Doing Teacher Research in My Classroom: What Can I Do?

Many posts can be found on the web that encourage teachers to conduct teacher research in their classrooms. The most common reasons stated for teachers to do research included that teachers who engage in research are 1) more engaged in their teaching, 2) able to use data to support evidence-based instruction requirements of districts, and 3) able to make adjustments to instruction to optimize learning by their students. Some posts include the steps on how to conduct teacher research from formulating the research questions through interpreting the data; others focus on how to adjust instruction in light of the research findings. However, there is very little posted to help teachers know if the research they want to do needs more than just principal approval to move forward. In Shelby County Schools, some teacher research must be approved by the District's formal research approval process, managed by the Research Team, before the research can occur.

For teacher research in SCS, the following guidelines can help determine whether it is necessary to submit a research approval application. If either of these questions indicates that District-level approval is required, then a research approval application must be submitted.

- **What is the purpose of the teacher research?** If the goal of the research is solely to inform the teacher's practice, then a research approval application does not need to be submitted. However, if the teacher research will serve a broader purpose, then a research approval application should be submitted. *Research that is going to be used as part of a teacher's Master's thesis or Doctoral dissertation requires approval through the SCS research approval process.* Another example of research requiring approval would be a research project conducted with the intent to present the findings at a professional conference.

- **Does the teacher have the login credentials to access the data that are needed to answer the research question?** If the answer to this is yes, then a research approval application generally does not need to be submitted. For example, teachers obviously have access to their students' grades on tests and assignments. If the research question can be answered using data teachers can access with their own credentials, then submitting a research approval application is most likely not necessary. However, if teachers need additional data to answer the research question – such as grades from a colleague's class or their own students' grades from subsequent school years – then a research approval application should be submitted.

Teachers wanting to engage in teacher research that is designed to improve the teacher's practice and can be completed with the teacher's current access credentials should discuss their plans with the school principal. Obtaining principal approval for conducting research is required and can help ensure that the needs of the research project do not conflict with school operations and classroom instruction, thereby increasing the likelihood of successfully completing the research project. Additionally, school staff familiar with the research projects can be a source of support for teachers while they are conducting their research.

Teachers who plan to do research for reasons beyond improving classroom practice or research that requires more data than they can access should both discuss their research plans with their principal and submit a District Research Approval application. Information on the research approval process is below.

SCS Research Approval Process

Shelby County Schools has a formal process in place to approve or deny all requests to conduct research in the District. The approval process, managed by the Research Team, is outlined on the District's website (http://www.scsk12.org/rpm/process?PID=952). The purpose of the research approval process is to ensure that all the necessary safeguards are in place to protect the research participants. Additionally, the approval process considers how much a research project might interfere with instructional time and whether it involves a significant administrative burden, among other things.

Most research approval applications are submitted by graduate students, professors, and others outside of the District who want to use SCS schools and student data to answer research questions. However, sometimes SCS teacher research must be vetted through the research approval process as well.

The research approval application asks for information about the nature of the research project and the data that are being requested. In some cases, parental consent and student assent are required before research projects can be approved or data can be released. Copies of these forms should be submitted with the research approval application. Information about what should be included in consent statements can be found on the website.

Once a research approval application is submitted, it is assigned to a Research Team member who will review the application. Often times during the review process the reviewer will reach out to the researcher for clarification on parts of the application. Sometimes the informed consent forms need revisions. Sometimes the District cannot provide what is requested so the research project needs to be adjusted. After receiving approval to conduct the research, teachers should update their principals and work out the details for conducting the research. While approval from the Research Team is necessary for a project to move forward, school principals give the final approval allowing the research to take place in their schools.

Using teacher research to gain more information about their classroom and students ultimately can help inform teachers to create stronger instructional practices. It is an interesting process that, if done well, can benefit the teachers and students alike.

For further reading:

https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/vop/about-teacher-research

http://www.nea.org/tools/17289.htm

https://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr/tr-definition

https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/pubs/Value%20of%20Teacher%20Research.pdf

http://www2.ncte.org/statement/researchandteaching/