Homegrown Research:
A Guide for School Communities

Volume I—Strategies for Listening to and Analyzing Student Voices

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The research for this guide comes from the following publications:

Christman, Jolley B. and Pat Macpherson (1996) *The Five School Study.*
Prepared and distributed by the Philadelphia Education Fund.

Gold, Eva and Cameron Voss (1996) *Making Children Larger and Cracks Smaller: The Role of a Participatory Evaluation in School Restructuring,*
Report for The Gratz Connection prepared and distributed by Research for Action.

We would like to thank all the members of the school communities involved in these research studies.

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Forward

In the past, students' problems in schools have often looked like *their* problems, evident in negative attitudes, discipline problems, and failure rates. But more recently members of school communities have begun to see that the problems and their solutions involve relationships among all the key players—students and school staff, parents and community members. No relationship is one-way. As a principal observes, "Teachers blame students for disrespect while students blame teachers for not listening—for disrespect of them." And as a teacher suggests, "When you know a particular child, you can teach him."

School reform requires that respectful relationships be fostered through thoughtful discussions of key issues and practice in group decision-making. In Philadelphia, a central reform strategy has been the development of small learning communities (SLCs) where school staff and students can come to develop these relationships over time. Adults involved in school reform agree that students' active engagement in learning is an important goal. Students' understanding and valuing of their education seems critical to their engagement. But where are students in reform processes and plans?

This book is about "homegrown research" that is "student centered," inviting teachers and other members of the school community to learn about their classrooms, SLCs, and schools through research that starts from students' descriptions of their experiences of their education. The strategies suggested here for looking at research and doing research grow out of responses to some specific questions about research and school improvement:

1. How do members of the school community learn about students' views and about students' engagement, or disengagement, in school? What kinds of educational issues do students raise in interviews and group discussions?

2. How do members of the school community decide whether and how to look at and respond to students' experiences of their schooling?

3. How have groups of school community members successfully used research on—even by—students in their own schools?

What is Research and Who Does It?

Research on education has traditionally been "owned" by external evaluators and university-based researchers. School staff were expected to implement practices dictated by outsiders. But in recent decades the education field has increasingly recognized the wealth of knowledge and insight that school "insiders" bring to research. Practitioner-research—inquiry conducted by and for people in schools—addresses the real concerns, questions, and frustrations of people who work in classrooms and implement schoolwide policies and practices. Their questions change over time. Sometimes they work collectively to gain the multiple perspectives necessary to address the enormous challenges facing schools, particularly urban schools.

This booklet is part of a national and local movement that is using collaborative research as a way to bring people together to guide school reform. The samples of research and the suggested research activities included here involve teams of people doing research together for common purposes. For example, outside researchers may work with teachers, administrators, and parents to examine students' school experiences. Teachers in an SLC may do research with their students to guide plans for next year. What the samples in this guide have in common is that they involve different groups of people designing and carrying out action research to improve schools. These samples are only examples from a much larger range of work. They are not meant to single out any specific schools, classrooms or students, but to show how larger issues can be illuminated through particular examples.

Fundamentally, research involves raising a question, gathering relevant data, and analyzing the data for what it can tell us about the question. Quantitative research uses sets of statistical data to address pre-determined questions. For example, a study could compare two different kinds of reading instruction by looking at the reading scores of students on a standardized performance measure.

Qualitative research is a way to look closely at what is going on in a setting—like a classroom, SLC, school or community—from participants' perspectives. In qualitative research, the question often changes over time in order to reflect deepening understanding of what is happening and what is important to learn more about. Qualitative researchers observe, participate, ask questions, and look at documents in order to illuminate daily interactions

in a setting. For example, researchers could learn about reading instruction in a school by asking students to write what they found interesting or difficult about a shared text. Or they could record a group discussion of a text, listening later to learn more about which students respond to what kinds of questions, where students have trouble, and how students are connecting the reading with their own experiences. In these examples, student writing, teachers' and students' observations, journals reflecting on observations, and tape recordings or transcripts are data.

Quantitative and qualitative research can be used together, to illuminate each other. For example, low overall reading scores on a standardized test might lead a school community to use qualitative methods to explore what is happening with their students as readers. In this guide, however, we emphasize qualitative methods such as focus group interviews, observations, surveys, and close examination of documents. Qualitative research is one way to help insiders as well as outsiders give purposeful consideration to what they can learn through careful and systematic observation with others in their school communities. Specifically, this volume focuses on the research strategies of asking and listening, for example, using interviews and focus groups to learn more about students' perspectives.

The following sections provide research material, discussion approaches, and strategies for doing research. For people in schools, each sample presents familiar characters, situations, and problems. Each of the texts, and all the examples of research, are from schools in Philadelphia. The accompanying strategies and questions are designed to be "student-centered" in both their starting and ending points. Immediately and over the long haul, what can we see about students' school experiences that helps us understand our work as educators and our plans for schools and classrooms?

Using This Guide

This guide provides strategies for **looking at** research and strategies for **doing** your own research.

- **Chapter One:** This chapter provides examples from two research studies, *The Five School Study*, a study of five restructuring Philadelphia high schools, and *Making Children*

Larger and Cracks Smaller, a study of the Gratz Connection, where elementary, middle, and high school teachers examined the transitions of students from one school level to the next. These two texts present some data—the words and ideas primarily of students, but also of teachers and principals—that can help us to think about the experiences of school.

- **Chapter Two:** Following the excerpts from the two studies are strategies for looking at research. These suggest ways of *using* the texts to consider relevant issues as you think about and plan your educational programs. The suggested strategies offer ways to read, discuss, and learn from the research.

- **Chapter Three:** This chapter presents strategies for conducting research in your own contexts—classrooms, SLCs, and schools. These suggestions will help you hear the voices of students and look at the experience of school from fresh perspectives.

  Also included are examples of research that teachers and other people in Philadelphia have done with students and in schools.

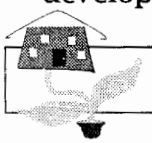
- **Chapter Four:** Finally, this chapter presents an example from *Making Children Larger and Cracks Smaller* in which teachers and the principal in one school use the research about students to reflect upon their school. It is offered as one example of a way that schools and SLCs could use research to enhance their educational program and school improvement planning.

The Philadelphia School District, like districts across the country, is moving toward decentralization. This will put increased responsibility on school communities to monitor and improve their schools. We envision this guide as the first of a series intended to provide tools for a broad range of people to use multiple methods to assess and change their schools. This first volume focuses on what we learn by asking and listening—through interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Subsequent volumes will focus on what we learn by observing in schools, by looking closely at student work, and by considering quantitative data. We hope to offer school communities a valuable tool to aid them as they chart reform.

I. Students' Voices, Students' Stories: Five Examples of Research

Part One: *The Five School Study*

The first research comes from the "Students Access Reform" chapter of *The Five School Study*, published by the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) in May, 1996. Over the course of one school year, researchers visited five comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia that had restructured into SLCs. Before beginning their research, the researchers met with principals and teachers from the schools to develop essential questions that they felt were important to study. The researchers conducted interviews with teachers, administrators, other school staff, and students, and shadowed students during a school day (see 3.4 and 3.5). Focus group interviews with students showed that their views on teaching and learning, relationships in school, and standards tend to be incisive, sometimes critical, and often frustrated. Included here are some of the transcribed focus group interviews with students from this study. The text is divided into four of the essential questions that researchers developed initially with the principals and teachers.



1.1 How Can You Tell That Teachers Care?

Student Focus Group—

Researcher: Why are students absent?

Student 1: If they feel like teachers don't really care, they don't bother ... A lotta teachers care—some—most [teachers] not a lot.

Researcher: How can you tell teachers care?

Student 1: They ask where you've been.

Student 2: They get on you about your grades, keep bringing your grades up, cause they care about your passing. They don't want to see you back in their class again [failing].

More Voices of Students—

- [They're] stayin' on top of us, seein' we do the work.

- Some of these teachers here are willing to help you if you're willing to help yourself. Some of them know what you can do that will help you. Some of them just don't care, and it's on you. Like me, I need somebody to push me, just to say, 'You gotta do this.' I have to have that attention. It's important.

- Some of our teachers are more stricter. They teach you responsibility. They tell you they care about you, yeah. But then they tell you, 'You gotta get your act together.' And that helps.

Student Focus Group—

Researcher: What kinds of things help you learn?

Student 1: I like English best. She makes you read. Then you talk it out; then you see the video. I like that. She prepares you for college. She gives you plenty of work ... She cares about the students.

Student 2: Mr. P., he's a wise crack. He's always making comments. He's always on you. He stays on your behind.

Student 3: There are different teachers that is on you, but if a teacher is on you too, too much, you don't get it.

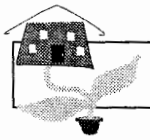
More Voices of Students—

- I have an information processing class and it's the same thing as a typing class. I mean we have a typing class and you're just using the computer to sit there and look at a paper and type it out. It's the same thing. She [the teacher] just gives you a paper and you just type all day. It's not supposed to be like that. Sometimes I try to read a paper and I just don't understand. I ask her and she says 'Go read the paper.'

- [Teachers] act like they're too good for you.

- They make you feel like you're getting on their nerves.

- They talk down to you. We're seniors, they treat us like freshmen.



1.2 What Does a Community Feel Like in an SLC?

- Our charter[1], because it is so small, we like real close, like a family. Mr. D. is like a father to us. If you have any problems he is there for us. If you need anything, he there to give to you.

- My mom is a dispatcher and she's never home. She's not home and I don't have anyone to talk to. And my father is an electrician and he's always busy. I stay here 'til about 6 and talk to Mrs. B. She's not going to turn us away from anything. She'd rather see what's wrong with us before she takes care of her business.

- Mrs. S. is like a mother. She understands a person. She pays attention to what you have to say.

- By having a charter you get more attention and things get done faster. If we were all together there would be no way they could take the time for us like that. I think the school would be in an uproar. There would be no way to control the whole school like that. I'm glad that the whole school is divided up ... You get more attention that way.

- I think the whole idea is good. At first we were upset, but then we got to like it.

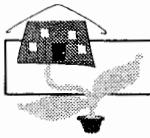
- In charters, you get to know your teachers better and you make friends. It's more like family. The ninth graders will have a better chance [because they will have been in a charter for four years.]

- It's like a family in our charter, everybody knows everybody.

- If you have the same teacher over several years, you get to learn their style and what they expect. You don't have to keep catching on to how they teach.

- It helps you come to school everyday.

1 "Charter" was a term used to describe a small learning community in a high school.



1.3 What Are the Standards for Student Work?

Student Focus Group—

Student 1: [What I want is] courses preparing me for college. What they're teaching, it's not fast enough. Twelfth graders tellin' me they're not ready for college.

Student 2: Science and math are ok. Everything else I can sit back and relax. But I want to learn something. I want to walk out knowing something.

Student 3: It took us until we're about to graduate to learn that we haven't learned anything. Anybody here goin to college is not prepared ... You go in with A's, you might become average in college.

Researcher: How is it you became aware that you don't have the education you need?

Student 2: I went to Temple for two summers. I can tell by professors I had that I'm not prepared.

Student 1: I went to school in Connecticut, we took college courses there.

Student 3: I went to a Navy Upward Bound Program ... I came in last. I have A's and B's here.

Student 4: When I started working at K-Mart. It's not that they were smarter than me, but they were more educated than I was. Telling me their stories about what they were goin' through in school.

Student 1: You realize you're going to have to struggle after you leave here, to keep up.

Student 4: We shouldn't have to, but we coulda took extra classes in summer. So we can't blame it all on the school. A school is supposed to give you what you need.

Student 5: You figure out that they don't really expect you to do that much and you can slide by.

Student 6: This is a fairly good school. It was a junior high. It's all beat up and everything, it brings you down. It's a junior high education. It's why everyone here acts like kids. If you were in a better school you'd act better. If you were in a worse school you'd act worse. You're a product of your environment.

Student 7: I went to Engineering and Science. I was struggling there to keep a C average. They're smart. There it was a good thing to be the nerd and get straight A's. Here it seems the mentality is 'Oh man, I got like six F's.' Everybody's average

[here]. You realize you're going to have to struggle after you leave here, to keep up.

Researcher: What would happen if teachers raised their expectations and standards?

Student 8: A lotta kids would fail and drop out. But the ones [left] would realize we gotta buckle down, they would get a good education. So if we don't change it, the ones who are passin', are thinkin' they got what they need, know what they think they need to know when they don't. People here who're smart [just] work that last quarter [of the year] and get that A. They don't work the whole year because they know they don't have to.

More Voices of Students—

- I would change the charters because I think it kind of divides the school. It's like Motivation is smarter than Business Academy, and Urban Studies is just dumb like that ... so I'd take the charters out.

- I had three Business classes. I had to get them changed. It was too easy. People was like talking in class, talking over the teachers ...

- It gets so boring that I put my head down and I don't copy the notes, but I still be getting B's on the tests ... It's easier than my charter classes.

- Notetaking, outlining, researching at the library, learning to use InfoTrac ... you have to go research many different books to find answers to questions ... You learn a lot more in that class.

1.4 What Do You Learn When You Teach?

Student Focus Group of seniors who mentor younger students—

Researcher : How do you get your ninth graders to learn?

Student: Expect things to happen. Go in with a plan, but if something else comes up, deal with that. You have to keep structure, but you have to allow some freestyle to go along with it ...

Student: We plan a lot, but we never have to leave early because they like talking about their own experiences. That's how we get them started a lot. Let them talk about their own lives.

Student: They understand other peoples' lives and their own after listening ... They find the similarities with different people.

Student: They get interested when we ask questions.

Researcher: What do you do if you get into an argument?

Student: Kristen was the only one with opinion on one side and we got into an argument, but it didn't turn into a fight. And we didn't resolve nothin', but everybody got a chance to hear other people's opinions.

Student: It gives people a different way of lookin' at it.

Researcher: Do you think the ninth graders or yourselves have gotten more out of Peer Mentoring?

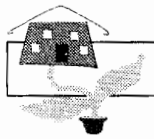
Students: (Agreeing) We have.

Student: People here used to hate HIM, never talked to THEM. Now I finally understand their point of view. We learned respect when we get to know each other. Everyone has their own little cliques, and this threw us all together. You get a chance to form an opinion and speak your opinion. Like in classes you never get a chance to talk about it.

Student: I think ninth graders shoulda gone on the [three day] retreat. Ninth graders' group got messed up [by rostering] ... They don't want to open up to every person that comes in there and then get let down every time.

Part Two: *Making Children Larger and Cracks Smaller*

The second piece of research comes from a report about the Gratz Connection, *Making Children Larger and Cracks Smaller.* The Gratz Connection was a federally funded dropout prevention program which engaged teachers in Gratz High School and its feeder middle and elementary schools in a process of developing connections across those schools. For the study, teachers became researchers of their own students, tracking them into middle and high school. The research was a collaboration between teachers and outside researchers based on teachers' questions and concerns about their students' school transitions. How could students be supported to invest and achieve as they moved through middle and secondary school? Their findings were discussed by school staff as part of ongoing reforms at the elementary, middle, and high schools. "Lynnette's Story" is written by Research for Action researcher Eva Gold with a teacher-researcher and her principal. The teacher, Ms. Smith, visited Lynnette, a former student at her middle school, after she entered high school. Ms. Smith wanted to find out what teachers seldom know—what happens to our students in the transition from one school to the next? She talked with Lynnette and her teachers, observed her classes and reviewed her records. This teacher found that while her student—a special education student—had succeeded in middle school with crucial help from supportive relationships, she started to fail in high school when she couldn't tap into the same structures or relationships. As the teacher shared findings with her colleagues, she discovered that while Lynnette's story had unique elements, it also revealed "cracks" in the school system that affected many regular education as well as special education children moving from one school level to the next. Quantitative data had already revealed the large numbers of ninth graders failing and dropping out. This qualitative research offers some insights into what can go wrong and how these issues can be addressed by schools. The kind of experience Lynnette has entering Gratz High School helps us understand the experience of many students entering urban high schools.



1.5 Lynnette's Story

Lynnette and Ms. Smith first met in spring 1993, when Lynnette was almost 14 years old and completing eighth grade. Ms. Smith's first impression of Lynnette was that she was "about 5 feet 2 inches, 100 pounds, and extremely pretty ... stylish and nicely dressed." Ms. Smith observed that at Washington's graduation ceremony Lynnette and her twin sister

Lynnetta wore identical dresses that she thought were "age appropriate, while many of their peers were dressed in outfits sophisticated enough for a 25 year old woman." Ms. Smith believed this was an indication of "their mother's strong influence over them."

Lynnette's school records show that she had attended two different elementary schools and had been retained in first grade and then again in second grade. They also show that she missed many days of school during kindergarten and the first year she was in first grade. Her elementary teachers described her as "quiet and well behaved. Doesn't put forth much effort. Needs to study." After third grade Lynnette was "promoted by exception" to Washington Middle School, where she was placed in special education classes. During her early school years, her records indicate that Lynnette's "primary caretaker" changed twice.

Lynnette was selected for participation in the study by a team of eight of her middle school teachers. Although labeled "learning disabled," Lynnette was identified by her teachers as a special education student likely to succeed in school. They had high hopes for her because they found her very adult-focused and very mature. They noted that Lynnette's mother (with whom she now lived) was very involved in her daughter's education—she helped Lynnette with her homework, worked with her on her reading, and had attended every one of her Individual Educational Program (IEP) conferences. They also believed the attention Lynnette would get from being part of the study would further bolster her confidence and increase her chances of success.

The criteria Lynnette's teachers used for selecting her illustrate the complexity of teachers' thinking as they worked through their ideas about what makes a student one for whom they have high hopes. When Ms. Smith looked back on the selection process, however, she noted certain drawbacks. The comments of Lynnette's teachers, who said Lynnette was "mild-mannered and adult-focused" and "very serious about her education," left Ms. Smith fairly knowledgeable about some of Lynnette's personal and emotional attributes, but less informed about her specific academic skill levels.

Before interviewing Lynnette for the first time in spring 1993, Ms. Smith went around to her classrooms. When she asked for Lynnette, she remembers that one student said, "Oh, you mean the twin? Oh, you mean the pretty one?" From talking with Lynnette's peers, Ms. Smith believed that Lynnette "fit in well, was accepted, even admired." She also discovered

that Lynnette, who was reading at a third grade level and doing math at a second grade level, and Lynnetta, who was higher functioning, were in different classes.

Recalling her first interview with Lynnette, Ms. Smith noted:

> Lynnette was extremely composed, serene, and made eye-to-eye contact. She was like a well-rehearsed star witness. When I asked her, 'What has life been like here? What are some highs, what are some lows? What are your worries and concerns as you make the transition to high school?' all her answers were in the same key. 'Oh, everything's fine. Oh, I like all my teachers. Oh, I like everyone. My mother helps me.' When I tried to disturb her very serene presence and said, 'Don't you have some concerns?' she would not deviate. My questions never disturbed her surface level response. I wasn't really able to get below that layer of how she responded to me.

In the course of investigating Lynnette's school experience, Ms. Smith talked to her sixth, seventh and eighth grade teachers. These conversations provided a more in-depth picture of Lynnette's middle school years.

> Lynnette's sixth grade teacher told me that she was the only girl in a class with some very rambunctious boys. The teacher said that she was like the 'Queen Bee' and enjoyed that status. She went on to say that Lynnette kept the boys straight. According to her, when she was talking and wanted quiet, Lynnette controlled those boys better than she did. Her teacher characterized her as 'ruling things.'
>
> By seventh grade her teacher said some problems and limitations were showing. The teacher sensed that Lynnette was academically frustrated and felt she flourished best one-on-one. When Lynnette was not ready to tackle a new problem she quickly grew frustrated and needed support and encouragement in the areas that were not comfortable. The teacher also told me that Lynnette liked rote learning. She loved blackboards of work to copy and worksheets.
>
> And the eighth grade teacher told me that Lynnette did everything that her level permitted her to do. She always did her homework, she was focused on academics, and she was growing aware that she did have some limitations.

With the additional information provided by Lynnette's teachers and peers, Ms. Smith augmented the picture she had of Lynnette before she went to Gratz High School. As Lynnette clearly told Ms. Smith in their first interview, she was concerned about academic achieve

ment. With the support of her teachers and mother, however, Ms. Smith saw strategies in place in middle school which helped Lynnette meet her goal of success in school. Ms. Smith perceived Lynnette as developing into a socially competent adolescent. She noted that Lynnette had established a respected place among her peer group. As Lynnette was moving toward high school, she told Ms. Smith she had no worries. Lynnette's strong standing among peers and teachers alike, her supportive home environment, and her seriousness about doing well in school led her to expect as positive an experience in high school as she had had in middle school.

The Transition

Over the next year and a half, Ms. Smith visited Lynnette in her new school two times, during the fall of 1993 and spring of 1994. The following reflects what she learned about Lynnette's transition as she interviewed her and accompanied her through school days.

Visiting Lynnette at the high school for the first time, Ms. Smith found that "all was not well." During her first high school semester Lynnette had failed two subjects. Questioning her student about these failures, Ms. Smith discovered that Lynnette had never gone to one class because she did not know it was on her roster and that she didn't understand what was going on in the other, a health class where she was being mainstreamed with regular education students. Although Lynnette named two teachers whom she felt she could turn to for help, when Ms. Smith talked with some of the high school teachers, she found them disinterested in Lynnette and unaware of her capacities and vulnerabilities.

> I talked to the health education teacher—the subject she failed. He told me, 'She is not doing well. She's an introvert. She's very slow. She's not working up to par.' When I observed the class, I realized that it was much too difficult for her. There was a list of 16 letter vocabulary words on the board for the students to memorize.
>
> Because I wanted to get Lynnette books and other things that would be of interest to her, I asked her high school teachers 'Where do you see her going? What do you see in the future for her? What skills does she show now?' I was attempting to get some guidelines and direction but felt very frustrated by the lack of response.

Ms. Smith asked Lynnette whether her mother had been to school to check into her academic problems. Lynnette responded that her mother was hesitant to come to the high

school and that she had told her daughter to "just try harder and do your best." Although her mother still cared about Lynnette's education, she was not taking action on her behalf as she had in middle school.[2]

In addition to her academic setbacks, Lynnette suffered a series of interpersonal traumas during the first few months of high school. Before leaving middle school, Lynnette told Ms. Smith that she already knew other students at Gratz, and that this helped her not to worry. During her first visit, however, Ms. Smith learned that Lynnette had grown increasingly isolated that fall. As she walked through the halls of the high school with her student, Ms. Smith heard a great deal of name-calling directed at Lynnette by other girls, and several students shouted out, "Hey there, twin." Lynnette returned some greetings and initiated others as students passed, but she confided to Ms. Smith, "I have no real friends." She quickly abandoned her dream of being a cheerleader because "some girls had put out the word that they did not like her, so rather than have a confrontation, she just withdrew from that dream and didn't go after it." Ms. Smith began to see that "pretty girl issues were emerging and some of the girls did not like her. I discovered that there were boys that followed Lynnette from class to class, and when I asked Lynnette about them, her comment was, 'They are knuckle heads. They don't want to learn.'" Perhaps most importantly, Lynnette and her twin seemed to have lost their former intimacy and were not getting along well together.

> I discovered some resistance emerging to her identity as a twin. Her twin was higher functioning than Lynnette. In middle school they had made a point of not having them in the same class. In high school Lynnette shared some classes with her twin. Her twin and she, however, were at odds. Where they used to support each other, all of that had changed.

In a few short months Lynnette's support network had shrunk considerably, leaving her not only isolated but confused and vulnerable. She no longer seemed to be a promising student, or a Queen Bee with an admiring court, or even a twin. Her eroding self-confidence probably also contributed to the depth of her reaction to the fights and conflicts she witnessed at school. She took care to avoid students "who are violent and crude," and she told Ms. Smith that she wished that someone would "take all the bad kids away."

[2] Like many parents, Lynnette's mother was reluctant to remain highly involved at the school once her youngster reached the high school level.

It is not surprising, then, that when Ms. Smith visited her in spring 1994, Lynnette talked about wanting to go to another high school. Ms. Smith believed that Lynnette was struggling with the need to establish her identity, even though a math teacher reported to Ms. Smith that in the last month "Lynnette and Lynnetta had begun sitting together and helping one another more." Lynnette's marks at that point were all "passing," but she did not feel good about her academic progress. Although in fall 1993, Lynnette had expressed an interest in a number of after-school clubs and extracurricular activities, by spring she had joined none. It was also about this time that Lynnette reported that she no longer talked to her mother because she did not want to bother her. Lynnette's mother confirmed this shift in a conversation with Ms. Smith. In a parallel development, Lynnette was turning to Ms. Smith for intimacy: Ms. Smith noted that Lynnette was increasingly sharing "a great deal of personal issues with me."

When Ms. Smith went to visit Lynnette in fall 1994, she was absent. In looking at her school records, Ms. Smith noted that beginning in the middle of her ninth grade year, Lynnette had been missing school more and more frequently. The process of listening to Lynnette and observing her—experiencing school *with* her—as well as talking to her teachers and peers provided Ms. Smith with a unique window into Lynnette's life in school. Her notes on what she saw and heard provided Ms. Smith with a record which she and her colleagues could reflect on in order to make sense out of Lynnette's school life.

II. Four Introductory Ways of Looking at Research

The four strategies in this section are designed to focus a group's attention on one piece of research, such as the samples in Section I. Each strategy invites participants to find their own most meaningful reading of the text—but also to listen and learn from others' different meanings and emphases and questions. The outcome of this process is the group's collective concerns and priorities.

Although these strategies are suggested as ways to understand the research samples in Section I, there are also other kinds of documents or texts that participants could use. For example, there may be narratives about specific students or groups of students, reports written about curricular or other programs in a school or SLC, or minutes from meetings. These can all be considered *data*—reflections or representations of the work in which school community members are engaged. The suggested strategies are ways to gain a greater understanding of data, and to plumb their multiple meanings for participants.

2.1 Re-hearing Student Voices *

The purpose of this strategy is to build knowledge about what students are saying about school. It invites us to put aside our judgments—our labels, assumptions, and habitual reactions—in order to see students in the context of their concerns. By keeping responses as concrete and text-based as possible, participants can stay within the students' frames of reference, refraining from analysis that jumps back to familiar teacher-centered issues.

This strategy can be used for looking at student work and describing what is seen in it by participants, and then paraphrasing what is "meant" by the work. [Allow 45 minutes]

1. Break into groups of 4-6. Designate a facilitator who will summarize each round of response.

2. Participants spend a few minutes reading the text silently. Then they go around the circle reading the text aloud. Each participant reads a line (or speaker or paragraph) until the group has read the whole text.

3. First Impressions: Participants go around the circle giving first impressions of the text as a whole. The facilitator summarizes.

4. Paraphrase: Participants put the text into their own works, again line by line or chunk by chunk (may be sentence by sentence, speaker by speaker, paragraph by paragraph). The facilitator summarizes.

5. Participants describe responses to the text chunk by chunk: What stands out? What questions/issues does this text raise? The facilitator summarizes.

6. Discuss the content and process. What was learned? How might this inform work in classrooms? SLCs? Schools?

* Adapted from the Documentary Processes developed by Patricia Carini and her colleagues (1986, 1993) at the Prospect School, N. Bennington, Vermont.

Example from a School

A group of SLC teachers met regularly to discuss students in trouble, academically or behaviorally. They looked at students' work presented by different teachers. The art teacher discussed one boy's project, an advertisement, and noted the intellectual complexity of the design. The rest of the teachers were shocked to see such sophisticated work from a student they had considered intellectually limited and uninterested. Using the student's work and the art teacher's comments on it, they reconsidered their very low expectations for this boy. As a group they began to think about challenges and supports to bolster his achievement across his classes.

2.2 Text Rendering *

Text rendering asks participants to read over and then select the parts of the text that are most meaningful to them to read aloud. It gives voice to both the text and the participants equally and in turn, and encourages careful listening, re-hearing, and thoughtful silences. This strategy can work well to form and focus a group of people who are relatively new to each other. One way, for example, to "hear" students would be to use text rendering with the focus group interviews from *The Five School Study*. Teachers can also use this strategy with students to solicit their different readings of a text in class. [Allow 30 minutes for text rendering and 30 minutes for writing and sharing.]

1. First everyone reads the selection silently.

2. Participants select a sentence that strikes them, then read aloud going around the circle without interruption. Repetition is fine throughout this exercise.

3. Participants select a phrase that stands out for them and read aloud around the circle.

4. Participants select a word from the text read aloud around the circle.

5. Participants select a word suggested by the text and call it out.

6. Discuss the range and emphasis of the group's selections. What has been learned about students' perspectives? Note the questions emerging from the discussion.

7. Reflective writing: Participants write about a theme or issue in their own classrooms or SLC. How might students look at the issue? What questions could be asked of students to learn more about their perspectives?

8. Share the reflective writing with a partner.

* Adapted from the Philadelphia Writing Project.

Example from a School

At a one-day conference bringing together K-through-college educators and community support administrators from a cluster in the city, an hour-long workshop about research used text rendering as the strategy to begin discussing "Lynnette's Story" from *Making Children Larger*. What emerged were both shared concerns about the student's isolation and lack of sufficient support, and differing perspectives on the priorities and possibilities for addressing the student's unmet needs. Parents in the group wondered if they expected too much from high school and too little from themselves; a psychologist wondered how the labeling of the student had governed expectations about her; middle school teachers discussed their teamwork with colleagues; a high school teacher described his isolation from colleagues; and a college counselor pointed out how unsupervised the student's experience of high school seemed to be. The middle school teachers attending the workshop planned to take "Lynnette's Story" to their schools for discussion with colleagues.

2.3 Looking at Loaded Words*

The purpose of this strategy is to share the group's different meanings that group members attach to words or phrases that are rich, troubling, or "loaded," and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that these words carry. Examples might include a term like "tracking" or a phrase like "at-risk students," both suggested by *The Five School Study* and *Making Children Larger*. Phrases like "teachers who care" and "teachers who don't teach" are explicitly used by students quoted in *The Five School Study*. Looking at loaded words gets participants' prior knowledge and assumptions out on the table as the foundation for new learning. It can be used to introduce a theme within a classroom or across an SLC. Teachers can also use this strategy in their classrooms to help students work collectively on provocative or complicated ideas. [Allow 45 minutes]

1. Facilitators and/or participants select a word or phrase that is loaded with meanings and associations for the group.

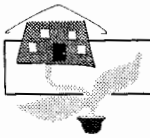
2. Participants jot their associations with the selected word or phrase, including impressions, denotations, connotations, instances, metaphors.

3. Participants go around the circle, reading aloud from their responses. There is no interruption for commentary until all have contributed.

4. Members share back themes and patterns they heard from the group, including key metaphors. They might also note juxtapositions or differences in responses.

5. Discuss how the issues raised could inform thinking, practice and planning at different levels: classroom, SLC, school, cluster.

* Adapted from Carini, et. al (1986)



Example from a school

... (A) group of African American and white urban high school teachers talked about tracking, inquiring into the ways students are typically grouped both within and across pro-

grams and classes. Together they raised questions about race, class, and gender, as well as about the impact of tracking on access to educational opportunities. Notes from the session convey some of the images participants shared as they explored their understandings:

> Tracks that leave a trace or mark, as do animal or needle tracks.
>
> Tracking down those who could excel and making them mediocre.
>
> Running on a track, around and around without a goal—just stuck there/being able to ride only one track at a time.
>
> The tracks on 69th street and what it would take to switch tracks/the early railroads, using cars on tracks to carry coal, everything had to be standardized to make it easier.
>
> Tracks as having known destinations, placing limits on where you can go.

Through this talk, teachers shared the pain and anger of their memories, as well as their outrage at the perceived connections between race and track in their own teaching and personal histories and in the lives of their students. The group's recollections simulated discussion on their own expectations for students and how those expectations might reinforce rather than interrupt destructive patterns.

(excerpted from "Learning in the Afternoon" by Lytle, Christman, Cohen, Fecho, Portnoy, Sion in M. Fine's *Chartering Urban School Reform*, Teachers College Press, 1994, pp. 163-4.)

2.4 Finding Themes and Raising Questions

This strategy gives groups some focusing questions for looking at research, first for individual reflection and then for group discussion. If participants are members of a school community who are planning together, the themes, issues, and questions raised by this strategy could be used as guideposts for planning their work—including further research to guide future planning. [Allow 45-60 minutes]

1. Participants read through the text silently, either marking their own copies or, if they are sharing copies, using the following questions to jot their responses:
   a) What themes or patterns do you see coming up again and again?
   b) What particular statements, issues or questions come up only occasionally but strike you as significant?
   c) What puzzles you, leading you to further questions?

2. Small-group sharing: Designate a note-taker. Participants share themes, issues that stand out, and further questions. Allow everyone to speak before moving into conversations.

3. Large-group discussion:
   a) What themes have been noted most frequently by participants?
   b) What issues stand out as particularly significant or provocative?
   c) What questions arising from this text bear further investigation?

4. Further large or small group discussion: How does looking together at this text inform future planning and present practice?

Example from School

In a two-hour meeting at a middle school, teachers, the principal, parents, and an outside researcher looked at transcripts from two focus group interviews with their students. They began by going around the circle and naming what they saw as themes and patterns in the text, sometimes finding examples to support their points. For most participants, two themes stood out: "Our expectations [of students] are not clear; we change our minds," as a teacher

put it; and students appreciated what a parent described as "personal relationships, including respect, decency and closeness; attitude matters, understanding what people think matters."

Then they talked more broadly about issues of expectations and standards. Some used their knowledge from their current work on exit standards for eighth graders. A staff member pointed out a student's recognition that "the exit bears the weight" when he named the real test as "get[ting] out and do[ing] well." A parent noted that the school's expectations were "still evolving" and pointed to a student's observation that she and her cohort felt like "guinea pigs" as the school experimented with standards and exit requirements. Another parent maintained that students' emphasis on "getting my work in" rather than on context suggested that they were still struggling with standards and benchmarks.

To conclude, the school team planned several follow-up activities. First, the team would meet with the students to analyze the transcripts, and secondly, several students would prepare a presentation on work-in-progress for the school's governance council.

III. Strategies for Doing Your Own Research

Although many things can be learned by looking at data collected by others, often the greatest learning takes place when members of a school community research their own setting and then examine the data that emerges. Teachers, students, administrators, and parents can become researchers by considering some questions they want to answer and using methods such as surveys, focus group or individual interviews, and shadowing to gather information. They can stimulate discussion by sharing the data in structured contexts such as classrooms and staff meetings. This process invites thoughtful analysis of a school, SLC, or classroom by participants. It also encourages planning and decision-making that take into account a more thorough understanding of what's going on in a learning community. Chapter III introduces strategies for compiling and looking at data, along with suggestions for how to use data to support planning.

Part One: Four Strategies for Hearing from Students

The first four strategies involve asking students about school. Just being asked these questions gives students an opportunity to practice reflection and action, an essential dynamic of learning. It makes school reform a site for student learning by offering students the opportunity to reflect individually, with each other, and with adults; potentially this gives students a hand in shaping their school experience.

Adults inside schools need opportunities to hear, take seriously, and address students' concerns. Attending to students' voices also provides adults with a window into how students are redefining their roles and behavior as part of the reform. This can help adults assess where students are in the transition to becoming the kinds of invested and active learners that reforming schools seek to nurture.

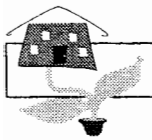
3.1 Reading with Research: A principal's assignment to his cabinet

Doing "homegrown" research can help build a leadership team, as members collect and share data about what's going on in their learning community. Their data can also be used to inform their planning for the immediate and longer-term future. [Allow approx. 1 hour for each step]

1. At a leadership team meeting, use a strategy like text rendering (see 2.2) to do a group reading of a piece of research on student experiences in school. The idea is to get a sense of the kinds of data that can be collected and what can be learned from the data. Then agree on a common concern or set of questions as a focus for "homegrown" data gathering.

2. Leadership team members collect their own data before the next meeting by conducting brief, on-the-spot interviews with three or more students in the course of their daily school life. Take notes during and/or after these interviews.

3. At a next meeting of this group, share the data collected. Examine the group's data for common themes that might indicate some directions for planning and/or further questions.



Example from a school

At one high school, the principal combined reading and discussing a chapter from *The Five School Study* with an activity which helped the leadership team (administrators, department heads, SLC coordinators, roster chairperson, counselor, and student government representatives) compile their own data (see memo below).

HIGH SCHOOL

LEADERSHIP TEAM

ROUTING SLIP

TO: Leadership Team

Re: Meeting Assignment

You will find attached a document excerpted from *The Five School Study.* It is imperative that you review it prior to our next meeting on Thursday, February 15 at 2:00PM in the IMC. In addition, I am asking that you randomly stop two students [in your SLC] coming to school and ascertain the following from them prior to the meeting:

1. What is in their bookbags (if they in fact have bookbags which they took home)? In your view, are the students organized? Prepared? etc.?
2. What did they have for homework the night before? Was the homework, in your view, rigorous?
3. Ask the students to list for you three characteristics of good teachers. Ask them if their current teachers have such characteristics.
4. Find out if they have someone to go to in the SLC if they have a problem.
5. Find out if they believe that the SLC staff is concerned about what they learn or fail to learn and how such caring is evidenced.

Thank you
[Principal]

First, the team used "text rendering" (see 2.2) as a way to begin their discussion of the chapter they read. Later each participant shared the information they had compiled from the interviews with students. According to the principal, the text rendering helped in several ways:

- it organized the information that people gleaned from the text;
- it helped elicit from all participants the range of ideas, issues, and statements meaningful to them;
- it provided a safe way to begin a conversation about the problems that exist within SLCs.

The principal noted that this was an effective way to get everyone involved in the discussion and to build a collective understanding of difficulties students are having in SLCs.

Later, each participant shared information from their interviews with students in their SLC. The principal reported that everyone was enthusiastic about reporting on their research from their own SLC, even members of the group who are usually reticent to speak. He was struck by how these two activities helped to confirm and build on everyone's understanding of the importance of relationships to students.

3.2 Student Surveys

Surveys are useful for collecting information from a number of people in a form that is relatively easy to collate and interpret. Student surveys are therefore a quick way for adults to learn about students' perspectives. At the same time, because students themselves can create, conduct, and interpret surveys, this strategy provides a valuable learning experience for students; they learn about research while they write, read, and/or use the computer. Engaging in this process can increase students' investment in their education and their learning community.

Note: This can be done in a class or in another learning community context such as an SLC student leadership group. [Allow approx. 3 regular class periods]

1. Along with students, write a series of questions about how students experience life in their learning community and what they would do to improve it. Make sure the questions are clear. You may want to include some questions with yes/no or multiple choice answers and some more open-ended questions.

2. Alert faculty to the project and its purpose, enlisting their help in distributing the survey during advisory or class time.

3. Distribute to students through advisories or classes, asking them to respond at the time and turn in their surveys. Students do not have to put their names on their responses.

4. Students tabulate the results. They may want to work in small groups, one group per question or per several related questions. They will count identical or similar answers to their questions, looking for themes that emerge across response sheets. They may also want to pay attention to answers that are different but seem to add an important point.

5. Make the results public—by publishing results in a newsletter to the learning community and/or by presenting results at a learning community meeting.

Example from a School: Constructing a Survey

Here is an example of a survey/questionnaire that students in one SLC created towards the end of their first year. In a class, students worked in small groups to make up the questions, take the survey around to advisories, and tabulate the results. They learned about research techniques and data analysis. They published the results so students and teachers could learn about the views of students in the SLC. Teachers learned that students identified with the SLC in a positive way. In spite of the fact that students weren't happy with all their teachers or classes, teachers learned that students in the SLC believed that teachers cared about them. It became clear that students knew that SLCs were organized to better prepare students for the future, and to build closer relationships among students and teachers.

1. Do you like this SLC?
   Why or why not?
2. Are the teachers in this SLC helpful to you?
   If yes, how?
3. Do you get along with the students in the SLC?
4. Do you consider this SLC an academic SLC?
   If yes, what makes it academic?
5. Is the SLC fun and educational?
6. What is something good that the SLC had done for you?
7. Would you tell another student to join this SLC?
   Why or why not?
8. What do you think the SLC is all about?
9. What is the most important thing you have learned this year?
10. What would you change about the SLC?
11. Why do you think they created this SLC?
12. How is this SLC different from the rest of the school?
13. Do you think the work in the SLC is different?
    If yes, how?
14. Do you think the teachers are different?
    If yes, how?
15. How do you think the students were selected?

Example from a School: Analyzing and Using the Data

In another SLC, a student leadership group conducted their own research by handing out a questionnaire to other students. After the responses were compiled, the students wrote up the results and reviewed them with the teachers. Some of the results of the survey included:

- Too many students disrespect teachers.
- Too many teachers disrespect students.
- Teacher-teacher relations affect students.
- Classes are not participatory enough.
- Students are not involved in decision-making often enough.
- Students only get attention when they are in trouble.
- There is racism on the part of teachers.

A focus group interview with students involved in this project shows that their research led to a greater stake in their SLC:

> *Facilitator:* How did teachers react to the problems you pointed out?
> *Student:* We had a discussion about the papers.
> *Student:* The first meeting we had, a lot of the members wasn't there so, we had papers that stated what we wanted and what needed to be done, so, we used the papers and told them to read over the papers ... we talked about what the papers meant to us ... We just really opened it up.
> *Student:* In the beginning there were a lot of problems. We started off bad, but then we came together.
> *Facilitator:* The survey says there are problems with disrespect and racism from teachers; that's a pretty heavy thing to talk to teachers about.
> *Student:* We agreed that was high priority. That [racism] would have to be addressed with the principal or something. You can't talk to all the teachers about that ... [A teacher] would get hurt ... if a student came up to you and said that I think you are a racist ... I don't like the way you teach and I feel as though you give the white kid more attention, or you give the Asian kid more attention, or

> you give the black kid more attention ... or you just give it to whoever period. People got images and stuff, and if you are a racist or not, you going to ...
> *Facilitator:* How did people react?
> *Student:* They were impressed first of all [that we did this]. We got to have feelings to come up with things like this.
> Facilitator: Do you feel any of your concerns have been heard?
> *Student:* Yeah. We set up student teacher conferences. Now we can talk ... there's a schedule on the door. So if you have something you want to say to a teacher, you can go ahead and make an appointment and you all can talk one on one. Before they said they had it but nobody knew about it.

The survey results, and the interview, also reveal students' interest in issues such as racism that adults may shy away from discussing in school. The fact that these students conducted the survey, tabulated and published the results, and set aside time to discuss this with the teachers may have helped to create a context for discussing difficult topics.

3.3 Students Writing about School

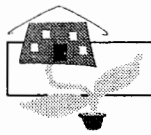
This strategy can help students focus on their own experiences and give them practice writing about these for a real audience and purpose. It can also give them a context to read or hear each other's writing and to learn from each other. For adults, student writing can provide a kind of "record" of students' concerns and ideas about their educational experiences. Whether or not teachers agree with students' perceptions, their writing can inform teachers about how students view their experiences. It can provide a basis for discussion among teachers and students and among SLC teachers as they assess their curriculum and classroom practice. [Allow approx. one hour]

1. In a class or other context in a learning community, ask students to write about their experiences of school. This could be put as a general question or made more specific to answer particular concerns. Make the question open-ended to encourage thoughtful and honest responses.

2. Ask students to read aloud all or part of their responses. You can do this as a text rendering (see 2.2) or less formally.

3. Ask students to identify themes in what their peers are saying, which may generate some discussion.

4. Consider the results in your planning. Share the results with your SLC team, using them as a springboard for discussion and planning on these and related issues.



Example from a School: Responding to an Open-ended Question

A teacher asked students to write about "what could make this school better for you?" Here are some short quotes from students' writing:

- Clothes for the head (hats) don't stop the learning process like pants don't stop us from working.

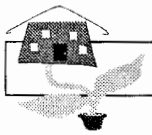
- Teachers and students have attitudes.

- There aren't enough choices.

- [It's] not racially balanced. Minorities feel intimidated and left out...

- ... Not enough college prep. School is supposed to be college prep. Many teachers around here do not personally help you out.

- If [the school] wasn't run as if martial law was enforced and they would give us freedom of mind, education, and teach. [The school] needs to remember that we're all family, sisters and brothers.



Example from a School: Responding to a Focused Question

Middle school students invited to help research their school wrote and shared their definitions of "caring" in school. This topic was assigned because students had let adults know that caring relationships in school were important to them. The adults wanted to know more about what students saw as "caring" in school so they could make the environment a more supportive one for students. Here are some samples from students' writing:

- To me caring means when you feel so down and out and when someone picks up your spirit. And say care about yourself because if you don't no one will. In [this school] I feel a lot of love and care because the teachers always stay on your back for you can make some progress. And that's caring.

- My definition of caring is you listen to what people have to say, you respect their wishes and even if you don't get along you grade their work on performance and not on behavior.

- Caring to me is when someone watches out for you and wants to see you succeed. A lot of the teachers at our school care about how we do but others don't really or it doesn't seem like.

- Most of the teachers give up on you but here they keep on pushing you to the fullest extent. They talk to you and make you understand things. They also think of this school as a loving environment.

3.4 Focus Groups

A focus group is essentially an interview with a group of people (for example students, parents with students, counselors and aides, etc.). The advantage of a focus group is that people can exchange and build on each other's ideas. This makes the data richer. Also, the discussion itself is a way for participants to build community and knowledge about a relevant issue. The object here is not to come to a consensus about a topic or issue, or to convince others to change their points of view. Rather it is a chance for everyone's viewpoint to be heard. Finally, student focus groups can give students a sense of participation in the evolution of their SLC. [Allow 40 minutes]

1. Decide on a purpose or topic for your focus group and develop some general areas you want the group to discuss.

2. 6-8 participants work well. Be sure to get some who talk easily; you might also include some quiet ones to be drawn out. Also think about a representative range of students in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, grade level, and achievement level.

3. If possible, allow at least 40 minutes. Try to schedule time in a relatively quiet place like the library or an empty classroom.

4. Develop a list of questions based on what you're trying to learn. These should be open-ended. Be flexible: if questions arise out of the conversation, ask them and follow the flow of the discussion even if it strays from your specific questions.

5. Try to make sure each group member speaks. You can do this by going around the circle for responses once or more.

6. Take general notes. If possible, also tape record the session.

7. If you are writing this up, include the general drift of the conversation along with some direct quotations.

8. Again, you can use the results to inform your classroom, SLC, and/or whole school planning.

Example from a School

Below is a sample from a student focus group conducted by a teacher-researcher. The topic is the policies and procedures of the SLC and the school.

Student 1: I do think that when it comes to things like being bad or suspension list or people who have detention, I think that those things move faster through the system than things that need to be done like roster ... and things like your classes, or being in the right advisory.

Facilitator: Can you talk to anyone about this?

Student 2: I feel that I don't. ... There wasn't this many problems last year. When I did have a problem last year, which I just took care of, yesterday it just got taken care of.

Facilitator: Can you get help from your SLC office?

Student 2: Yes, I can get help from the SLC office, but I think things like that, extends to the main office.

Student 3: In the end, you wind up dealing with the main office. The SLC office, they can only go so far and they'll tell you 'we did our job now it's up to them.' That's what they'll tell you, and then when you go to them they'll tell you 'well you have to wait ...' ... Which shouldn't be right, because people need ... so they can be cool for the rest of the year.

Student 4: I want to know why you [have to get detentions for being late to school], cause you're trying to get to school. Some people don't even come to school, so we should get something, for trying to come to school.

Student 2: They do it because they think it's going to make you be on time ...

Student 4: Then you get suspended for not going to detention; that's the same as not coming to school.

Student 3: And then they want you to have all your work.

Facilitator: What would you do about lateness?

Student 3: There's only so much you can do, and giving them detentions every-day ain't going to help it. Like get programs early enough for kids that really want to be in certain programs. I remember last year, when I first joined the choir, it was early in the morning, it got me here on time, for school. So if something happen in the morning that kids want to be a part of that will get them here.

> *Student 4:* People are very interested in credit. So if there was some kind of way that you could split credits up and make advisory a credit and people who were late a certain number of times, then they would have to lose that advisory credit ... Some people are late once a month, other people are late almost 29 days a month.

After looking at this focus group interview, teachers might want to examine the ways in which the SLC could provide more assistance to students. These students identify closely with the SLC, yet they find themselves dealing with the central office, a place where people do not necessarily know them, in order to straighten out some of their problems. Further, students themselves have concerns about student lateness; they also have suggestions. Involving students in the SLC's conversation about improving student attendance and lateness could give students a sense of participation while also bringing to light new ways of handling these problems.

Part Two: Using Observation to Learn about Students

Observing is another way to learn about how students' experience school. Of course, teachers observe students all the time. This section suggests several ways for teachers to know what they know, that is, to glean the most knowledge from the observing they are already doing. It also suggests "shadowing" as a method of observation that lets teachers in on the student experience.

3.5 Shadowing a Student

Shadowing a student over the course of a school day takes a teacher out of his/her usual role with students. Just the simple fact of sitting with and among students in a classroom can radically change what the adult sees and hears. This strategy helps adults to see school through students' eyes, which in turn can help them figure out how to support students' learning.

1. Consider which student to shadow. Are you interested in the experiences of a student who appears to be "at risk" or a student doing well in your school or SLC? Do you have a particular interest in male or female students? You may, of course, simply pick a student at random.

2. Inform both the student and his/her teachers that you are not evaluating them, but rather trying to experience school through a student's eyes. Check to make sure that the student feels comfortable about having you shadow her/him.

3. Learn something about the student ahead of time. Ask teachers and/or check records.

4. Follow the student for as close to a whole day as you can.

5. Take as detailed notes as possible. Ask the student to "interpret" what is going on during the day.

6. Remember that the "social" context of school is important, so along with classrooms attend to other interactions and activities, e.g. hallways, lunchtime, etc.

7. Use the data to inform SLC or school reflection and planning.

Example from a School

From a Researcher's fieldnotes for *The Five School Study*—
Community Service Charter is two years old. A home-grown SLC, Community Service offers students the opportunity to participate in service learning activities. Danielle, a perky blonde tenth grader, switched from the "academic" SLC she was in as a freshmen because she liked the idea of "working at the elementary school with the little kids" and because her friends are in Community Service.

This year, as a tenth grader, Danielle has a "college prep" roster: Spanish, Biology, Geometry, English, World History. She works at the neighborhood elementary school three afternoons a week. Spanish meets at 7:30AM in the new 0 period and it has been a problem subject for Danielle and many of her classmates. The teacher is consistently late, more than half the students are failing the course, and most of these have quit coming to class by early May. Danielle was grounded by her parents last quarter because she made a D. "Today we had a quiz. I only knew about half of them. If you miss, you fail. She doesn't really care if we learn it or not."

Mr. Smith's first period Biology class is conducted in question and answer format, with the text as road map and teacher as guide. Students prepare for a test that is scheduled for the day after tomorrow. Following a study chart provided for the test, they flood the room with questions. "What's the digesting system for priferi? " "What's a nerve net?" "What's the support system for sponge?" Students become animated as the teacher throws some of their questions back to them, asking them to share their knowledge and observations of sea life. Next period's Geometry calls is similar, but with the board taking the place of the text. The class is orderly, with much banter between teacher and students as they solve homework problems. The teacher is sarcastic; Danielle says he's funny and she likes his personality. Other students appear less responsive to the verbal sparring.

Lunch consists of sodas and candy bars for Danielle and her friends. She sits with six white girls in the lunchroom; tables are segregated by race. The girls talk of boyfriends and prom dresses. When asked, they also tell me how school is. Danielle and her friends agree that

their courses are too easy. "You figure out that they don't really expect you to do that much and you can slide by." "In 9th grade we found out that we didn't have to work too hard to get an A and so this year we have totally slacked off." Danielle had been a "A" and "B" student in her former, more demanding academic SLC, but her grades have dropped to "Cs" and "Ds" this year.

The girls have other concerns. One of their friends has "gone back" with a boy who had physically threatened her after they broke up. Some of the girls interpret this as giving in because "she is afraid." Others say "She just wanted attention anyway." One girl wonders in her friend would talk to the counselor about it. Danielle changes the subject, directing this comment to me: "This school is prejudiced. I don't know if anybody has told you that yet. Blacks hate the white and whites hate the blacks. No one wants to admit it, but it's true." But the girls don't want to probe this subject despite my questions, and talk returns to prom dresses. Around them, students and teacher congregate, mainly, but not entirely, in all black or all white groups.

After lunch, English class is also text-based. Students are given paperback vocabulary books as they come into the room, and class time is devoted to completing the text's matching exercises aloud. The teacher calls on students for responses. They are attentive and compliant. As I leave with Danielle, the teacher explains that "We could do different things in class if the student population were different. It took all year to get this class under control."

Afternoons across the SLC are devoted to community service, which students assert has become "boring" as the year progressed. Several are assigned to assist in a neighborhood elementary school. As the weather has become warmer, the elementary children have grown more energetic. Danielle, who has complained to the charter coordinator that she spends too much of her internship "checking spelling papers and marking homework and not enough working with the kids," says that there's not even much of that to do now that the end of the school year approaches. Another student concurs that the elementary school teachers don't seem to have much for them to do because it's May. One young woman explained, "I got a lot out of it at the beginning of the year. I really felt like I was teaching kids something and everybody was like ready to learn. Now at the end of the year, there's nothing to do. I'll probably cut this afternoon." (Excerpt from *The Five School Study)*

School community members could consider using one of the activities in Section I to help them think about what they learn from these notes about a student's day at school. They might also develop a series of questions to generate reflection and discussion, such as:

- What standards and expectations are reflected in the work that Danielle does in school?
- What seems most important to this student about the school experience?
- What seems most difficult about school? What are the implications for our classrooms, SLC, and school?

3.6 Descriptive Review of a Child*

This strategy is designed to help participants better understand and teach a particular child/adolescent. Teachers and parents bring skills as daily observers of children in classrooms and homes. The process draws on those skills, avoiding the use of labels and instead describing what we observe. Although educators have been trained to evaluate and judge students, this strategy is an attempt to suspend the evaluative stance for a brief time as a way of seeing a student as a whole person, focusing on strengths rather than deficits and weaknesses. It is important, then, that the presenter *describes* rather than evaluates or appraises the focus child, and that the members address the strengths of the teacher and student.

Taking the time to draw a picture of a whole child-time that is seldom available in school-and discussing this with colleagues can help participants reach new insights into children. Looking closely at one child also helps educators think about the possibilities for work with many children in classrooms, SLCs, or schools.

In order to do this description, one person selects a focus student to present to the group. This person (teacher, parent, principal, or other school staff member) should prepare ahead of time for the session by considering a specific question or issue that they have about the student. An example of a question is: How can I help Jason work more productively with other students in the classroom? Another person in the group should act as chairperson, insuring that the group follows the procedure outlined below. It is also helpful if the chairperson and presenter meet beforehand so the chairperson is familiar with the presentation. When a student is taught by more than one teacher, teachers could collaborate on a presentation, or one teacher can do the presentation and others can add comments. Also, the complete format (see citation) contains guiding questions; referring to this format could be helpful in planning a Descriptive Review of a Child.

1. The chairperson convenes the session: gives the name (optional) and age of the child to be reviewed; the ages of any brothers and sisters; the family constellation in which the child lives; the question or questions which frame and focus the review.

2. The teacher (and/or parent or other adult) presenting the child portrays her/him according to the following categories without interruption:

- Physical Presence and Gesture (energy, posture, gestures)
- Disposition (emotional intensity and range, expressiveness)
- Relationships with Children and Adults (attachments, variation and consistency, quality, range)
- Activities and Interests (preferences, range of interests, engagement in projects)
- Formal Learning (learning in school, learning styles, academic interests, attitude towards learning)

3. Following the portrayal, the chair makes a short restatement of the presentation, calling attention to dominant themes running through the depiction.

4. The chair asks for observations/descriptions from other adults who have had the opportunity to work with the child or who may have made observations specifically for the purposes of the review.

5. The chair offers a brief historical perspective on the child's school experience, including any important medical data and any information given by the family for school use.

6. The chair opens the review for questions from the participants which could elicit more information from the presenter. At the close of the discussion, the chairperson summarizes, restates the focusing question or context, and asks for recommendations which refer back to the focusing question.

7. Recommendations are made by participants without comments or response from the presenter.

8. The chair makes a restatement of recommendations, clustering these by topic or theme.

9. The group critiques the process. "Were we respectful of the child and the family?" is the key question for this critique. If time permits, it is useful to circle the group inviting each person to comment on their own participation and to identify any aspects of the review that stood out to them.

* Adapted from the work of the Teachers Learning Cooperative, a group of Philadelphia teachers, using Carini, et. al (1986).

As a follow up activity, the group can consider some questions for discussion*:

- What do we learn about our students by looking closely at one child?
- What do we learn by observing students using these specific categories?
- Are there other categories or lenses which might be helpful as we observe students?
- What are the implications and how can this inform our work in classrooms, SLCs, and/or schools?

* This is adapted from an exercise created by Diane Brown, Philadelphia Program Support Teacher

Using Description with a Team*

This strategy helps teachers plumb their own knowledge and get some fresh perspectives on students they find challenging to teach. SLC teachers can use this as a way to focus together on children who are visible partly because they are challenging throughout the learning community. The strategy can be used on its own and/or can serve as a "warm-up" for the Description of a Child (3.6), which is more elaborate. [Allow one hour]

1. Participants envision a child they feel they have not been successful in reaching—a "challenged child"—and jot notes describing him/her without using pejorative language or labels.

2. Break into small groups to share descriptions. Brainstorm strategies for addressing the needs of these youths.

3. Chart the strategies as a larger group, with small groups reporting out.

* Adapted by Diane Brown from Carini, et. al (1986).

IV. The Challenges of Research: Moving from Students to School Planning

"Learning from Lynnette's Story" is an excerpt from *Making Children Larger.* In it, the teacher-researcher describes how her learning started from the experience of shadowing Lynnette and talking with her. Ms. Smith's new understanding of her student's perspective had major implications for her teaching, she realized. She practiced "reading" students in her classroom. With colleagues she interviewed students to learn about their expectations coming into her school and classroom.

Ms. Hopkins, the principal, describes how the Gratz Connection research project raised questions for teachers that became the tools for planning the restructuring of their middle school. With an understanding from the research on student needs and experiences of their schooling, the teachers could identify more clearly both the incoming and outgoing perspectives of their students—what they wanted, needed, felt they gained, and regretted they lacked, from their middle school experience.

These three framing questions could focus discussion of "Learning from Lynnette's Story."

1. What different kinds of learning did the teacher describe from her research on Lynnette?

2. What sequence does the principal describe from research to school planning?

3. How could research help your own work in school? What kinds of research?

4.1 Learning from Lynnette's Story

Through the Descriptive Review of the Child, Ms. Smith discovered that looking closely with colleagues at one child can be helpful in thinking through how schools might better support all children. "I was surprised that some of the insights we had looking at this one child in depth had systemic implications."

As I walked around with Lynnette, I began to see what her day was like and what was happening to her through her eyes. My relationship with her started to change once that happened. At first I was asking her my scripted questions and she was giving me her scripted answers. But somewhere in the process—after I had begun to look deeply at her experience—we stopped giving each other the script. I started to listen and respect what she said and she sensed it and she started opening up.

From this experience I understand more the importance of dialogue. Sometimes at the middle school level we are so programmed for order and structure: Preclasswork on the board or get journal writing started, then get into motivating the students by drawing their prior knowledge into the lesson, then get the lesson going. And do we really allow time for dialogue? This taught me to allow more time for kids to talk to me. I also realized that along with time for dialogue we need time for careful listening. I understand now that if you have kids tell you something over and over and you just listen, the truth of what is happening will emerge. Even within the classroom setting, I had a new appreciation for how dialogue validates the knowledge production process.

I am more plugged into faces, gestures, movements. What a student does when they are disgusted, when they are happy. I spend time now studying the gestures and movements of my students.

As I reviewed Lynnette's school experience and what teachers had said about her, I felt that schools value the quiet good students, but they do not always meet their needs. The research, in general, also pointed out that while the onus is on students to stay out of trouble, we in schools do not provide trouble free environments.

When I considered Lynnette's failure in health [class] that first year of high school, I saw that while the work was at a ninth grade level, far above her capacities, she might have had more success if the teacher had supported her with a more active learning environment. I believe she might have met success if she could have dealt with the material in a different way rather than just as 16 letter vocabulary words on the board.

My colleagues and I who were following kids through their school transitions from one school level to the next talked about what we were learning with others at our school. We were asking, 'What kind of questions can we ask about school systems and restructuring by looking deeply at our questions about individual students?' With our colleagues we extended this investigation by inviting elementary school children over from our feeder schools so we could just listen to what

> their worries were. We asked them, 'How do you feel about coming to this middle school? What do you hear about us? What are your concerns? What are your worries? What do you like doing in elementary school that you hope to continue in middle school? What do you hope you'll do differently?'

Ms. Melanie Hopkins, the principal of Washington Middle School, described the influence of the research on her school to a gathering of teachers, parents and administrators.

> The Gratz Connection has been in existence for four years and this information was shared with the principals within the Connection and it was shared at Washington with our staff. The issues that Ms. Smith learned from following Lynnette and its impact on her and her classroom could have been left there. She could have come back to our school, shared that in a professional development session and that would have been the end of that. That is so often the case when we go to a conference or we collect data. We talk about it once and it ends there. But we were searching for ways of restructuring within our building and we took the research that was done in the longitudinal study along with other surveys we did and we used them to guide us.
>
> As a result of the data that was collected through the longitudinal case studies, we believed there were many things that we had to take into consideration before we began the restructuring process within Washington Middle School. Five or six years ago middle schools had been restructured into Houses. In our school, which had grown by leaps and bounds, a House is too large to be a small learning community. We needed something else to guide what we were doing. This research guided us.
>
> We knew the Lynnette story was not an anomaly. I believe there are many Lynnettes. For many of them, their needs and interests are not served at our middle school. What happened to Lynnette at high school happens to many students when they make the transition from elementary into middle school. Even in the elementary schools you can have a quiet child who gets nice grades because they do not create any problems. I have worked in all three levels and I have seen it.
>
> Some of our considerations were so deep because of the Lynnette story. We did not want to make change for change's sake. We had to become a very large learning community so that when we made the changes they would serve the needs not only of the Lynnettes, but also the 1,425 other students in our building. After hearing Lynnette's story, the teachers raised the following questions:

- Will Lynnette be able to survive through the four years of high school? Will she be successful?
- What will Lynnette be able to do when she completes high school?
- Are we in the middle school providing Lynnette with the knowledge and skills to negotiate high school?
- As a middle school, what can we do both for special needs children and for regular education students?
- Was Lynnette's story unique or was this story being repeated by many students not only at the high school level but also in middle school?
- Were children coming to us from elementary school who had been very special there but now were having difficulty succeeding at the middle school level?

These questions forced us to look at how curriculum was being presented in our school, and we wondered, was it meaningful? Is it engaging enough? Does it provide opportunities to explore so that when the question is asked, 'What do you want to do?' a student has the knowledge to say, 'I want to be a fashion designer,' or 'I want to be a city planner.'

We also wondered, How are the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of the staff affecting students' success? How does the organizational structure of our school impede student success? How do scheduling and rostering support or impede the teaching and learning process?

Lynnette's story caused us much anxiety. So we formed a small group that began to go out and visit other middle schools in the city to see how they were delivering instruction, to see what the climate was like within their buildings, to see what rostering and scheduling were like. We asked about assessment and how students show that they have gained material. A paper and pencil test is not enough to show what a student like Lynnette has gained. That group of teachers made a report to our school's leadership team and the faculty at large about what they discovered.

Although the team learned the ways in which 45 minute time slots no longer meet the needs of children, we knew from the case studies that children valued the independence they thought they were gaining by changing classes at the middle school level. The staff, on the other hand, was concerned about the disruptions that occurred in the hallways and what we could do to have a calmer school. They wanted to restrict movement by having self-contained classrooms because our trouble occurred during transitional periods and we saw other schools with less transitional time and less difficulty. So, we had two problems: children wanted one thing and staff wanted another. This led us to look at how we might restructure the way we use time. We now have five 70 minute periods and one 25

minute advisory. Students still travel to a degree, but less than before and school climate has improved. Teachers get a lunch and an expressive arts period for prep, and working in teams plan how they will use the rest of the day.

We also knew from surveys that the children enjoyed the expressive arts. They enjoyed music, art, and they look forward to going to those classes. They did not like going to math or English because it was boring and social studies was out of the question. We had another problem: How are we going to be able to teach the children the basic knowledge they need and make the learning process an enjoyable one for them? We had to integrate what they liked with what they needed to make it work for them. Expressive arts teachers now each work with two teams and their areas are an integral part of the teams' plans.

Readying themselves for change was neither simple nor easy for Washington staff. Structural constraints—such as the union contract and their own community standards—needed to be accommodated. And reconceptualizing professional development to support staff as they moved into new multidimensional roles was critical.

We restructured our building into eight teaching teams, two in each of four Houses. After teachers divided into teams they presented their ideas for a theme, which we call an option, to the whole faculty to see if it would be accepted as part of our OPTIONS program. Our options include Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism; Creative and Performing Arts; Young Entrepreneurs; Law, Government and Consumer Education; Project Med; Bridging Cultures; and Math, Science and Technology. The teachers were able to select the option they wanted to work in. But we had to balance that with other things that make a good climate, for example a balance of experienced and inexperienced teachers, a balance of male and female teachers, racial balance. We wanted children to understand that we live in a world of many kinds of people.

A lot of effort, pain, work and struggle went into this. We wanted to create an organization where all of us would be in a continuous learning mode. After their team was selected, the teachers—five regular education and one special education —were responsible for developing curriculum that engages children using their theme. They have begun to develop activities within their classes that help children to explore; they have developed a relationship with community organizations that allow children to engage and serve in learning projects; they have learned about themes that they may not have known much about. Teachers cover for each other so they can go out and go to conferences. That has created an atmosphere for learning in the building.

We did an interest survey and writing sample in our elementary feeder schools in fifth grade, and scored the writing sample holistically. We wanted to have an idea about the children coming into the school. We met with counselors, parents and children in feeders to explain our program. With their parents, the children select which OPTION to be in, and we try to give them their first choice.

What I see emerging, and I need to emphasize that restructuring is a process not an event, is [that] restructuring must be a reflective process and what we are trying to do is put in place changes that will allow us to prevent the Lynnette story from reoccurring. Since making changes and developing the OPTIONS program we have seen a decline in discipline problems and attendance is up and so is improvement in achievement. Students are working on projects they like. And new learning communities are emerging: Across teams an interest in literacy is developing, and things like the science fair also cut across teams. Ms. Smith's research surfaced gender issues and some teachers wrote a grant and received funding to study gender issues in our school. A technology group is emerging. We want to give children the kind of experiences that make our school a learning community for them, and make changes that make it a learning institution for all of us.

A Final Note

This booklet is a work-in-progress. It includes a sampling of the rich research on and with students already underway in Philadelphia, as well as strategies for looking at research and for doing your own research.

There are many contexts and ways to use the booklet: It can provide a framework for an institute, an approach to charting school reform, or simply a selection of activities for use as needed by professional development facilitators, small learning communities members, administrators, parents, and/or teachers in their classrooms.

Those of us who worked on compiling this guide feel that you—its users—will be the best judge of when, where, and how to use it to suit your needs. So pick and choose, feel free to call on Research for Action and the Philadelphia Education Fund to support your use of the guide, and finally, let us know what happens so that we can revise the booklet accordingly. Thanks!

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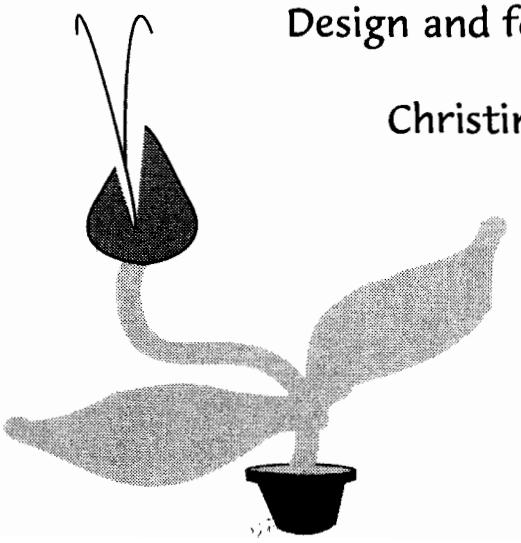

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