs in the process. Three of our schools are directly involved with the teaching practitioners. (small non-formalized school board)

[4.7] I would like to be more involved with our universities. Possibly because we are a small board and we have not had the opportunity to be connected with a university. (small non-formalized school board)

[4.8] We are beginning our second Masters cohort group with local University. We have research projects as well with the University. (medium formalized school board)

[4.9] Local University has conducted a number of research projects within our Board. (medium formalized school board)

[4.10] Professional development with Local University – presentation to Graduate program on DSB External Research and Review Process. Current collaboration on research projects. (large formalized school board)