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Even though educators

may feel they are

intimately familiar with

what students do each day

in school, sometimes

systematic observation can

offer a fresh perspective.

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SHADOWING STUDENTS

DEFINITION

SHADOWING is the process of following a student and systematically recording that students' instructional experiences. The technique, while labor intensive, provides a rich display of what happens in the classroom and provides a deeper understanding of the connection between pedagogy and student performance.

KEY ISSUES

Educators contemplating the use of shadowing as a technique should address three important issues before attempting to shadow students:
- The purpose for the shadowing;
- the process to follow; and
- the intended uses to be made of the data.

Carefully considering these issues will help answer whether the technique is appropriate as well as ensure maximum benefit from the technique, both for improved professional growth of educators and enhanced student learning.

PURPOSE

Because student shadowing is labor intensive, an essential first step is tying the activity to a desired school improvement purpose. Clearly defining the purpose will make it easier to focus on the kinds of interactions/behaviors one wants to document, possible categories for analysis, and parameters for sampling.

For example, one high school where we conducted the shadowing technique instituted a pilot block schedule for a subgroup of students. The school's intent with this reform was to increase the opportunity for teachers to have meaningful instructional interactions with students, especially those who were achieving poorly.

Shadowing was undertaken to capture the quality and quantity of student/teacher interactions. Keeping the reform's purpose in mind led to a clear sampling strategy: shadowing students participating in the block schedule and comparing their experiences to those experiencing a traditional schedule. This very specific interest in the quality of student interactions was well-suited to shadowing. If, on the other hand, the school had wanted to assess student reactions to block scheduling, other techniques would have been more appropriate.

We found that despite structural changes promoted by the block schedule, students still had relatively infrequent interaction with either peers or teachers. They spent most of their time quietly working on their own, completing worksheets, or answering questions out of a textbook. Furthermore, the infrequent interactions they had with other students or the teacher didn't invite active engagement with the content.

METHOD

PROCESS

At a minimum, the shadower needs a notepad and pen to script observations. It is often helpful, in addition, to have a form for recording basic information about what is being observed.

For example, in the preceding example we began each student shadowing by drawing a layout of the classroom, with particular attention to the location of individual students. Race and gender were also recorded. To round out the background information, we also added a simple checklist to record:

✔ The location of the interaction (classroom, library, etc.);

✔ Topic of the lesson (math, science, etc.);

✔ Instructional grouping (whole class, small group, etc.);

✔ Materials being used (textbook, worksheets, experiment, computer, etc.); and

✔ Instructional delivery (lecture, discussion, seat work, etc.).

Most of the "data" is gathered from any interaction between the shadowed student and other students, or the student

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and the teacher. We try to capture in detail what happened and its duration. This requires systematic documentation of individual student/teacher and student/student conversations, as close to verbatim as possible.

This scripting should be descriptive of at least an entire lesson, but preferably would involve following a student for an entire day.

The question of how many students to shadow is difficult to answer. More is better, but the technique is too labor intensive to think about shadowing a representative sample of students. Consequently, we like to think of shadowing not so much as a tool to scientifically capture the full range of student experiences, but rather as a way to richly describe some of that range.

USING THE DATA

Data from shadowing are best used to stimulate conversations among teaching colleagues about student experiences. There is no magic formula for summarizing the results of shadowing experiences, since what you may be looking for will vary with the purpose.

The format for data summary is less important than whether the information can address two key questions:

● What do students see and hear as a result of their daily classroom experiences?

● What do those experiences mean for the students' learning opportunities?

It's often relatively easy to create a format and a forum where teachers can analyze results from a shadowing experience and discuss in principle what needs to change. What is much more difficult is empowering educators to act on those results to enhance students' learning experiences. In the case of shadowing the students involved in the block scheduling reform, for example, the more difficult challenge was how to change pedagogy systematically to match the structural changes. ■