

Chapter 9

Action Research, Design Thinking: Consulting at a Trauma- Informed Community School

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ABSTRACT

Narratives of unruly Black children in failing schools often normalize hopelessness at the expense of students. Newer, sometimes silenced voices, however, can produce counter-narratives that can lead to ecological solutions for assisting traumatized students. This is a case study of the transformation of a principal who asked, “What’s wrong with these children?” to an advocate whose inquiry shifted to “What happened to these children, and what must we do to help them?” With trauma awareness and behavioral management training for her staff, improvements began. The local school board cut her successes short by changing the lock on her office door on the day before teachers returned for the Fall Semester and informed her that her services were no longer needed. What is the lesson for the consultant?

INTRODUCTION

This study demonstrates action research-based consultation (Conwill, 2003) with design thinking (Brown, 2010) during the 2015 Spring Semester at a community school located in a Far South Side Chicago housing project that was built on top of a toxic dump site in 1945. In 2015, as part of its Community Engagement mission, the second author, head of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) commissioned the first author to provide the principal of An (used for anonymity) Elementary School in Chicago’s Far South Side with action research-based consultation (Conwill, 2003). Action research is a form of inquiry that allocates participants a research

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role based on their sharing the vision of committed professionals critically investigating their own practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Action research moves quickly to focus on a specific need; identifies theoretical perspectives and research questions; collects and analyzes data and reports findings; and acts (Conwill, 2003). The purposes for action research in the educational context include developing reflective practitioners, improving school-wide priorities, and building professional cultures. Design thinking is a human-centered innovation method that views challenges and solves problems by meeting people's needs feasibly and efficiently.

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

An Elementary School had a virtually 100% Black student body of 281. In 2013-2014, 98.8% of its students were from low-income households, with 5.6% homeless ([http://schools.chicagotribune.com/school/An\(usedforanonymity\)-elementary-school_chicago](http://schools.chicagotribune.com/school/An(usedforanonymity)-elementary-school_chicago)). Low-income students are those from families receiving public aid, living in substitute care, or eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. High percentages of non-White students and students receiving free and reduced-price meals are two important school climate markers that accompany the delivery of more services and resources at a school (Conwill & Parks, 2007). The segregated housing project had been built atop a toxic dump site for Black veterans returning home from World War II. It is bounded by the Little Calumet River, closed industrial sites, and the freeway. It is virtually a food desert.

The school had performed at consistently low scores on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT), a statewide elementary-level assessment in reading, math and science. In 2013, the Illinois State Board of Education raised the standards by which it assesses student performance to match those laid out in the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

The Common Core is a set of academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) set forth in 2010. These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students regardless of where they live, graduate from high school with the skills and necessary knowledge to succeed in college, career, and life. Forty-one states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have voluntarily adopted and are moving forward with the Common Core (<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/>). As a result, a school's 2013 ISAT composite scores may appear to have dropped considerably even in cases where student achievement has not changed. The Chicago Tribune reported that 23.8% of students at An Elementary met or exceeded Illinois State test standards with a ranking of one, with 10 being the highest. In short, the school appeared to need a great deal of support, regardless of the attempt of the School Board to raise the score standards. The School Board's narrative cast the blame for their performance on the West and South Side schools, with poor scores as an indicator for closure.

Focusing school assessment solely on percentages of students who meet or exceed Illinois State test standards as outcome measures of student academic achievement can be an iatrogenic fix that increases children's risk. The strategy of determining a school's qualifications for closure is fraught with confounds, especially when poverty and race are known to be strong indicators of school performance in the inner-city. In effect, the strategy of closing schools for poor performance is designed to limit the school system's responses to cosmetic adjustments rather than structural changes in its adaptation to oppressive conditions in the school, legal, and housing systems. Attributing the decision to close schools

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