Partnering with Families on School Improvement Inquiry

Recognizing that school success or failure is often a social and political as well as an educational challenge, the need for partnerships that provide a sustained focus on academic success for all student groups is imperative. Across the United States, only 30% of high school freshmen can read at grade level and 1.2 million U.S. high school students drop out every year — roughly 7,000 each school day. (Cook & King, 2004). From an economic perspective, a college degree has become more important than ever before. However, data from 1999-2000 indicate that while only 7% of 24-year-olds from low-income families had earned a four-year college degree, 52% of those from high-income families had completed a post-secondary degree (Cook & King, 2004). Data that point to persistent gaps in learning outcomes among diverse student groups suggest that school improvement needs to be a community enterprise that often exceeds the typical definitions of parent involvement.

This article speaks to three forms of family involvement partnerships with school staff that contribute to relevant and responsive instruction for diverse learners. Often, this requires creative scheduling and respect for the demands parents and teachers already face. Yet schools are incubators of invention, and in recent years there have been exciting developments in how schools and families work together to strengthen instruction through inquiry projects that are forms of action research.

Action research is a form of disciplined inquiry used to investigate a problem or relevant question where there is no satisfactory present answer (Elliott, 1991; Glickman, 1998). It is a cyclical process in which educators, families, or community members use real-world information and data to inform new courses of action. Although such research can lead to valuable insights, results are almost never able to be generalized because of their use of very small samples.
Nonetheless, action research can be a powerful tool to forge partnerships between schools and families focused on school improvement. In addition to revealing important insights based on self-generated knowledge, a residual benefit is that adults experience the same conditions for learning that they seek for students — respectful collaboration, an inquiry-oriented approach to solving problems, and interesting explorations that foster motivation for continuous learning (Ginsberg, 2011).

Of the three examples that follow, the first occurs in the community and teachers are the primary researchers (home visits); the second in a set of classrooms and parent or family volunteers work with teachers as researchers (shadowing students); and the third in teams with teachers, high school students, and community members as collaborative researchers (data-in-a-day). All three examples involve an action research protocol, as illustrated in the following section with home visits.

**Home Visits**

These are off-campus meetings with the families of selected students, and they are set up early in the school year. They help teachers get to know their students at a level deeper than mere classroom contact can provide. Visits are usually held in the students’ home and follow a “Funds of Knowledge” approach (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ginsberg, 2011). The visit enables teachers to discover student strengths that can be “mined” to make teaching and learning more culturally responsive, motivating, and academically effective. Examples of questions that teachers ask are: What are you most proud of about your child? When your child talks about school, what are some of the things he or she has mentioned? We are developing a unit/learning
experience about _______. What do you think might be particularly important or interesting for your child to learn?¹

Certainly, home visits – or any experience – can be implemented without an action research focus. However, in such cases, learning becomes a matter of happenstance or serendipity rather than an intentional learning process with a coherent and manageable sequence of actions aligned with valued outcomes. To pursue home visits as an action research process, educators might work with families to construct the following process:

1. Identify a relevant focus or problem

   For example, in the case of home visits, a shared focus might be for teachers and custodial family members or parents² to explore a child’s strengths through uncovering family stories and experiences that reveal special knowledge or skills. Such an exploration can provide teachers with ideas for making curriculum increasingly relevant to a range of students.

2. Pose the relevant focus or problem as a researchable question

   For example, home visits that are focused on learning about a family’s strengths might explore questions such as: “What can teachers learn from visiting with families in their homes that would be difficult to learn in any other context?” and “How will teachers apply new insights to make learning more motivating to all students?” In this example, one question has to do with the process of visiting a student’s home. The other has to do with the teacher’s application of new knowledge to instruction.

3. Develop a plan that includes collecting data related to the research question

¹ Baeder (2010) provides a more thorough discussion regarding implementation.
² This article uses these terms interchangeably out of respect for the members of families, such as grandparents, who raise their children’s children.
To prepare to answer the two research questions, teachers might ask a small focus group of diverse family members – perhaps para-professionals or language interpreters who are parents – to help teachers think through what to do from the moment they enter through a family’s home to the moment they leave. This would include what to notice and what questions to ask so that teachers can learn in ways that are fundamentally respectful. The plan should also include a way of taking notes while visiting or shortly afterwards.

4. Make sense of data

In the home visit example, data takes the form of the teacher’s notes related to the two research questions and, with a family’s permission, photographs or a copy of something the family has created and wants to share. To make sense of data, teachers could chart themes by carefully reviewing data from each visit, noting, for example, patterns across visits to several families. The next steps would be to draw conclusions and, ideally, to gain additional perspective on conclusions by seeking input from colleagues regarding the first question, and input from two or three families who were visited regarding the second question.

5. Take action

With regard to the second research question, a teacher might want explore rhythm and music as a way to bring math and language arts to life if he or she notices that several families play an instrument. If families have successfully negotiated their way through different kinds of bureaucracies – such as medical care or building codes for home construction – teachers might refer to such experiences when they teach the steps for solving problems or understanding how systems operate. Related to the first
question, if teachers discover that visiting with families in their homes provides rich information about families’ many strengths in ways that would be difficult to learn in a context other than a student’s kitchen table, their action might be to advocate for additional funding to expand the project, or to inspire other educators to visit students’ homes.

6. Keep the learning cycle going by generating new questions

Action research is sometimes referred to as a cycle of inquiry because it is cyclical (Coalition of Essential Schools, 2009). As original questions are explored, new questions emerge. For example, once teachers gather and implement ideas to make teaching and learning more relevant to a range of students, new questions might surface about the influence of home visits on student learning.

**Shadowing Students**

Although test scores and grade point averages provide evidence of what students are learning, they don’t show why students are learning. One way to understand this is through shadowing. For example, one school developed an action research cycle to explore how well it was implementing its approach to supporting language development among English learners. Teachers invited several parents to be co-researchers. They asked parents to take notes (collect data) of when and how specific students 1) interact throughout a lesson with the teacher, 2) use language in one-to-one conversations with a trusted peer, and 3) engage in group work with other students. Teachers identified two students for each shadower to watch. Every five minutes the shadowers made a note about what each student was doing. At an agreed-upon time, parents worked with teachers to identify patterns from the data they had collected. Based on patterns,
teachers discussed ways to assist English learners with the dual goals of learning a new language while mastering content knowledge.³

**Data-in-a-Day**

This collaborative action research experience involves visiting every classroom in a school, typically three times a year. It provides an opportunity for parents, high school students, and teachers to serve on four-member teams that collectively examine what instruction looks like throughout an entire school. Each team visits six different classrooms for 15 minutes each. For example, eight teams would collectively visit 48 classrooms in a single morning. In smaller schools, there could be fewer teams or more time spent in each classroom. Although brief visits to classrooms do not provide a full picture of instruction, they can reveal certain trends and identify inspired interactions that can be replicated in other classrooms.

Teams are provided with a pre-determined research question and a data collection tool based on the school’s instructional priorities. These tools (e.g., forms) help teams to be deliberate about what to notice across the classrooms that they visit. For example, one set of teams investigates the question: *To what extent are learning environments inclusive of each and every learner?* Another set of teams investigates the question: *To what extent do learning environments encourage students to make meaningful and culturally relevant choices?* The other two sets of teams investigate, respectively, *To what extent is learning challenging and engaging? To what extent is there clear criteria related to authentic ways for students to identify their success?*

Data-in-a-Day teams are prepared in a way that promotes the reliability of their observational insights. All participants attend a preparation dinner the evening before they visit

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³ For detailed information on shadowing English learners see *ELL Shadowing as a Catalyst for Change* (Soto, 2012) and, for school administrators, *In Yassir’s Shoes* (Farris, 2011).
classrooms to practice using the data collection tools accurately and respectfully. They also have a chance to consider what they might or might not be able to see depending on when they arrive or leave a classroom, and norms that teachers have suggested for what teams should do when they are in a classroom. In other words, protocol can be established, such as should they interact with students, wait until they leave the classroom to write notes on their form, and so forth.

To make sense of data once the visits are complete, teams create descriptive lists of “wows” and “wonders” based on observation data. A “wow” is something that stands out because it is positively related to learning among diverse students. A “wonder” is a question such as “I wondered if teachers have shared their approaches to holding students accountable for productive group work?” Wonders suggest questions that teachers might ask as part of a follow-up action research process of their own. Before the teams share their insights with other teams and with teachers, they reach a consensus about what they have seen and summarize key findings.4

Home visits, Shadowing, and Data-in-a-Day are forms of action research that assist schools with their continuous commitment to instructional improvement. It is not uncommon to involve families as school improvement partners by eliciting their perspectives through survey instruments or focus groups. While these methods can be valuable, there is a tendency to underestimate families’ desire and capacity to engage in real-time, inquiry-focused opportunities to assist with the most important aspect of school improvement – instructional practice. Not surprisingly, when families and educators work as partners in context-embedded school improvement inquiry, they gain a better understanding of how much knowledge and skill they

4 For more information on this process, read Seeing Through New Eyes (Richardson, 2001) Richardson’s article explains different approaches to classroom visits and provides references for practices such as Data-in-a-Day. The Center for Action, Inquiry and Motivation also provides information about Data-in-a-Day at www.aimcenterseattle.org/motivation/diad.
collectively possess, even when state test scores are in significant need of improvement. As a consequence, school staff members become less likely to view families as oppositional or in need of fixing, and families become more active and appreciative advocates for teachers’ hard work. This is vitally important to our collective interest in learning that is inclusive, relevant, challenging, engaging, and oriented toward success for every student, every day. The importance of partnership in this cannot be overstated.

As I conclude this brief article, I am reminded that two of the most essential characteristics of skillful educators, whatever their level of experience, are vision and imagination. Certainly, the ideas for action research in this article require vision and imagination. Not only must they be customized to work within a local context in ways that are pragmatic and responsive, but they reside among a host of other everyday priorities. Nonetheless, in education, rich and authentic partnerships are the architecture of student success. They are also the foundation of another fundamental purpose of education – pluralistic civic engagement.
References


