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Focusing Focus Groups

A "ONE-PAGE PROTOCOL" APPROACH

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In a previous Incubator post, our colleagues pointed out that leading effective focus groups for implementation research requires clarity about the critical topics to explore. Our experience conducting the focus groups for our evaluation of PowerTeaching illustrates how we targeted a few key topics while at the same time encouraging conversational flow. We prepared a framework in advance to help us analyze the information we gathered during the sessions.

IDENTIFYING THE KEY QUESTIONS

Overall, our implementation research was asking whether the program, a version of "cooperative learning," had been implemented as designed, and what kinds of relevant activities were occurring in schools that did not receive the program.

In practice, cooperative learning may be simply "group work" that involves seating students in groups and asking them to work together, sometimes assigning a unique role and responsibilities to each student in the group. Yet cooperative learning as defined by the developers of PowerTeaching — the Success for All Foundation — specifically means that groups exhibit *team interdependence*. The key elements are team recognition, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success: Teachers give student teams recognition for good collaboration and academic work, and, critically, they use *random reporting*, calling randomly on team members. This method gives the team incentives to collaborate to make sure that every member is involved and ready to respond.

We knew that PowerTeaching was complex and equal to more than the sum of its parts; surveying teachers about their implementation of the parts would not yield a full picture of how the program had been implemented. We needed to dig deeply into such questions as:

- How were teachers defining cooperative learning?
- How were teachers using cooperative learning, and why?
- Did teachers at the same school use cooperative learning in the same way?
- How did students respond to and engage with cooperative learning?
- How did teachers' implementation of PowerTeaching differ from typical group work?

We wanted to learn about how cooperative learning actually occurred in classrooms, but the project budget did not allow for direct classroom observation in multiple schools at multiple times. We examined the project's logic model and the options for data collection and determined that focus groups were essential to inform us about what cooperative learning looked like across the schools in the sample.

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FOCUSING THE FOCUS GROUP

In developing the focus group protocol, we wanted to zero in on the extent to which teachers using cooperative learning were facilitating team interdependence. But by its nature, cooperative learning is a very complex practice with overlapping parts. It is hard to have a conversation about one of those parts without also talking about another part. So we needed a protocol that allowed the discussion to move between topical buckets, rather than a protocol that sounded like a survey and forced the discussion to move in a line from one topic to the next.

We developed a one-page protocol with several layers (see figure below), beginning with an ice-breaker question about classroom layout meant to get at whether teachers grouped their students, followed by questions and probes related to the three big themes — team recognition, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success. Our overall research question appears near the bottom of the figure, and the protocol ends with a question that asks teachers to share their personal opinions about their experiences implementing the program.

Creating and using this figure helped us in several ways. First, while developing it, we were challenged to articulate the central questions that needed to be addressed during the sessions. This helped us conceptualize how cooperative learning might manifest in different schools. Having this exhibit in our minds during the focus group sessions also changed the way that we conducted the groups: We were better able to navigate the protocol, using comments from participants, than we had been in our prior work when we had lists of questions. And the protocol enabled us to focus on depth, not breadth, in collecting information. Participants did most of the talking and the conversation did not feel contrived, but we could bring the focus back to the key questions when needed, and we had a sense throughout of where information was richest and where it was leanest.

ANALYZING RESPONSES TO INFORM THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS

The protocol fed into our coding, starting with the three "parent codes" for team recognition, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success. We then created "child codes" based on themes that emerged from a first round of reviewing transcripts. For example, for the *equal opportunities for success* parent code, we created child codes that captured whether the teacher discussed (a) creating mixed ability groups, (b) setting team goals, and (c) assigning team roles as part of the effort to create equal opportunities for success. We then used a weight system to flag whether the teacher's description of these themes was positive (weight of 2), neutral (weight of 1), or negative (weight of zero). Our coding team had three coders, each specializing in one parent code and gaining expertise in that part of the implementation story.

WHEN IS A ONE-PAGE PROTOCOL FOR FOCUS GROUPS APPROPRIATE?

Using this kind of one-page protocol is unlikely to work well when focus group facilitators are inexperienced or do not have a deep understanding of the implementation context or of the study priorities. And it's not appropriate if the focus group sessions are a last-resort source of information for questions better answered with surveys or other data. This kind of approach works best when the focus groups are part of a broader information collection strategy for implementation research and when the sessions can inform a particular aspect of the intervention in depth.

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[45 min]

Success for All Math School Year 14-15 Teacher Focus Group

TELL TEACHER: Think of your 3rd period class, or nearest to 3rd pd, as your example class throughout this interview.
ICEBREAKER: How do you physically structure your classroom? **FOLLOW-UP:** What do students do in these [X]?

Team Recognition

- **When do you decide to group and what goes into that decision?**
- **What tools or practices do you use to keep students engaged while in groups?**
  - —Norms and practices in place (consistency and efficacy)
  - —Details on how current practices promote group engagement
- **Bonding/Group identity/Feeling responsible/ Safe; Trust; Respect**
  - —How are these practices prioritized or essential to their classroom culture
  - —What influences dis/continued use of "team building"
- **Rewards/celebrations**
  - —Focus on group rewards/look for examples and how well a teacher uses this practice.

We want to know if, and how, teachers create buy-in/a classroom culture that encourages and supports student interaction and co-learning where students trust and respect each other's learning.

Individual Accountability

- **Random selection of students/Random Reporter**
  - —How do you call on students to answer questions?
  - —When/how often does this happen? (Is it REALLY random, and do they tie it to having students work as a team together, or do they just ask students to report without the prior input from their team?)
  - —Is there any incentive for team to prepare all team members?
- **What if a student doesn't know the answer?** (trying to assess interdependence)
- **Are there things that the group expects of each group member?** (What drives this expectation?)
  - prep points / homework / meeting group goals / collaboration / behavior

We want to know how teachers ensure that their students are held accountable for their own, and their peers', learning.

Equal Opportunities for Success

- **What does a successful group look like? How do students know?**
- **Setting goals** (ex. how do they make sure they are improving/growing, and not necessarily getting an A or 100%)
  - —At the class level, group level, individual level?
  - —How does group know they are reaching those goals?
- **Homogenous or heterogeneous groups? Why and to what extent?** (When do they group based on mixed abilities? When not?)
- **How does each person participate in the team?** (ex. group roles evenly distributed?)

We want to understand the ways teachers set the stage for success for all; the ways they make sure all students are improving and succeeding.

Big Picture: What does cooperative learning look like in schools?

FOR THE LAST FIVE MINUTES: We just spent the last 40 minutes talking about cooperative learning:
We want to hear, in practical terms, what has been your experience so far with implementing this math program/PowerTeaching?

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