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Developing Your Question

Research is a high-hat word that scares a lot of people. It needn't. It's rather simple. Essentially research is nothing but a state of mind . . . a friendly, welcoming attitude toward change . . . going out to look for change instead of waiting for it to come . . . an effort do things better.

—Charles Kettering

The word *research* can instill anxiety in many people. Memories of graduate school and statistics may come to mind. In this book, we will call our journey in finding answers *practitioner inquiry* (PI). Why call it PI rather than research? In PI we can use existing data; our everyday work can lead us to seek answers to the questions arising from our interactions with students, faculty, and parents.

HOW WE ARRIVED AT THIS POINT

School Reform

A closer look at the real world of schools can lead to genuine change to better serve our school communities. So let's step back for a minute and review the school counselor's role in the educational

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system and the school reform movement. Initially, school counselors were ancillary to the school reform issue. Conversations took place and decisions were made without any involvement of the school counseling department. However, as the issues continued to press on the school and stakeholders began to look deeper into the issue facing the reform movement, the school counselor or school counseling department began to surface as the one knowing the overall picture of the school and community. No one in the building hears more, sees more, or knows more about students, faculty, staff, parents, and the community than the school counselor! School counselors must be included in school reform on a level conveying a clear message: their help and support are essential in this journey.

Research or Inquiry?

To fully collaborate in the school reform journey, school counselors need to understand and embrace the use of data. The data may already exist within the system. On the other hand, it is likely that questions will develop requiring new data to determine essential and appropriate next steps.

Rather than expecting outside researchers to come into the schools, we can use existing data (e.g., test scores vs. passing grades, course enrollment patterns) or we can gather data from daily issues and concerns (e.g., How many students are absent in the first few hours of the day?). This is the heart of practitioner inquiry: asking the very real and difficult questions.

Using Existing Data

Schools are filled with data: dropout and graduation rates, test scores, attendance, disciplinary referrals, and enrollment patterns of students' selection of courses, to name a few. Everywhere you look the educational culture provides a rich arena of data. According to Ruth Johnson (2002):

Data can provide tremendous food for thought in schools where low expectations lead to low results for large numbers

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of your people . . . most often low-income students of color. These are the first kinds of data schools should examine to absorb the troubling implications of tracking and other status quo practices. . . . data can begin to illustrate the gaps between words and actual behaviors in many schools. (p. 14)

PI seeks to gather existing data to inform us to move to a question, which is so much simpler than trying to create your own research study! Just look at your school's available data, and you'll see it's virtually impossible not to start asking questions.

MOVING INTO INQUIRY

Inquiry is a natural and important part of our professional practice. In our jobs, questions constantly arise as to why something happened or how an issue can be addressed or changed. During his first year as a school counselor in 2002, Ian Martin started keeping a research journal, which had been one of the recommendations in his preservice courses. Individuals were encouraged to write down questions they had about how they might improve something in their schools. His first entry follows:

Where do I begin? I must first report on where I am: struggling through my first year as a school counselor and trying to keep my head above water. I consider getting through the day as a major success.

Along those same lines exists the beginnings of my questioning. Over the last couple of months I have been collaborating with another staff member to create an after school program. She is a Special Education teacher focused on academic results. She wants to establish a non-fiction reading program. I on the other hand, hope to operate in the more creative vein of art. Our thinking is that by combining the two disciplines we can create a balanced experience that addresses the concrete and abstract elements of both practices.

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As a counselor I am constantly communicating the relationship between academics and creative expression. This opportunity allows me a chance to back up my words. Will we see an increased interest in reading? Will students become more comfortable expressing themselves through art? Will they begin to combine both tools through synergy? How will we collect the data? Is there a relationship between fact and fiction? Will students become more creative as their factual thinking becomes more sophisticated? Will their images become more realistic? These and many more questions get me excited about this project.

There is an interesting byproduct that I feel I have to mention. That byproduct is excitement. I know that my day is busy and I probably don't have time to tackle another project, but the concept has me wanting to explore. All of the stories that we hear on the radio or on T.V. about exceptional teachers and students result from people that are motivated to learn. There is a thirst, a vision, and a goal to learn more. That thirst is why I entered this profession. It is key in keeping me motivated, because like it or not, we are educators and students. The more that I experience, the more that I feel that true educators never stop being students. I am motivated and invested in my education and I am proud to say that I am learning every day. I hope to look back on this journal and compare these ideas in relation to where I finally end up. Who knows where that might be? This is my kind of research! (2002)

How do we tap into Ian's enthusiasm and move into practitioner inquiry? First, we encourage Ian to gather any relevant data on his students, from test scores, attendance, and homework completion to teachers' observations (e.g., during instructional time, lunch, an assembly). From this, he can begin to develop questions. Perhaps he wonders: What happens to nonfiction reading abilities when I introduce the students to artists and use their media to illustrate nonfiction books? Whatever he chooses to inquire about, it will be a clear reflection of the questions he really wants to explore. From this, Ian will think about how and where he will look for and gather data.

DATA SOURCES

Locations for data can be many and varied. From your building to national centers, we can find data in many locations. Let's look at various entities where data may be accessed.

State Department of Education. Data abounds in the state department, from test scores to district demographics. Check out your State Department of Education's Web site; you will find a plethora of information and data specific to your building as well as to your district and state. For example, on the North Carolina state department Web site (www.ncpublicschools.org), there is a tab titled Statistics/Data. By clicking on that tab, you can find further information under several categories: About NC Schools, Student Testing Results, Student Testing Information and Results, Evaluation/Analysis, and the Accountability Division. By clicking on Student Testing Results, you can then select from a variety of reports. Table 1.1 shows just one example of data on student testing results that can be accessed via the state department Web site.

School District. Your school district can provide substantial data to help inform your inquiries. Before searching your district's Web site, think about your school in relation to the district. Do you have programs with a particular focus? Are your school demographics different from other schools in the district? What does your school board require? On what aspects of learning has the district placed its emphasis? What does the school district articulate as short- and long-term goals?

Building. What data is already available in the school? How is data on courses and programs collected? What data currently exists on the achievement, discipline, dropout, referral, or failure rates within your building? What additional needs are evidenced within your school? What questions arise because of the uniqueness of the school itself?

We often forget simple things done every day. What about bus referrals? Attendance? Schedule changes? Time spent in classroom instruction? How about truancy? ESL/ESOL services? What behaviors or data are regularly tracked? Does your school compile three-, six-, or nine-week failing reports?

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Table 1.1 Hudson Elementary School, End of Grade (Reading) Composite Grades 3 Through 8: Detailed Gender-Ethnicity, Migrant, Free/Reduced Lunch and Limited English Proficiency Status Breakdowns

Student Subgroup	2003–2004			2004–2005		
	Number at or Above Level III	Number of Valid Scores	Percentage at or Above Level III	Number at or Above Level III	Number of Valid Scores	Percentage at or Above Level III
Female—Hispanic	8	9	88.9%	≥ 95.0%	8	≥ 95.0%
Female—Multiracial	*	1	*	*	0	*
Female—White	172	186	92.5%	153	166	92.2%
Male—Asian	*	0	*	*	1	*
Male—Black	*	0	*	*	1	*
Male—Hispanic	11	12	91.7%	8	11	72.7%
Male—Multiracial	*	2	*	*	1	*
Male—White	140	171	81.9%	135	166	81.3%
Free/reduced lunch	119	149	79.9%	125	154	81.2%
Not free/reduced lunch	215	232	92.7%	182	200	91.0%
Limited English proficiency	8	9	88.9%	4	6	66.7%
Not limited English proficient	326	372	87.6%	303	348	87.1%
Not migrant	334	381	87.7%	307	354	86.7%

Note: The percentage and number of students are not shown if the percentage is greater than 95 or less than 5. Subgroups with no data are not shown in this table.

* Student population in subgroup too small for value to be reported.

As you can see, the range of data is seemingly endless. However, what is lacking are the initial questions to begin the quest in using data to derive solutions.

THINKING ABOUT THINKING

How would you define *metacognition*? Simply put, it's thinking about thinking. Most of us have a particular way in which we think. Some think in concrete terms, which require specific details to complete the picture. Others of us might think in abstract terms, without specific details. Whatever your modality of thinking, inquiry needs to support it and help you think in new ways. If inquiry occurs only in the area or method in which you are comfortable, essential information and feedback could be overlooked. Learning, thinking, reflecting, and sharing information can occur in a multitude of arenas. We must be open to exploring the information as it is presented even when it is out of our comfort zone. For example, Student A may have linguistic talent that readily catches our attention. Student B's talent might lie in interpersonal intelligence, while Student C's learning is best correlated with bodily/kinesthetic interactions. These examples come from Howard Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences work and provides a strong argument for exploring our thinking and understanding via many avenues.

Some of us will rely on hard factual data while others use written notes or recorded conversation as the primary way of gathering information. Still others will use outside resources whether it be individuals or written material. And yet others would much rather observe and take notes (either in written or taped format), then reflect on the information at a later date. No matter which method you prefer, it is wise to remember that information is given and received in multiple venues.

FORMULATING QUESTIONS

Some school counselors catch the fever of questions and become passionate question machines. Adam Swientek is a middle school

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counselor known for writing his way to understanding. Adam's writing brought him to this draft of his questions:

Main Question:

- What are the social and academic developmental implications that former ESL/ELL students experience when making the transition from a self-contained shelter classroom to an inclusive classroom environment?

Subquestions:

- What is the self-esteem of the students in their new classroom environment?
- Are the students comfortable with their new instructors? Do they feel that they have an outlet or can reach out for assistance?
- Are the students able to assimilate into the classroom, develop friendships with students of different ethnicities or race, and believe they belong to a social group?
- Do students sense a different, positive educational experience?
- Are there outlets that the former ESL/ELL students can go to for assistance in the classroom or outside of the classroom?
- Has the students' identification to their race or culture changed because of a new, modeled environment?
- Are students more compelled to complete middle school and high school because of the mainstreaming?
- Do students have an urgency to attend postsecondary college or take up a vocational trade because of the impact of transition? (2002)

This was a great outpouring of Adam's questions, and yet he realized he had even more that he wanted to explore!

EXPLORING YOUR QUESTION

Selection/Identification. Begin by selecting a student, issue, or concern. Often we select a child who takes a lot of our time: a name frequently

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heard in the faculty room or written on bus referrals. We encourage you to consider a child you don't know well. Perhaps it is a child who doesn't come to school until 9:00 a.m. Does your student have an older sibling? Family health issues? A single parent? Are there other students who are also consistently late to school? Are there commonalities among these students? Where do they live? Do they have a low income?

Form 1.1 is a case study worksheet. Think about an issue in your school that needs particular attention. You can use the worksheet to help you determine

- What are the facts?
- What else do you need to know?
- What are possible sources for additional information?

Keep a close check on the assumptions you may begin to make. Do you really know the truth of what you write down? Work on your objectivity with fierce determination. You'll have time later to follow hunches.

What do you want to know? Once you have identified the area, issue, or students you would like to know more about, think about what you already know. What questions begin to bubble up? Be open to *anything* popping up into your head! Do they even care about being in school? Are their parents home at night? How many other students also have afterschool jobs? This last question was asked by a high school counseling department when a large number of students regularly missed first- and second-hour classes.

What else do you need to know? Look at your list of questions. Where can you find the real information? The cumulative files? Talking with the teachers? Parents? Coaches? Will you take time to observe or talk to these students during recess or lunch? After disaggregating their first- and second-hour absences by ethnicity, the counseling department was able to see the majority of students were Hispanic. The counselors began by talking with students during lunch. After all, they were at school during the lunch hour!

10 • THE REFLECTIVE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S GUIDE**Form 1.1** Case Study Worksheet: Template**Concern/Issue/Question:** _____

<i>What are the facts?</i>	<i>What do you want to know? What else do you need to know?</i>	<i>Possible sources for additional information</i>

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What are possible sources for additional information? The first two categories will lead you to this arena. Here is where you will explore other possibilities for resources, information, or data. Do other teachers have similar students? Do the ESOL or Special Education students face similar struggles? Does the district office store school longitudinal data? Are community members deeply involved with the school? How about the graduates?

Let's continue with our Hispanic students missing first- and second-hour classes. The mere fact that the majority of absences occurred in the Hispanic population during first and second hour led the counselors to begin to look at the daily schedule. What implications for missing the classes might exist for these students?

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Anyone can become an educational inquirer by pursuing one question at a time! It demands a willingness to be informed by the questions arising in our minds. We are often trained to put aside our questions, wonderings, or ideas. School counselor Liz Mahlum (2003) wrestled with the concept of practitioner inquiry from the first class meeting. Continuing to focus on the finished product—what was she going to prove—she struggled with the concept of “being in the question.” Toward the end of the class, Liz wrote about her process of finally “getting it.”

After struggling through the development of my question and being able to differentiate between data collection and analysis, I got it. I was finally being forced to think about my thinking. I was challenged to step away from deadlines and actually think about the “how” and the “why” ahead of time. This has been uncomfortable. Hidden in the discomfort, however, was an opportunity for me to assess the time that I spend with students and whether or not I am taking advantage of the abundant opportunities for change that they present to me on a daily basis.

In actuality, uncovering and igniting a spark of curiosity is quite simple. Even today, as I talked to a student, I just couldn't

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help but wonder “What if . . . ?” In a brief 20-minute conversation, he made my wheels turn. I wasn’t hunting for a research idea, but what he shared with me made me wonder. It was simple and concise, but could easily be an area worth exploring. At that point, I recognized that research doesn’t have to be huge; in fact it might be small but nonetheless important. (2002)

Meet Dianne: An Ongoing Case Study

Dianne Wilson, a working practitioner, is our focus for the Ongoing Case Study section of each chapter. Dianne worked with children in county mental health and day treatment settings for many years and then decided to become a licensed school counselor. She has been a practicing school counselor for eight years. During that time, she has helped move the faculty and staff perception of the school counselor’s work from ancillary to an essential service central to the work of the entire school. No longer is she viewed through a lens of “What do you really do?” In partnership with her administrator, she has restructured her role to include being a key player on the leadership team.

So let’s begin Dianne’s PI journey, how it came to be, and what motivated her.

The Issue

Dianne Wilson, an elementary school counselor in Tigard, Oregon, provides this example of using data to drive her practitioner inquiry.

Under the new rules of school reform, we test third and fifth grade students. A large number of third graders were failing the tests. It really didn’t matter who was the teacher; the scores still indicated they couldn’t perform up to state standards. It was obvious we needed to develop some academic interventions to help these students. We knew asking parents to monitor homework wouldn’t work because a large percentage of our students are from low-income, single-parent families. And a lot of the parents are working two jobs, so no one is home to help!

This sounds familiar to many of us who have worked in similar schools: high numbers of at-risk students having little or no support from home. Even some staff and faculty members have the attitude, "It will never change." However, Dianne was motivated to step outside the norm and dig for a deeper understanding of what was happening to these children and why. She knew she had become a school counselor because she wanted to make a difference in students' lives. That difference had to first begin with helping *all* children achieve academic success—after all, she was employed by an educational institution! Her work in the private setting led her to the realization that without a strong education, the children were headed for a lifetime of struggle.

Many times it takes one individual who will go against the flow, be obstinate, and look "outside the box." One obvious tactic Dianne might have taken would have been to partner with the teachers to bolster the academic rigor of the assignments for students with failing scores. However, as you will learn in this ongoing case study, approaching the issue in that manner would have been less effective than the manner she chose. There was much going on behind the scenes.

Given the information Dianne was presented with, what would you have done? Where would you have begun? Whom would you have approached? Were there any other sources of information that could have proven beneficial? As we move along in the book, you will begin to get some "ah-has" as to potential options in this situation. Using Table 1.2, let's begin to fill out the columns as Dianne might have. Let's see what you can add to the list and where your inquiry might take you.

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Table 1.2 Case Study Worksheet: Poor Third Graders' State Test Performance

<i>What are the facts?</i>	<i>What do you want to know?</i>	<i>Possible sources for additional information</i>
77% of Grades 3 and 5 combined met reading benchmarks. 65% of Grades 3 and 5 combined passed writing. 72% of Grades 3 and 5 passed math multiple choice. 62% of Grade 5 passed math problem solving.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the teachers? First year or seasoned? • Who are these students? • Where do they live? <p><i>What else do you need to know?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum for all? Same? Different? • Do they have siblings? • What do you know about their parents' financial/personal situation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Parents • Siblings • Community contacts
This was below where we wanted to be as a school.		