Qualitative Data Sources

When we think about data in education, we often think about information that can be easily quantified, like test scores, attendance rates, or the number of students in specific demographic groups. When we rely only or primarily on quantitative data, we miss the opportunity to understand a fuller and richer story about student lives and their experiences with learning from which we can make informed decisions that can improve outcomes. Qualitative data sources are well positioned to sharpen our focus on equity and the lived experiences of students, families, and teachers. When used intentionally, these kinds of data help us include voices that are often not included in our decision-making processes. Equity-focused analysis of qualitative data should be centered around key equity questions and analysis should attend to both themes and the information conveyed by outliers and people at the margins.

This resource is intended to provide an overview of different ways to collect qualitative data that will help complete the story. It is by no means an exhaustive list. Which of these strategies are currently used to elicit qualitative data at your school or district? What other strategies are used at your school or district that might not be included in this collection?

Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews and focus groups help gather data that can express the complexity of the lived experiences of students, families and caretakers, and other educational partners. They allow participants to tell their own story and do not constrain them to preconceived categories for their responses. They also allow an interviewer to ask questions to explore ideas and clarify information participants share.

Interviews can take many forms but generally involve eliciting data from one person at a time. In this module, we provide more detail about an interview strategy called an *empathy interview*. Interviews can be highly structured and take an extended time to administer, but they can also be more informal, like a focused discussion with a student about their experience in a specific unit of instruction.

Focus groups can also take different forms, but generally include a group of participants engaged in a discussion together. Focus groups can be useful in allowing participants to build on the ideas shared by others and for establishing themes.

While taking notes during interviews and focus groups is useful, the discussion should be recorded and transcribed so that the data provided can be coded for themes and important points. There are different strategies to structure focus groups, including a fishbowl structure in which participants engage in a facilitated discussion in the center of a circle with an audience seated around the circle taking notes and reflecting on key ideas. This is one of many strategies that invites a larger group to participate in the collection and analysis of this type of qualitative data.

Surveys and Written Feedback

Surveys are often designed in ways that provide data that can be easily quantified and analyzed. Surveys may ask participants to use scales to share their ideas and thinking (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Surveys that rely only on these types of questions do not provide qualitative data. However, when surveys use open-ended questions, which allow participants to share their thoughts in their own words, they can be a source of qualitative data and provide richer information in relation to your area of inquiry.

In addition, there are other strategies that allow participants to share their ideas in **written feedback**. For example, teachers can invite students to write reviews after an instructional unit, project, or assignment in which they are asked to share what worked well for them, what was challenging, and ideas for improvement. Or, school leaders can post a series of questions on large posters around a room and invite teachers to do a type of gallery walk where they write their responses as well as annotations to responses from their colleagues on sticky notes and attached them to the posters or on individual responses.

Structured Observation

Observation is an important way to collect qualitative data, particularly when it is done in the spirit of making students, families and caretakers, and other educational partners who are not often centered in educational decision making, truly seen. The data collected through minute-by-minute observations of student learning are a fundamental element of the formative assessment process; in addition, structured observation, in which an observer steps back from the instructional cycle and notices patterns and experiences that happen in a classroom or at a school, can be an important data source for analysis between and after learning.

In their 2001 book, *Street Data*, authors Safir and Dugan provide some structured approaches to observation that focus on gathering data that provides insight into equity concerns. Their suggestions include:

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- **Equity participant tracker** in which an observer tracks the specific interactions that take place in a classroom, including who volunteers to speak, who is called on, and who receives positive and negative feedback. These interactions are noted by race, gender, learning differences, multilingual learner status, or any other factors of interest. These observations can also capture specific, illustrative quotations from students and teachers.

- **Shadowing a student** allows an observer to follow a student, who has consented to participate, to better understand how that student experiences their education throughout a day. Safir and Dugan recommend using this strategy specifically with students who are "outside the sphere of success," for example, tracking a multilingual learner throughout their day.

- **Equity focused classroom scans** in which an observer does a demographic scan of different types of classes in a school, noticing and recording the distribution of students across race/ethnicity, students who are receiving special education services, and other categories of interest. While the data generated through this strategy are technical quantitative data that can be analyzed and reported numerically, these data can be coupled with other true qualitative data to help establish an understanding of access and equity factors in a school and classroom.

- **Structured meeting observations** can function similarly to the equity participation tracker and allow an observer to track who participates and how they engage in meetings. The observer can track these kinds of data by race, gender, role, or other factors. Additionally, the observer can capture quotations, look for themes, and capture the nature of comments (e.g., comments that focus on instructional practice, student characteristics, or are framed through a deficit lens).

Case Studies

Case studies support a detailed examination of a specific experience or instance in a school or classroom, offering data in a narrative structure. Case studies can make complex, real-world situations tangible by using storytelling to present data. A case study could examine how a specific intervention played out in a classroom or could track the experience of an individual or a set of students to illustrate the human side of a system.

Safir and Dugan (2021) recommend the use of ethnographies, which explore the experiences of a specific subculture in a school, such as high-achieving indigenous students or students with disabilities who experience much of their learning outside of the mainstream classroom. This approach entails interviews, observations, and written reflections from the learners being

profiled. An ethnography is a tool that can surface not only the lived experiences of a group of learners, but also their culture, values, and priorities.

Document and Artifact Review

Data found in documents and artifacts can provide a rich source of information about student learning, how students experience school, and the culture and climate of a school or classroom. Document and artifact reviews are useful when there is a focused inquiry to guide the analysis. The type of documents or artifacts will be driven by your inquiry question—for example, are you interested in student learning, teacher practice, or general processes? These reviews could sample a wide range of documents or artifacts, including student work samples, meeting agendas, written teacher feedback, report cards, and teacher and instructional coaching notes.

References:

Safir, S. & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data*. Corwin.

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