

Chicago Schools Alliance PBI School Visit Team Member Reflections -2005

Following are the anonymous reflections/evaluation of the school visits by both the Perspectives and the Al Raby teams. Anything that would identify the writer or his/her school has been deleted or edited to preserve the anonymity of the writer or to prevent someone from determining on which team he/she served. Where specific comments about the schools were made that were unique to a school they were edited/deleted. Tom is Dr. Thomas A. Wilson, of Catalpa Ltd.; he was our consultant and chair of the visits. Not many edits/deletions were made!

Remember this is a reflection on the process – not on the schools! Some details of the evaluation/reflection questions themselves are included only in the first reflection.

REFLECTION NUMBER ONE

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

I think the notion of professional judgment is one of the most important things other educators should understand about the visit and how it works. The reading in the PBI [Practice-Based Inquiry®] Protocol helped me gain a clearer understanding of exactly what we mean when we “throw around” the term professional judgment. Schools are in every way complex and, as we found, the evidence was also complex and sometimes incomplete. I did not feel guilty and actually ended up feeling quite confident in not any one of the individual’s judgment but the team’s ability to make professional judgments as a whole based on the evidence we collected.

Not often enough in our schools are we asked to be as thoughtful, critical and honest about our practice. While the entire team was initially nervous about the host school’s reaction to our fairly harsh report, the honesty and quality of the report caused it to be well received by the school staff. I left on Friday thinking my school would also likely well receive and utilize this kind of feedback.

The focus on student learning, teaching to support that learning and the school’s support of both, are the key components we often gloss over in our review and evaluation of the many particular programs, initiatives etc. at our schools. The PBI® process forces you to focus on what really matters - student learning, no matter the particular approach of a particular school.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

Some follow-up questions: Do you plan on doing anything differently? Was this a valuable professional development activity for you? Or would you compare it to other professional development activities (e.g. what does it do better, worse, differently)?

This experience has definitely caused me to reflect on my own practice and our school. Though nowhere in the process does the team compare the site school to another school (the chair helped keep us quite focused on the school at hand and would have disallowed such conversation as per the PBI protocol), I couldn't help but think about my own school in light of what I was observing, the professional judgments we were making and the conclusions the team was developing.

At our school we have already begun efforts to collect explicit evidence for many of our own reflection and evaluation processes. This process helped me to gain a broader, yet stricter sense of the evidence collection and evaluation process.

The week-long experience itself was unlike any professional development in which I have participated. The length, the focus, the intensity and the professional collaboration are what make it so unique and authentic. Many other professional development workshops, conferences (external) are filled with good information but lack time for processing and thinking about application. The PBI® process is grounded in application. You are applying what you learn every minute to the team deliberation and discussion. Right there in the moment, you have the practice of thinking deeply about what you have seen, read or heard and making decisions and professional judgments about it. That is where the real learning takes place. Not to mention that the report itself is a resolution, a living document that speaks to the week's experience and which will hopefully be valued by the host school as a means by which to improve its practice. I felt good about the report we left to the school.

Furthermore, the collaborative, consensus-based process for writing the report is something every educator should experience. Not often enough our educators asked to write their professional judgments in such clear and concise terms. This is good practice for all.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice for the Alliance or Catalpa (Dr. Tom Wilson) about?

- ***Pre-visit "preparation" (for you)***

I am not sure I could have been any better prepared for the week's experience. Tom made it clear on the first day: "know what you see" not "see what you know". I think any additional preparation (knowledge about the school, etc) may have in fact impeded my ability to do this.

I had read through the “Protocol” which helped give me an overall framework for the process. [Note: The visit protocol is developed by the school and Catalpa prior to the visit and among other things, guides the selection of the visit team members and the visit itself. Part of the validity of the report stems from whether or not the team actually followed the protocol.]

*** *The school visit itself***

The week’s schedule was packed, intense and focused. It kept the team engaged and on track. While of course the observations and meetings were fascinating, what I found most interesting were the team deliberations. The collaborative consensus based report we generated in such a short time is concrete evidence that quality analysis and thoughtful recommendations can be done in a week’s time.

*** *How the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it***

It seems that the only true way to understand the actual process is to experience it. In that way I hope that the Alliance is able to bring the process to other member schools so that a broader group of educators can participate. I think that will create for a more concrete understanding and substantial dialogue as to how the process can help our schools improve their practice.

REFLECTION NUMBER TWO

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

The team's "journey" through the week was an amazing opportunity for reflection. We started from a position of ignorance (for me anyway) about the school and each other. As we moved through the week, we developed a sense of team as well as an understanding of the school we were visiting. At times, that movement was painful, as I viewed my own teaching and school through the new lens we were developing together. By the end of the day on Thursday, I was concerned that the process was designed to primarily pick out the shortcomings in the visited school. As we processed that thought on Friday, and finished our conclusions, however, the strengths of the school became more apparent. Additionally, any shortcomings identified in the report were most certainly reflections of the shortcomings the faculty and administration of the school themselves identified. In the end, I think the report provided a great way for the school to start a conversation about difficult

topics. By the end of the week, I felt that I had a deeper understanding of what it means to teach for learning.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

Holding up such a sharply focused lens to another school makes me wonder what I would see through such a lens about my own school and classroom. Some things I know I need to do soon include responding better to student work, and thinking more about the many decisions I make during a class in response to student work. While I'm not sure how this will exactly play out yet, they are certainly foremost in my mind as I return to my classroom. As a professional development opportunity, I really appreciate the time to talk to teachers from schools different from my own. This includes the teachers [from the school], as well as the teachers on the team. The sharp focus on teaching for learning with different voices from those I normally hear has given me much to think about. I always worry about any time spent away from my own students, but I feel that the past week was certainly worth the time away.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice about pre-visit preparation, the school visit itself, and how the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it?

I thought I was well-prepared for the visit. I'm not sure that more information about the school or process would have been helpful, as part of my learning came from the "surprise" aspect -- having the school and process open up in layers helped me "know what I was seeing" without the opportunity to make pre-judgments.

This has the potential to be a very painful process for a school, although profitable if the school uses the report to jump into painful discussions. It strikes me that there may need to be a certain amount of readiness on the part of the school for the process to have a really positive impact. On the other hand, the surprise factor may help the school itself know better what it is seeing.

REFLECTION NUMBER THREE

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

The purpose of the visit is to support the positive work in the school and to recommend areas to strengthen. The school needs to have a clear understanding of

the purpose of the visit. A few teachers perceived the visit as more threat than support. It might help to inform students about the purpose of the visit as well, so they can relax and not worry that this is about evaluating him or her.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

It was extremely insightful to follow a student; this opened my eyes to the world of the tuned-out student. As I observed further classes, I became aware of the 5%-50% of the students who opted out—sleeping, choosing some other activity, staring into space, or pretending to attend to the class. The change I will make is to expand my “radar” to pick up on the students who have tuned out. I also appreciated the perspective of focusing on learning as a separate activity from teaching; this is useful to get to the business that we are really about: student learning. Based on my school visit experience, I will continue to advocate for more teacher involvement at my school.

One value of the activity was working directly with the visit team—from our formal and informal conversations I learned about other perspectives on education. Another value of the activity was practicing careful, evaluative observation. In the context of comparative in-service experiences, this was far superior in that it is all about looking for quality learning experiences and figuring out recommendations for strengthening weak learning and teaching vs. a more conventional in-service that gives a more theoretical overview of good teaching (hands-on vs. theoretical). I also valued the experience and cumulative wisdom that my fellow team members brought to the effort. The best professional development activity is exposure to very competent people; our conversations were extremely stimulating and fun. I feel that I have a much heightened ability to evaluate teaching and learning as a result of participating in this visit and working with these quality people.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice about pre-visit preparation, the school visit itself, and how the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it?

Re: Preparation. While the overview documents e-mailed in advance helped, I would have preferred the orientation during the previous week (even in a conference call or web cast) so that we could start immediately into the visit on Monday morning
Re the school visit itself: Tom did a masterful job of keeping us focused and moving ahead.

Re: learning from the visit. First, I think the visitation process is a valuable form of assessment and feedback for a school. Having participated in several re-accreditation processes in my career, this is by far a superior process. By focusing on issues on which the school wants feedback, the school visit process can give objective feedback that will allow the school to refine and maintain its course. It also can potentially unearth issues that are off the school’s radar screen. Because the

report is submitted for the school, there is no need to hide from the process. [NOTE: Each team member signs a code of conduct/confidentiality agreement. The Alliance signs an agreement with the school, which gives the school complete authority over the distribution of the report.]

REFLECTION NUMBER FOUR

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

What I think is most important about this methodology is that it takes a look at a whole week in a school from many different angles. All aspects of the school are investigated (as much as possible). This then takes into account that a school is not just a set of discreet tasks and classes, but is really a living, breathing community with much overlap. The fact that the visit takes place over a week and in multiple settings ensures that the information gathered is not just a snapshot of one child or one classroom.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

The most important discovery that I made is that I feel this should be done in my school. As for my own practice, I find myself to be more reflective about exactly what the students are learning. While I have always examined my own teaching, I now realize that the way I can measure my own teaching is by what my students are learning. I consistently ask myself “What is the point? What is important for your students to learn from this?” Areas of weakness that I observed in other classrooms, I am now finding in my own and taking steps to strengthen my students’ learning. This was an incredibly valuable professional development activity for me. It caused me to reexamine my philosophy of teaching more so than any 1 day workshop. I also immediately implemented many of my new ideas as soon as I returned to school.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice about pre-visit preparation, the school visit itself, and how the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it?

I’m not quite sure how they can share the information, but it is really important that they do. I don’t know if this means that the Alliance has a discussion with the teachers from [the visited school] and report what they have to say about the process/findings, or they report what the team members had to say. I think that

any school that wanted to improve themselves would find this to be a valuable exercise.

REFLECTION NUMBER FIVE

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

I believe that the school visit was a learning experience for all involved. The way that the visit is set up allows for the team members to get a real feel of the school instead of just a snapshot. It is impossible to get a true understanding of what people are trying to do if you only see them for 10 minutes and never talk to them. Being able to follow students, talk with teachers, observe teachers and talk to administrators really allows you to get a true sense of what is going on. By being in the school for a week, you see all aspects of the school and not just the half day performance that schools usually put on for visitors.

The visiting team should be a fly on the wall and it is important that they stay that way. Of course teachers will want to explain to a visiting team member what the lesson or what the students are doing, but it is important that the visitor be left out of the discussion as much as possible. The visiting team member should be able to walk into the room, either as an observer or as a student, and know what the goal of the day is. It is important that the visiting team keeps its distance.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

As an educator, it is important to understand that the visit isn't intrusive in the sense of being bothersome; rather it is a learning experience for everyone involved. I truly feel that the team came up with valid and worthwhile conclusions and included recommendations that can help the direction of learning at the visited school, but in the same time, it allowed me to learn from the staff at visited school. I have started recognizing things that I do and wonder if I am doing my best to improve the learning at my school. I have already noticed changes I that I have made to my teaching style, especially in the case of questioning. I noticed how choosing certain words when asking questions can really challenge a student to think and respond with a more in-depth and thought-out answer.

This process is something that I believe every school should go through. I tried to picture in my head what a visit to my school would be like and I cringed. I think it

would be brutal, but as I thought about it more and more, I realized that the students are the ones missing out. There are things going on that everyone know, but when someone from the outside tells you about it, it hits a little deeper and makes you want to make a change. As for professional development, I learned more in this week then I have in many years of attending city funded or school funded professional development. I just wish other teachers at my school could have experienced the same growth that I feel I did.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice about pre-visit preparation, the school visit itself, and how the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it?

I really don't have anything to reference my visit to, but I feel that everything went very well. We had a great team and I feel that everyone had the same goal. Tom did a wonderful job of getting us all on the same page and preparing us for the week.

As for the Alliance, I feel that every school can benefit from this process, both as a recipient and by having faculty that participates in team visits. One difficulty the Alliance might have is the confidentiality that must accompany the visit. We can learn so much from the other schools in the Alliance, but the Alliance must be careful in what they share.

REFLECTION NUMBER SIX

1. Please reflect on the school visit and methodology as you experienced it. What are the most important things that other educators should understand about the school visit and how it works?

Tom kept emphasizing that the team is a group of peers, and what we are doing in making our report is opening a professional conversation about the strengths and weaknesses we observe in the school. I think that is the most important thing to understand about the school visit. It seemed impossible, walking in on Monday morning, that we would really know enough to be able to make unequivocal statements about the school, but by the time Friday afternoon rolled around and Tom was reading our report to the faculty, I felt confident that we were speaking "the truth." By completely immersing ourselves in classrooms, the lunchroom, in conversations with teachers, students, administrators, the security guard, everybody, and by just watching what was going on, it was amazing how well we got to know the place over the course of the week. It was an incredibly powerful experience all around, from the full immersion in the life of the school, to the collective writing process, to the reading of the findings to the school.

2. As an educator, please reflect on how this experience has affected how you think about your own practice and your school.

This was a great professional development activity, and it definitely affected how I think about our teaching practice at my school and in relationship to my own job. For one thing, this experience gave me more confidence that I can observe in a classroom and that I'll have productive feedback to give to the teacher. I've always been a little bit uncomfortable in the role of critiquing other people's teaching... It was very validating to have conversations with my colleagues on the SALT team and feel like we were seeing the same things and coming to the same conclusions when we observed teachers. I have to comment on the team here as well. I so much enjoyed working with my fellow team members. It was a real pleasure to spend so much of our time last week engaged in very intense intellectual discussions with such intelligent professionals. I very much appreciated having that experience with them. I liked the focus on learning as separate from teaching, also. Too often we focus on what the teacher is doing or saying, but we don't reflect back on what kids are learning. Treating these (teaching and learning) as two separate phenomenon really helped to clarify things as we did our observations and had our discussions.

3. Do you have any thoughts or advice about pre-visit preparation, the school visit itself, and how the Alliance can share and learn from the visit so that your school and other schools can learn from it?

Having the materials in advance was helpful. I don't have any particular recommendations for changes.

Re: The school visit itself. We were able to accomplish our objective in the allotted time.

Re: learning from the visit. I think the visit itself is so powerful, every school ought to undergo one. As for what to share with the Alliance, I would think that it would be straight-forward enough to teach people how to observe in their own schools or other schools, talk to teachers, talk to kids, etc.