

Engaging Critical Perspectives

Sophia Farmer & Yolanda Perkins

A Common Understanding of Critical Perspectives

In educational spaces, it is no longer aspirational but an imperative that the community—with its richness and diversity—joins educators as key instructional partners to liberate the creativity, uniqueness, and potential of all students. As educators, we can miss the value of this collaboration. In fact, we tell ourselves that there are many reasons not to include those outside of the schoolhouse. These reasons include time constraints, use of data that can't be shared publicly, a belief that community members don't understand all that we are handling in a classroom, and others' unfamiliarity with the science of reading or best math practices. So, we move forward and make decisions as efficiently and effectively as possible, all with the very best interests of our students at the center of our hearts and minds. We are even moderately successful for many students, however, there are groups of students for whom we frequently miss the mark. To decrease the likelihood of this happening, we need to invite others to the conversation — we need others' perspectives.



Imagine you are buying a car. For most of us, that is a big decision with implications for several years. You consider the data related to your needs: your size and how that relates to how comfortable you are in the car; the distance of your commute to work; how many family members or pets you need to comfortably seat; if it has enough space to take on vacations; preferred color; price range.



Next, you consider the data or information about the vehicle to see if it is a good match to your needs: age/mileage of the car; whether it has been in any accidents; gas mileage; safety ratings; the value of the vehicle; overall rankings of the model and make of the vehicle; who is selling the vehicle (dealer, CarMax, private seller). From this, you can probably make a solid decision.

But, how much more likely are you to be satisfied with your decision and be more accurate in the match to your needs if you consider other perspectives besides your own?

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Let's imagine you bought the car from a salesperson you trusted or someone you know. To add to your data, you read reviews from those with the type/s of vehicles you are considering. You talk to someone who owns the same vehicle and has similar needs. Those you talk to live in the same area as you, so you discover how well the car does in snow or ice. With this added information, your chances of choosing a 'lemon' or picking the wrong car for your family are significantly reduced.

When thinking of our educational systems, decision-making, and the implementation process, it is critical that we have others' perspectives to give us a view beyond our own knowledge and biases. But, before we delve into the importance of these perspectives, we first need to explain what we mean by "critical perspectives." Generally, the term "stakeholder" is used to refer to an individual and group with interest in the implementation process (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However throughout this brief we refer to them with the term "**critical perspectives.**" The reason for this change is to uplift that not only do these individuals/groups have a stake in the implementation but also to recognize the critical need to seek and consider their thoughts, views, and ideas (i.e., perspectives) to make the process effective and equitable. The critical perspectives in this brief include, but are not limited to, educators, students, families, and community partners.

To further define critical perspectives, implementation teams should consider a perspective critical - or so essential that we can not and should not move forward with the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of an initiative without it - when:



The perspective is needed to help develop a deep and thorough understanding of the needs and assets of the community, the history of a community or how an agency approaches complex problems and new initiatives, the nuances of a variety of contextual factors, etc.



A particular viewpoint is needed to generate ideas, disrupt the status quo and/or systems of oppression, anticipate barriers and leverage strengths



A specific lens will help to understand how policy and practice can work together for more sustainable implementation¹



We need a better understanding of who will be impacted by the work and will provide valuable insight as to the fit, feasibility and acceptability of the innovation

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Stakeholder. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved September 6, 2022 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stakeholder>

1 Bammer, G., Oyalowo, B., Smith, M., Affara, M., Bradley, S., Lemaitre, F., & Wali, A. (2021, December 21). *Stakeholder engagement primer: 1a. why a Primer? 1b. defining stakeholders*. Integration and Implementation Insights. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from <https://i2insights.org/2021/10/14/defining-stakeholders/>

To ensure a depth of understanding of implementation efforts within context, it is also important to include individuals who may present opposing viewpoints. Adam Grant, a popular organizational psychologist, calls this complexifying. Why, you ask, would we want to make our concerns more complex? It is to help teams avoid binary bias, or the tendency of teams acculturated to white middle-class norms defaulting to either/or and black/white thinking.²

“A dose of complexity can disrupt overconfidence cycles and spur rethinking cycles. It gives us more humility about our knowledge and more doubts about our opinions, and it can make us curious enough to discover information we were lacking.”³

In this way, teams can develop a better sense of the range of opinions on the needs and barriers being addressed throughout the implementation process. Meaningful engagement of these critical voices should be interactive, encouraged in every aspect of implementation, inclusive, and fluid.⁴

Engaging Critical Perspectives is Necessary

Traditionally, engagement of others in decision-making has primarily included unilateral communication methods that focus on organizational leaders providing information to a defined group. Sharing information about the implementation process is important; however, using only sit-and-get methods, such as webinars and newsletters, does not allow teams the opportunity to learn from others' expertise or gather and use their feedback - thereby excluding their critical perspectives. Viewing engagement only through this limited lens reinforces power differentials, since only certain ideas are included in the decision-making. These methods are often used in family engagement activities in schools (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). For example, open houses, back-to-school nights, and parent-teacher conferences communicate school expectations

of student and family behavior and participation with limited input from students and families. Although these activities can be informative, they assume they meet the needs of all involved and treat families as spectators (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). They limit the ability to create equitable and reciprocal partnerships because they place students and families as “passive stakeholders” (Durham et al., 2014).

What is the potential benefit of involving the perspectives of others? The question of why is twofold: why involve a variety of critical perspectives at all AND why is it critical to your specific effort? Both questions must be intentionally and carefully considered to ensure that key individuals and groups are not ignored or marginalized within the implementation process, and that the broadest range of knowledge and expertise is engaged.

2 Grant, A. M. (2021). *Think again: The power of knowing what you don't know*. Penguin Publishing Group.

3 Grant, A. M. (2021). *Think again: The power of knowing what you don't know* (p. 165). Penguin Publishing Group.

4 Jeffery, N. (2009). (publication). *Stakeholder Engagement: A Road Map to Meaningful Engagement* (pp. 1–48). Cranfield, England: Doughty Center for Corporate Responsibility.

Mapp, K.L. & Bergman, E. (2021). *Embracing a new normal: Toward a more liberatory approach to family engagement*. The Carnegie Corporation of New York. https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/f6/04/f604e672-1d4b-4dc3-903d-3b619a00cd01/fe_report_fin.pdf

Durham E., Baker H., Smith M., Moore E., & Morgan V. (2014). *The BiodivERsA stakeholder engagement handbook*. BiodivERsA. <https://www.biodiversa.org/702>

Why is engagement from a variety of perspectives necessary at all? Reimagining education in a time of unprecedented change and growing complexity due to the lingering effects of a pandemic, staffing shortages, and a meager educator pipeline is our greatest challenge. To be successful in our responses, we need to cultivate highly adaptive learning cultures in our schools, led by teams who can effectively leverage the expertise of community perspectives and navigate challenging conversations.⁵ The promise of this way of working is exciting!

The benefits far outweigh any potential barriers.

Clearer definitions of desired outcomes are crafted

Policymakers develop better understanding of community wants and needs

Initiatives are often a better fit to local contexts, increasing the likelihood that they will be adopted and implemented well to realize intended outcomes

Co-learning and opportunities for personal development among all involved through the sharing of ideas and best practices

Successfully generating solutions to sticky problems empowers all team members and builds a sense of collective efficacy as well as deepens trust and improves relationships

Those likely to benefit or be affected by the decisions made develop a sense of ownership of the initiative

Collaborative space to anticipate unintended outcomes, barriers or negative effects before they occur in order to prevent them or mitigate their lasting effects

Participation improves clarification of common language and provides equitable access to what is happening in schools⁶

Why is the engagement of critical perspectives important to your particular initiatives? Only you can determine the concrete or specific reason for engaging other perspectives in decision-making. At the outset of your decision-making process or when determining who regularly participates in important decisions, it is critical that you specifically identify why the engagement is necessary (i.e., which perspectives are missing), what you are hoping to achieve, the scope and context for engagement, and the benefits to those we are asking to be involved. So, how can we define this, and how we might engage others? The National Implementation Research Network, NIRN, utilizes the *Guidance for Engaging Critical Perspectives* as a guide for partnering agencies to carefully think through this process.

How to Select and Engage Critical Perspectives

Guidance for selecting and engaging diverse voices is briefly outlined within this graphic.

Identify

- Who will contribute to our objective?
- Who will be affected by it?
- Who can influence our objective, directly or indirectly?

Map

- What is the needed level of engagement from each collaborator?

Analyze

- What are potential barriers to their engagement?
- How can we mitigate those barriers?
- What are the rationales and/or facilitators of their engagement?

Plan

- What is our plan for engaging collaborators?
- Who is responsible?

5 Joiner, B. and Josephs, S. (2019, January 24). The five levels of leadership agility | AMA - amanet.org. American Management Association. Retrieved September 21, 2022, from <https://www.amanet.org/articles/the-five-levels-of-leadership-agility/>

6 Durham E., Baker H., Smith M., Moore E. & Morgan V. (2014). The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook. BiodivERsA, Paris (108 pp).

Identify

Before naming individuals who might be of help in adopting, implementing, and/or continuously improving an initiative, take a deep look inward. Does your team have lived experiences that represent the broadest range of perspectives? Consider which perspectives are needed to give the team a thorough understanding of the context (i.e., current demographic or geographic issues or policies), the problem, the practices in use, and those who might be affected by your decisions. Once you have determined what is needed and evaluated your team for those perspectives, the team should clearly articulate *why engagement from additional partners is important for your initiative and how it will contribute to better results*. What are you hoping to gain that cannot be discovered and explored through your current team membership? Remember to include those who may have very different opinions on the decisions being made.⁷

Map

The level of engagement needed from various contributors does not need to be the same. There are those that can simply be informed, and yet others we will need to consult, involve, collaborate, or even co-create with. When considering what is needed, think about what each level of participation would mean for the current 'project.' Clearly articulate what it would look like to collaborate or co-create, for example. Then, we can better match the need of the available partners with the resources (i.e., time, capacity) to realize the benefits of the specified level of engagement.

Analyze

Plan

Finally, the core team would analyze and plan for the engagement activities. Analyzing and planning for the support of potential partners helps the team to ensure that contributions are effective and valued and to avoid potential barriers that could damage emerging relationships. For example, teams could begin by analyzing why specific individuals would benefit from participation, what expertise they bring to the discussions, and their ability to participate. The team then outlines ways to facilitate their ability to participate and make visible their expertise.

For a detailed description of the process, see [Guidance for Engaging Critical Perspectives](#).

Evaluate Successes and Ways to Improve Engaging Others

To fully realize the benefits of engaging with diverse perspectives, we must continuously monitor and improve our efforts to be more equitable and inclusive in our decision-making environments. Not only would we evaluate the effectiveness of our collaborative efforts, but how we might reduce any barriers we encountered or improve the process for expanding access to more collaborative decision-making approaches. In other words, teams should assess the process and outcomes of engagement, successes, failures, quality of engagement, satisfaction of participants, and diversity of those selected to participate.

⁷ Bammer, G., Laursen, B., Nikulina, V., McKenzie, B., & Smith, M. (2021, December 21). *Stakeholder engagement primer: 2. Identifying stakeholders*. Integration and Implementation Insights. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from <https://i2insights.org/2021/10/21/identifying-stakeholders/>

Imagine

There are multiple methods for evaluating the engagement of critical perspectives.



Surveys

Develop a short list of questions to ascertain the thoughts of others. You could include rating scales or more open-ended questions. Be sure to include clear instructions not just for completing the survey but how the feedback will be used.



Focus groups

Set an agenda, prepare specific questions based on what you would like to improve, encourage candid input and reflection.



Interviews

Interviews allow for more private feedback around potentially sensitive topics.



Existing Tools

Utilize developed and tested tools such as the [“Collaboration Effectiveness Assessment Activity”](#) from the Prevention Institute.

Meaningful engagement happens when systems, aware that changes are happening beyond their walls that have a profound impact on what is happening within, choose to reach out and establish deep relationships as means to thrive in these dynamic contexts. Chris Emdin inspires us to be educators who are “...pushing the boundaries of what is normal within schools to reflect the needs of groups of people who have been denied power. It is claiming the right to develop and express one’s true genius and live as one’s true self.”⁸

What are the first steps to invoking our boundary-pushing selves?

1. Reach out, start a conversation, and build relationships with community members and the families whose children we serve daily. This will aid you in gaining a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and authentic selves.
2. Ask for help. Let others know what you are trying to achieve and seek their input.
3. Leverage others’ expertise. Invite others to collaborate in problem-solving and decision-making, especially those that will be impacted by these decisions.

Take the time to collaborate now so we arrive at lasting solutions to make meaningful change for our schools, communities, families, and most of all- our students.

⁸ Emdin, C. (2021). *Introduction*. In *Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success and Urban Education* (p. 3). introduction, Beacon Press.