

Using Parallel Surveys and Reflective Conversations to Tap Perspectives and Promote Improvement

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Abstract

This article focuses on how principals can use parallel surveys that tap multiple perspectives to identify improvement needs, priorities, and the relevance and effectiveness of actions and strategies implemented, and ultimately use this data to support ongoing improvement. We explore the use of survey data that couples principals' self-assessment of their practice with teachers' assessment of those practices, and the value of reports that reconcile the data from these items along with a formal conversation with principals to facilitate reflective use of data. We conclude with recommendations for how to develop school surveys, how to report survey data, and how to facilitate reflective practice and school improvement actions.

Key Words

principal leadership, survey design, data use, principal effectiveness, school effectiveness, school improvement, reflection

Introduction

School surveys are frequently used to understand the perceptions of various stakeholders in a school. Despite the importance of the information they provide, they tend to be underutilized in informing school improvement initiatives. Research concerning the use of survey data by schools and school districts is scarce (Godreau Cimma, 2011) and such research suggests that many leaders are overwhelmed by the amount of available data (Monpas-Huber, 2010).

This article explores how principals can use data from parallel surveys to accelerate improvement. We begin with a discussion of the challenges principals face in using the ever-growing array of data and the important, yet underutilized role of survey data. We then review the technical features of school-based surveys designed to support improvement and two surveys that we have used in such efforts. We close with an example of how a principal used survey data to drive improvement to illustrate key supports that enable effective data use.

Data Use Challenges

Although data are plentiful, principals often lack the knowledge or time to sort through stacks of data from different sources designed to be used in different ways. They also struggle with aligning assessment data with qualitative and quantitative survey data on school organization, culture, and climate.

Principals struggle to formulate data-related questions, limiting their ability to analyze, interpret, and use data effectively. Survey data is often lost in the shuffle of competing “data dives” and an emphasis on summative assessments.

Despite over 30 years of requirements for “data-based improvement planning,” school leaders and teachers do not consistently analyze existing data sources within the school, apply such analysis to innovate teaching, curricula, and school performance, and use data to implement and evaluate these innovations (Ingram et al. 2004; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Data—again, summative, formative and benchmark, and survey data—have been mostly used to monitor progress, but outcomes of this monitoring are not consistently applied to improve education (p. 494-495).

In addition to challenges associated with data use, principals and teachers often operate in isolation, with few opportunities to learn from and with each other (Przybylski, 2016).

As a result, little attention is given to the impact of their perspectives of each other’s actions on teaching and learning. According to Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010, data used by school leaders, in most schools, has not led to genuine improvement efforts. Other research (Goldring, et. al. 2015) shows that principals often experience cognitive dissonance when feedback from different data sources (e.g., their self-ratings to those of their teachers) represent conflicting views.

To make better informed decisions, principals would benefit from data that frames the challenges they face and provides different options in resolving them. Deliberate review of qualitative data from surveys and other sources can surface issues that may lead to innovative actions.

Generally, school-level surveys have three, sometimes overlapping, purposes:

- (1) **Accountability:** To obtain an objective measure of “school quality” as part of educational accountability, provided by stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, students);
- (2) **Research:** To measure changes in teacher or student behavior in response to an intervention, or to better understand contextual and curricular aspects of schools; and,
- (3) **Improvement:** To inform continuous improvement among district leaders, principals, and teachers.

While each purpose is important, we are focused on the third purpose—improvement—with the goal of examining how principals can use survey data to accelerate improvement efforts. Our experience and research have indicated that there are insufficient supports (e.g. leadership coaching) to assist leaders in making sense of survey data in a manner that leads to improvement and actionable shifts. The questions, then, that we endeavor to answer are:

How can principals use parallel survey data to directly inform improvement-oriented decision and actions?

Specifically:

1. What are the technical features of effective school-level surveys?
2. What systems and supports need to be in place for school leaders to analyze and take actions based on survey information?
3. How can we best facilitate these discussions and actions?
4. What are the types of leadership changes (leadership moves, actions, shifts in behavior) that

leaders may make as a result of reviewing survey data?

Technical Features of Effective School-Level Surveys

A key technical feature of school-level teacher surveys is the use of an evidence-based framework with dimensions that are comprised of individual indicators/items. An evidence-based framework allows users to quickly visualize areas for growth and strength, as well as to track change over time.

While there are differences across surveys, most include categories focused on core instruction, leadership, teacher collaboration, and culture and climate.

Some surveys also include sections on parent and community involvement. Also, most surveys target teachers, students, and sometimes parents and community members. They do not include a separate survey for the principal and leaders although some include administrator responses as part of the teacher survey.

In our work with leaders we have found that it is difficult for principals to actively use teacher survey data without directly referencing, or being able to assess, how their own actions and perceptions mesh with teachers’ perceptions.

Background on Survey of Professional Interactions and Organizational Capacity

We initially developed two companion surveys, an Assessment of Professional Interactions and an Assessment of Organizational Capacity, each grounded in the *ARCS Framework for Sustainable School Improvement* (see Display 2). Each survey was designed from the ground up to provide actionable information for district

and school leaders to inform improvement efforts. The companion teacher surveys were developed in 2009 and have been used in multiple schools (25+ schools) and districts, primarily in New York and Massachusetts.

Our refinement of these surveys highlights three additional, and crucial, technical features of surveys that contributes to the effective use of data.

Specifically, surveys should be capable of: (1) assessing school-level relational networks and the frequency of interactions among individuals; (2) assessing the organizational capacity of the schools; and, (3) allowing principals to compare leader and

teacher responses, through parallel principal and teacher items.

The *Assessment of Professional Interactions* gathers information about the frequency and impact of the interactions among school staff, including administrators and district staff, teachers and other professional staff (e.g., guidance counselors, specialists, coaches) focused on teaching and learning. An expanded version of this tool allows for the development of a network map of the connections within a school, identifying key connectors, or “hub individuals” within the school and the density of relationships across teachers, grade-levels, and administrators and coaches. What follows are responses to questions asked by the survey.

Display 1. Assessment of Professional Interactions

	Categories and Scales
What is the focus of teachers' professional interactions with each other and with administrators and coaches and how often do you meet around these focus areas?	Professional Discourse Collaboration Instruction Lesson Study Data Use
How often do teachers interact with each other, and with administrators and coaches?	With Principal With Assistant Principals With Coaches
Which interactions are deemed to be most and least useful and impactful on student learning, and on teachers' professional learning?	With Teachers in same grade With Teachers in other grades With Other Teachers (e.g. SPED or ELL)
What are the structures that support the most frequent interactions?	Grade-level Teaming Vertical Teaming Leadership Teams Professional Development (e.g., faculty meeting) Coaching (e.g., job-embedded)

Scales: Daily, Weekly, 2-3 times/month, Less than 1x/month. Very Useful, Somewhat Useful, Not Useful

The *Assessment of Organizational Capacity* measures the school's current capacity to engage in sustainable and effective improvement efforts. This portion of the survey is aligned with the ARCS Framework and produces item-specific results and aggregate ratings for each of the Framework

dimensions. Resulting data answers questions related to the ARCS Framework and the extent to which school leadership practices reinforce professional learning and instructional improvement. All items use a 4-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree).

Display 2. The ARCS Framework and Key Questions in each ARCS Dimension

The *ARCS Framework for School Improvement* (Picone-Zocchia and Martin-Kniep, 2009) is based on years of practical experience working with state leaders, district, and schools and evidence-based research, including research on leadership (Leithwood, et. al. 2017) and school improvement (Bryk, et. al. 2015). This framework asserts that the key dimensions of improvement are alignment, representation, culture and sustainability.

Alignment

To what extent is curriculum and instruction aligned and how do leadership practice support alignment?
How effective is the school leadership in supporting teachers' work and student learning?

Alignment examines and questions connections, coherence, focus, direction and sequence among structures, programs, practices and systems. It provides the focus for organizational goal setting, action planning and decision-making, enabling school leaders to strategically connect goals to actions, philosophy and values to practice, and policies to programs and practices.

Representation

How aware and involved are staff member in school improvement efforts, including teaming practices, planning, and professional development?

Representation examines stakeholder engagement, participation, assumptions, perspectives and constituencies so that they directly inform decision-making and day-to-day actions.

Culture

How effective are the structures and practices that ground the development and review of curriculum and use of data to identify and address student needs?
To what extent do teachers and leaders share responsibility and hold each other accountable for student learning?

Culture focuses on the predominating attitudes, behaviors and beliefs, knowledge and values that characterize schools by examining what people value, what they do and what they produce, focusing on collaborative and reinforcing relationships among participants that promote sharing and learning.

Sustainability

How does the school monitor and assess the effectiveness of improvement strategies?
How does the school support and mentor teachers and leaders, and plan for staffing turnover?

Sustainability frames the school's exploration of its own continuance and meaning beyond the present moment or immediate importance, and shines light on the degree to which it is attending to developing its own expertise, leadership and longevity.

During the first few years of using the survey with schools and sharing data with principals, we noticed that while principals were able to use the survey data to identify areas for improvement, such as grade-levels not working together frequently, or teachers not fully engaged in instructional planning, they did not make connections between their own actions and the experience of teachers, as expressed in the survey data. It was difficult for them to use the data to identify strategic actions or to reconcile survey data with actions that the principal had taken in the past.

To address this dilemma, and in conjunction with our work developing principal leadership evaluation tools and guidance for states, we decided to more explicitly connect teacher perspectives with those of the principal. This shift in our work is reflected in the following theory of action.

Our theory of action proposes that:

If principals had access to relevant data on their leadership moves and practices, and on the relationship between such practices and moves and those of teachers; and, if they had opportunities to reflect on that data and their implications for their systems, structures, processes and practices;

Then, principals would be able to translate the use of such data into meaningful and timely actions to promote improvement for teachers and for the culture of their schools; so that, these actions could lead to improved student outcomes.

Research suggests that principals demonstrating a level of proficiency with the use of a variety of data sources are more adept at designing strategies to address school needs, are more inclined to use data when planning, and are more inclined to initiate goals for

school improvement (Przybylski, 2016). When principals are given time, context, and skills to use data, student achievement improves (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2009[BL2]).

We contend that if principals were more proficient at interpreting data and explore the relationship between their perspectives and those of staff, that all stakeholders in the school would benefit. Gains would be realized in areas such as curriculum development, classroom instruction, remediation and tiered instruction, special needs programming, and professional development opportunities for teachers. Principals would benefit from the data on their practices and the relationship between their practices and teachers' own actions, and from ongoing opportunities to reflect on their practice and on the impact of their actions.

To supplement the teacher survey and support schools' use of survey data, we created a parallel Principal Survey in 2015. The principal survey includes items related to the frequency of the interactions that principals have with others as well as items related to the degree to which they support various aspects of school leadership. The principal survey also assesses the alignment between a principal's individual capacity and overall school vision and the extent to which the school engages in strategic and long-term planning.

Many of the items in the teacher survey and principal survey are parallel to compare teacher responses with leaders' responses to the same questions. Our goal in creating the principal survey was to collect data that could lead to productive conversations with the principal (and leadership) regarding different perspectives around how leadership actions were being understood by teachers, and to explore ways to use this information to craft specific actions.

Table 1

Sample Parallel Teacher and Principal Survey Items (Scale 4, Strongly Agree to 1, Strongly Disagree)

Teacher Items	Principal Items
The principal actively engages teachers in promoting the school's instructional focus.	I actively engage teachers in promoting the school's instructional focus.
The principal is knowledgeable about the achievement and progress of every student in the building.	I am able to monitor the achievement and progress of every student in the building.
The principal makes his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals clear to the staff.	I am able to communicate my expectations for meeting instructional goals clearly to the staff.
The principal visits classrooms on a daily basis.	I visit classrooms on a daily basis.
The principal is strongly committed to shared decision making.	I have integrated shared decision making into the leadership of my school.
The instructional feedback that I receive from the principal is useful.	I see evidence that the feedback I give to teachers leads to changes in their practice.
The principal implements processes and structures to ensure quality instructional practices.	I have evidence that the processes and structures I have implemented promote quality instructional practices.
The principal attends to both the learning and social needs of students and staff.	I attend to both the learning and social needs of my staff.
The principal promotes informal and formal leadership opportunities for staff and students.	I actively promote informal and formal leadership opportunities for staff and students.
The principal values reflective practice for him/herself and others.	I cultivate reflective practice in myself and others.
The principal is transparent about the reasoning behind his/her decisions and actions.	I am transparent about the reasoning behind my decisions and actions.
The principal collaborates with staff and other stakeholders around quality teaching and learning.	I collaborate with staff and other stakeholders around quality teaching and learning.

Actions and Supports Needed for Effective Use of Survey Data

The primary purpose of pairing the teacher survey with the principal survey is to stimulate the principal's thinking about the school and his/her work. We provide an illustrative case study to describe how three steps and related facilitation strategies can promote reflection and the development of strategic actions.

Key Step #1. First, it is important to share data reports that link the teachers' and principal's data to see the alignment and gaps in perceptions. These reports include all parallel teacher and survey items in a sortable spreadsheet, so that the principal (and we, as the facilitators of the conversation) can sort high and low scoring items. We also identify items showing differences between principal and teacher responses, highlighting similar and different items. Displaying data according to high and low scoring items and areas of difference is the starting point for the analysis and conversations.

During the first year of our work with West Middle School, survey results were not widely used, despite the inclusion of parallel principal/teacher items. While the survey was provided to leaders with the expectation that the principal would review the data, later conversations with school leaders revealed that the leadership team had reviewed assessment and behavior data to develop their improvement plan for year two, but did not review the survey data.

During year two of the school's improvement effort, the school continued to struggle to implement key improvement initiatives, including having teachers develop high-quality lessons and use grouping strategies in lessons. School leaders also struggled with visiting classrooms to monitor and provide support to teachers. This led to the facilitators'

decision to schedule a formal meeting to review the year two survey data.

Key Step #2. This second key step is to facilitate conversations to unpack the data and promote meaning making. In these conversations, we first review the overall survey data to identify a few key issues, using the following questions:

- How might responses be different if the survey were administered earlier or later in the year?
- Are there different data that would challenge or verify the data from these tools?
- What does the data on teachers' interactions reveal about what teachers' value?
- What does the data on interactions reveal about how the school attends to collaborative work?

We then move on to an analysis of the parallel teacher/principal items, asking questions such as:

- What do the items in which there is a strong alignment in teachers' and principal response reveal about the relationship between teachers and principal?
- What could explain the misalignment between teachers and the principal's responses in the items that reveal misalignment?

In planning for year three, we met with the West Middle School's principal to discuss the results of the survey and how they could be used to inform improvement planning using the preceding questions. We identified *converging* items (e.g., alignment in teachers' and principal responses) and *diverging* (or mis-aligned) items. A sample of these items is provided here.

Converging Items	Teacher Rating	Principal Rating	Difference
The principal visits classrooms on a daily basis.	1.47	2	0.53
Grade-level teams regularly evaluate the effectiveness of instruction through the ongoing analysis of data.	2.00	2	0.00
The school provides every student with appropriate tiered interventions according to needs identified through data.	2.09	2	-0.09
Diverging Items			
The principal values reflective practice for him/herself and others.	2.16	4	1.84
The principal is committed to improving his/her own leadership practices.	1.90	4	2.10
My colleagues are free to bring ideas forward, regardless of their role or formal position.	2.32	4	1.68
Our school implements, monitors and evaluates the impact of vertically aligned instructional strategies.	1.45	3	1.55
The school commits to targeted goals and priorities and sticks with them over a long period of time.	1.55	3	1.45
The school encourages adults to work in groups and teams to learn from each other.	2.45	4	1.55

Our unpacking of these items (and others) provided clarity on areas for improvement and highlighted potential explanations for why improvement efforts had not been as successful as anticipated. For instance, the relatively low and aligned perceptions of teachers regarding the frequency of principal visits, grade-level analysis of data, and provision of tiered interventions, clarified the need to improve these structures and practices.

While this information was not necessarily new, since it reflected challenges that were part of the school's improvement plan, our in-person analysis of diverging items began to surface explanations as to why improvement efforts were not successful.

Key Step #3: Third, after unpacking the areas of convergence and difference between teacher and principal responses, we focus on a few of the diverging items. Instead of dwelling on explanations as to *why* there are differences, we *ask the principal to consider what actions he/she could take to change teachers' perceptions*. We highlight this as an important "facilitation move" that redirects the conversation from focusing on why teachers may have different perceptions, which can lead to potentially defensive or non-productive responses (e.g., teachers don't know what I do; teachers don't understand the full picture) to a more proactive conversation, focusing on what the principal can do to change perceptions.

In West Middle School, the principal found many of diverging items to be unsettling, noting that her teachers did not acknowledge her efforts to be reflective, encourage collaboration among colleagues, and set grade-level and school goals. In our conversation, the principal noted that she had worked hard to put into place teaming structures (for collaboration)

Specifically, the principal rated herself highly in terms of valuing reflective practice, setting targeted goals, and encouraging collaboration and sharing of ideas among staff. However, staff did not perceive the principal as doing so.

We assert that such "disconnect" between the values and perceptions of leaders and staff may be common among low performing schools that are working hard to change and improve, and that addressing this disconnect is essential to sustained and effective improvement efforts. Rather than framing improvement strategies as simply "effective or ineffective," the successful implementation of improvement strategies rests upon reconciling different perceptions, values, and understandings among stakeholders, and that many of her actions were directed towards school improvement goals.

As we discussed actions the principal could take to change teachers' perceptions, we uncovered that teachers may not fully understand how the principal's actions (e.g., directives, allocation of staff, changes in teaming structures) related to building collaboration and trust, or to overall school goals. This conversation contributed to specific principal actions to clarify the connections between her actions, school teaming structures, and roles and responsibilities of coaches, department heads, and teachers.

The principal and her leadership team took deliberate and strategic actions in year three. For instance, she explicitly communicated why certain actions were taken, such as asking teachers to submit lessons to a shared google drive and to incorporate 20 minutes of group work into each instructional period. In the past, such actions had been construed by teachers as a top-down attempt to "monitor" or control teacher practice. Taking

the time to explain how these actions aligned with the schoolwide goal of developing instructional coherence provided credible justification for changes in teacher practice. This message was reinforced by coaches and department heads. Similarly, the principal developed a personal schedule of informal classroom visitations and informed teachers that she was doing so to hold herself accountable and to ensure that teachers received feedback.

Another example of proactive communication was the principal's clarification to the staff of the roles of Department Heads with respect to content teams, which connected the work of instructional coaches (responsible for grade-level common planning) with the responsibilities of department heads (to develop and monitor strong content).

In year three, we noted shifts in principal actions and teacher responses, a direct result of our analysis of the survey and the principal's diligence in cultivating shared leadership and communication. Examples of shifts include:

- The development, sharing, and use of an informal walkthrough tool with department heads and teachers that included specific "look-fors" related to student engagement, higher order thinking, and student grouping—all key aspects of the school's instructional model. The walkthrough tool was subsequently used by the principal and department heads to visit all classrooms on a weekly basis, to proactively identify teachers needing additional instructional support and to inform schoolwide professional development.
- The inclusion of a similar set "look-fors" on a shared lesson planning template that made explicit expectations for lessons and provided a way for

coaches and department heads to review lesson plans and provide feedback to teachers.

- By setting clear expectations for grade-level teams and PLCs as time for teachers to develop common lessons on shared practices, with support from coaches and department heads. Teachers now have a growing ownership of shared instructional practices and a willingness to develop common lessons and share best practices (and challenges) related to student groupings and formative assessments.

Conclusion

Quantitative and qualitative data on teachers' practices and student outcomes are insufficient in terms of informing the questions, decisions and actions that principals need to make to improve their schools.

If principals truly want to build a culture of trust that leads to school improvement, they need to compare their own perceptions with data on how teachers perceive them. The proactive use of parallel survey data could greatly enhance and complement principals' reliance on test data, teacher observation and other quantitative data sources, and could lead to better and deeper analysis of existing data sources.

Given the overwhelming amount of data principals have access to, and the fact that data sources are seldom integrated into accessible reports, principals could benefit greatly from formal opportunities to explicitly assess the data they have; ideally facilitated by external providers.

There is great value in conversations that enable principals to identify and reconcile differing perspectives to test their own

assumptions and consider their school system through the lenses of others with an open mind. Without the conversation, principals may not be able to take needed actions.

Further work is needed to determine how to best engage leaders in the reflective

analysis and use of data to make this process cost effective. It may be useful to incorporate the analysis and use of survey data into school improvement efforts, especially those that are externally facilitated, or are mandated to low-performing schools.

Author Biographies

Giselle Martin-Kniep is the founder and president of Learner-Centered Initiatives, Ltd. She has a background in program evaluation, organizational change, and political science and has several graduate degrees from Stanford University. Over the past 25 years, she has worked with national and international schools and districts in the areas of strategic planning, curriculum and assessment, educational policy, neuro leadership, and systems thinking. Most recent interests center on determining best leverage points for sustainable organizational improvement, and more specifically around developing and aligning outcomes and measures. E-mail: gisellemk@lciltd.org

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[1] We are focusing on technical features that relate to the content and usability of surveys, rather than issues related to the validity and reliability of survey items.
