Beyond the Numbers: Use of Qualitative Methods for a Contextually Sensitive Evaluation

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Responding to Context

- Among other contextual concerns, the evaluation design should be responsive to:
  - Key research questions
  - Decision-makers' expectations
  - Program life cycle

Case: GEAR UP Partnership

- First year GEAR UP partnership grant in two middle schools

- Grant aligned with district-wide reform initiative emphasizing, among other elements:
    - rigorous, interdisciplinary curriculum;
    - personalized learning plans;
    - learning supports, including use of AVID
    - career pathways and counseling

School-Level Context

- ## School A:
  - New principal transferring from elementary school
  - Year-round schedule

- ## School B:
  - Third year of principal's tenure
  - Traditional year schedule
  - In midst of transitioning to pre-IB program
  - Push for increased pre-Algebra enrollment

Year 1 GEAR UP Strategies

- Some strategies varied between two schools: AVID in School A, pre-IB in School B

- Shared strategies included:
  - Rigor: College Board's Springboard curriculum; reading and math coaches, tutors; Saturday Academies; PLCs
  - Relevance: STEM workshop series; in-school college and career resource centers; career coach
  - Relationships: Parent involvement ; personal learning plans

Year 1 Evaluation Design Concerns

- Decision-makers' expectation to learn about implementation challenges to support program improvement

- Start up program required baseline data collection

Mixed Methods Evaluation

- Combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches purposively selected to:
  - ensure triangulation and
  - strengthen understanding of the nature of implementation, including challenges and strengths at the individual school level

Quantitative Methods

- ## Quantitative methods:

    – Surveys of parents, students, and teachers in participating schools

    – Participation / dosage data on services to parents, students, and teachers

    – District-collected data on multiple indicators, including (but not limited to) daily attendance, discipline infractions, and academic achievement used as outcome indicators

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research underscores how a school's context affects the implementation of a reform.

-- Rawlings, 2000

•Focus groups with key stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, support services staff, school administrators, central office administrators, partner agency representatives

Site Visits & Focus Groups

- School site visit included focus groups with:
  - School Administration: school's leadership team
  - School Faculty/Support Staff: Grade 6 and 7 core teachers
  - School Support Services Staff: Career Coach, School Counselor(s), Parent Involvement Facilitator
  - Students: Grade 6 and 7 students (10-12)
  - Parents of Grade 6 and 7 students (10-12)

Site Visits & Focus Groups

- Central office site visit included focus groups with:
    - Community Partners: Representatives from all GEAR UP partners
    - District Administration: GEAR UP project director and co-director; school counseling director; director of community relations; IB Coordinator; and English and math curriculum leaders

Focus Group Protocol - Sample

- From Teacher Focus Group Protocol:
  - When I say "GEAR UP," what comes to your mind?
  - What do you consider to be the major successes of the program so far?
  - What should be improved about how GEAR UP is implemented?
  - Is GEAR UP raising the expectations of students that they will attend college?

Selected Findings: Saturday Academies

- Program participation
  - Attendance is well below expectations. According to sign-in rosters, average number of student participants per session = 8
  - Parent involvement is lower than anticipated:
    - "Getting parents out on Saturdays was tough." – School A staff
    - 22% of School A parents indicated on the annual survey that they participated in program; 11% of School B parents indicated participation

Selected Findings: Saturday Academies

- Program participation
  - Staff concerns with student behavior have hindered recruitment efforts to serve at-risk students
    - "a lot of kids with behavioral problems are not allowed to attend [*Saturday Academy*]. The kids who really need the program are not getting it." – School B teacher
    - "Students who can go are given a slip of paper." – School B student

Selected Findings: Saturday Academies

- Program staffing has been difficult, although this issue is not well known by high-level administrators
  - "Saturday Academies . . . are not different from last year, but now the funding is in place. " – School B administrator
  - "We've had some staffing and transportation issues."—School A principal
  - Saturday academies don't have administrative oversight.—School B teacher
  - "The hourly compensation rate for teaching on Saturday is not an incentive for working on a weekend." – School B teacher
  - "Teachers are willing to come in. As far as lessons, a rich lesson only costs about $40 dollars." – Central office administrator

Selected Findings: College Expectations

- **Students have high expectations to attend college**
  - Over 90 percent of students surveyed indicated a desire to go to college or another postsecondary program, with over 72 percent expecting to obtain a four-year degree.
  - During a focus group at School B, only one student said that he did not expect to attend college.

Selected Findings: College Expectations

- Parent expectations for their children is similarly high.
  - 60 percent of parents surveyed anticipated that their child will graduate with a four-year degree.

Selected Findings: College Expectations

- Teacher expectations for students are lower than parents or students.
  - Half of surveyed teachers believed that students will study at the college level but will not earn a four-year degree.
  - At School A, 39 percent of teachers believed their students will achieve a high school diploma or less. School B teachers were more optimistic, with nearly 81 percent of teachers believing that students will at least earn some college credit or more.
  - "With our group of kids, they are so narrow minded. They think the only way they can succeed is to play ball or find a trade and that college isn't an option." –School A teacher

Selected Findings: Parent Involvement

- Parent involvement is improving at both schools
  - PTA membership has grown exponentially at both schools; at School A, for instance, the PTA grew from 10 members in 2007-08 to 210 in 2008-09.
  - "The first few [parent events] were small, but as parents talk to neighbors, more people are trickling in. You can just see that the parents are enjoying it. You can see the change in attitudes that there are people looking out for them."—School A teacher

Selected Findings: Parent Involvement

- **Parents perceive climate changes at schools.**
  - "I have a long history with [School A]. The atmosphere here was at one time very distant. You could walk in and feel a chill. With the GEAR UP program, there's a totally different atmosphere. You walk in and feel like somebody wants parents. I'm loving it. . . . Many times in the past I got the cold shoulder in this school. Not anymore."—School A parent
  - "My older son came in before and it was a very negative place... The teachers' attitudes now seem different, five years later...The staff seemed to be cheerful and positive. If I've had issues for additional help for my son, the staff is very responsive."—School B parent

Evaluation Use

- Significantly, issues raised through the evaluation informed the project director's second year plan, including:
  - Scaled up plans to implement the Teacher Expectations for Student Achievement PD program
  - Rescheduling of Saturday Academy after school

Value of the Mixed Method Approach

- Qualitative findings more accessible while quantitative work imparts robustness & generalizability

- Qualitative work corroborated and validated the quantitative findings

- Qualitative work provided insight into school contexts and how they influenced implementation