Centering User Voice with Empathy Interviews

Purpose: An empathy interview is a qualitative data collection strategy that uses semi-structured interviews to understand an experience from the perspective of the interviewee and bring to light their unacknowledged needs (Bennett et. Al 2022). This helps teams remain user-centered or see the school mental health system from the perspective of students, families, and staff to ensure that their diverse lived experiences are centered in the improvement process (Hinnant-Craford 2020). Unlike traditional interviews, empathy interviews do not ask for opinions on narrow topics but are shaped by the themes and topics brought up by the interviewee.

Framing: DPI's Roadmap for School Mental Health Improvement outlines five steps for increasing the quality of their school mental health system. Empathy interviews can be helpful during any step in a team's improvement journey. For example, empathy interviews can be used in the assessment step to better understand the system, or in the planning step to define the problem, generate change ideas, or elicit feedback when changes to the system are tested. Whatever way teams choose to use them, empathy interviews provide a powerful method for elevating those voices that might be muted by power dynamics present in group settings (Hinnant-Crawford 2020). This strengthens collaboration in Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems by centering the voices of those most impacted by the problems that improvement teams are working to solve.

Improvement teams can use the Empathy Interview Planning Tool to prepare for empathy interviews, including determining a purpose for the interviews, planning interview logistics, writing an interview protocol, and making meaning from the interview data.

Empathy Interview Planning Tool

Create a Plan

1. How will the improvement team use the interview data once it's collected?

Determine the purpose of the interview(s). Empathy interviews can serve a variety of purposes, such as identifying and refining a problem of practice, understanding the problem's root causes, getting feedback on the impact of changes, or generating new change ideas. Examples of when a team might use an empathy interview:

Increasing Student Belonging

- **Problem:** Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data showed that many students do not feel like they belong.
- **Driver:** The improvement team identified staff and student relationships as a primary driver of student feelings of belonging.
- **Interview purpose:** High school teachers conduct empathy interviews with students to better understand their experiences with belonging at school. Teachers and students use themes from the interviews to design activities and routines that increase feelings of safety and belonging in the classroom setting.

Improving Staff Retention

- **Problem:** District staffing data revealed a trend of teachers leaving the district after fewer years of employment.
- **Driver:** The improvement team identified compassion resilience as a primary driver of teacher retention.
- **Interview purpose:** After testing, refining, and implementing new staff wellness practices, district staff conduct empathy interviews with other staff to better understand how the program is impacting their feelings of efficacy, satisfaction, and burnout related to their work and make needed adjustments to the wellness practices.

Eliminating Barriers to Receiving Mental Health Support

- **Problem:** Mental health referral data showed that only 30 percent of students referred for community mental health services received those services.
- **Driver:** The improvement team identified supportive referral processes, such as a warm handoff, as a primary driver of receiving supports.
- **Interview Purpose:** Student services staff complete empathy interviews with caregivers of students who have accessed external mental health supports to better understand the challenges they face in accessing support. Staff, caregivers,

and students will use the information to brainstorm and test changes to their school mental health referral pathway policies and procedures.

Decreasing the Use of Punitive Discipline

- **Problem:** Suspension, expulsion, and academic data show that punitive discipline methods are having disproportionately negative impact on Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) students.
- **Driver:** The improvement team identified administrator exposure to alternatives to suspension and expulsion as a primary driver of decreased use of punitive discipline.
- **Interview purpose:** The Director of Student Services performs empathy interviews with building-level administrators to better understand when and how they use alternatives to punitive discipline and barriers to doing so. The director and administrators will discuss themes from the interviews to develop policy and support for using alternative methods.

Purpose and Use of Data

2. Who will be interviewed?

Decide on the number of interviews to be conducted and who will be invited to be interviewed. Select a number that is a manageable but gives a variety of perspectives. When selecting interviewees, consider whose voices have not been included, and whose stories need to be told.

Interviewees

3. Who will conduct the interviews?

Determine who will conduct the interviews. Consider who might be best suited to conduct the interview, and how the interviewer's own identity, role, relationship to the interviewees, and biases could impact the process. Note, the skills needed to listen and respond with good questions align well with the skills of student services staff, though other staff, students, caregivers, and community members may also be effective interviewers depending on the goals of the interviews and the identity of the interviewees.

Interviewers

4. When and how will the interviews take place?

Determine the logistics of conducting individual interviews, such as:

- ✓ Identifying a safe and comfortable space to hold the interview or a secure virtual setting if an in-person interview is not possible.
- ✓ Date, time of each interview.
- ✓ Who will take notes (the interviewer or an additional person present during the interviews).
- ✓ Where notes will be stored.
- ✓ Who will reach out to potential interviewees and what information will be shared about the interview.

Interview Logistics

Write Interview Protocol

1. What questions will be included?

Empathy interview questions should prompt interviewees toward stories to convey perspectives and experiences. Write 4-6 questions that:

- Are open-ended.
- Are easy to answer from the interviewee's perspective.
- Elicit specific examples of interviewee experiences instead of discussing solutions (Bennett et. Al 2022).
- Consider including a tour question, which asks the interviewee to act as a tour guide and walk the interviewer through their context and point out things that may be important to them (Hinnant-Crawford 2020).

Questions

2. **What will the interview protocol include?**

The basic structure of an empathy interview includes the following:
- ✓ **Connect:** Introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview. Build rapport with the interviewee by displaying openness, curiosity, and humility. Discuss how the interviewer will maintain the interviewee's confidentiality, including how information will be shared with others and limits to confidentiality. Remind interviewees that all questions are voluntary.
- ✓ **Evoke Stories:** Start by asking a question that invites the interviewee to share stories about their experiences related to the topic. Consider starting with a tour question such as, "what is a typical day like in your classroom?"
- ✓ **Dig Deeper:** Use follow-up questions and prompts to get more information. Avoid suggesting answers to the questions or implying that there is one correct answer. Use prompts such as:
  - ➢ "how does that impact you?"
  - ➢ "what lead to that?"
  - ➢ "can you say more about that?",
  - ➢ "what were you feeling when that happened?",
  - ➢ "tell me about a time when you…".
- ✓ **Invite Additional Sharing:** Provide an opportunity for the interviewee to share anything else they think is important, that may have not come up naturally with the interview questions, by asking something like, "did I miss anything?", or "what else would you like to share?"
- ✓ **Express gratitude:** Wrap up the interview by thanking the interviewee for their time and willingness to share their experience. Connect back to the purpose of the interview and how their sharing will further that purpose. Inform them of next steps in the process of utilizing the data collected in the interviews.

Example Interview Protocol
- ✓ **Purpose:** Interview caregivers with students who have received external mental health supports to better understand the challenges they face in connecting to those supports. The improvement team will use the information to brainstorm and test changes to the school's mental health referral pathway.
- ✓ **Connect:** *Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. My name is ___ and I am a school counselor in the district. I am part of a team of staff working to better support our students' mental health. We are particularly interested in improving the way we get students connected to mental health resources in the community. We call this our school mental health referral pathway. We know that in the past, your student was*

connected to a community mental health resource by school staff. We are really interested in knowing more about what that experience was like for you and your student. We have gathered feedback and collected data that tell us that the procedures we currently use may not be working as we expected, so are curious to better understand your unique experience of that process. Do you have any questions so far? Before we proceed, I want to let you know that I will record notes as you talk. Your name and identifying information will not be shared with these notes. However, if you share with me any concerns about someone's safety, I may need to tell others who can help. You may choose which questions you would like to answer, and if at any point you'd like to stop the interview, just let me know. How does that all sound?

- ✓ **Evoke:** *Great, let's get started. Tell me about a time you and your student were referred to a community mental health resource by the school. What went well with this process? What roadblocks did you face in connecting to that resource and using its services? How do you feel the resources the school connected you to would meet or are meeting the cultural and linguistic needs of your student and family? What might have improved this process for you?*
- ✓ **Dig Deeper:** Prompt more sharing using questions such as: *"how does that impact you?", "what lead to that?", "can you say more about that?", "what were you feeling when that happened?", "tell me about a time when you…".*
- ✓ **Invite Additional Sharing:** *Thanks so much for answering those questions. Is there anything else you'd like to share?*
- ✓ **Express Gratitude:** *Thank you for taking the time to share this with me, and your willingness to be open about your experiences. We expect to interview ____ people about this same topic. Next month, our team of staff, students, and caregivers will meet to talk about what we learned, and brainstorm changes based on what you and other interviewees have shared. I will plan to follow up with an update by the end of the quarter. Do you have any questions about that? Thank you.*

Interview Protocol Template

Purpose

Connect

Evoke

Dig Deeper

Invite Additional Sharing

Express Gratitude

Conduct the Interviews

Conduct interviews using the interview protocol and record notes. Remember to include the five parts of an empathy interview. After each interview, reflect on how it went and make any needed adjustments to the interview protocol.

Connect → Evoke Stories → Dig Deeper → Invite Additional Sharing → Express Grattitude
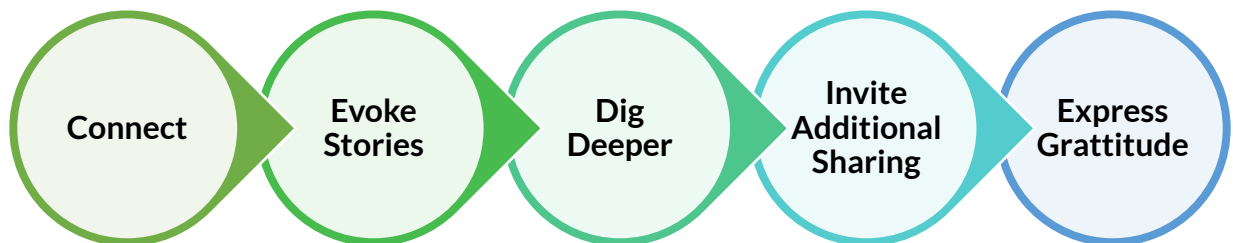
Make Meaning

1. After the interviews are complete, debrief the process with interviewers.
    a. What was the experience like for the interviewer?

b. What did you learn about the process, both positive and negative, that could inform the next iteration of empathy interviews?

Reflections

2. Prepare data for analysis by removing identifying information from any notes or summaries that will be shared.
3. Convene the improvement team to analyze the data. Teams may opt to use a protocol for analyzing the data. In the book, *Improvement Science at Your Fingertips* (Bennett, Grunow, and Park 2022) the authors suggest three strategies for analyzing empathy interview data, depending on the team's goals. The strategies include:
    a. <u>Headlining:</u> Headlining is a process used to create a summary of the interview data. Team members are split into groups and assigned interviews to review. One person in the group will read the interview notes while the others capture representative quotes on sticky notes or a virtual collaboration board. Avoid inferences or solutions on the sticky notes. Try to identify one to six headlines for each interview. Once complete, organize the post-it's into themes. Label each grouping of themes with a descriptive sentence. Discuss what you learned about the problem. Note, the group may not need to complete the process with every interview, as they may feel like all the original themes were already identified.
    b. <u>Point of View Analysis:</u> Point of view analysis can be used when the team's purpose is to generate change ideas from a few interviews. The team starts by reviewing the interviews and articulating a need statement. A need statement should include the person, the need the person has, and any insight gained about that need. For example, "a staff member feels that they struggle to create a safe classroom environment because they are too burned out to connect with their students in the way they want to. Next, the team turns the need statement into a question, such as, "What support can we provide to teachers to help them feel less fatigued and more able to connect with students?" The team then brainstorms answers to the questions. These become the basis for change ideas that can be tested using rapid PDSA cycles.
    c. <u>Empathy Mapping:</u> Empathy mapping can be used when the team's purpose is to better understand the problem from the perspective of those most

affected by the problem. On a whiteboard, the team draws four quadrants, and labels each of the following:

- Say: Standout quotes from the interview
- Do: Actions and behaviors of the interviewee
- Think: Inferences about what the interviewee might have been thinking and the beliefs that underlying these thoughts.
- Feel: Inferences about what the interview may have been feeling

Next to the quadrant, also draw a box labeled "needs" and identify activities or wants the interviewee needs help with. These often become apparent in the contradictions between the quadrants (what an interviewee says vs what they do, for example). Finally, draw a box and label it "insights." Record any realizations that came from the discussion that could help move your team closer to its goals. Insights often come to light when contradictions are noted and the team asks, "why?"

Key Learning from Data Analysis

References

Bennet, Brandon, Grunow, Alicia, Park, Sandra. 2022. Improvement Science at Your Fingertips. San Francisco, CA: Improvement Collective and ISC LLC.

Hinnant-Crawford, B. N. 2020. Improvement Science in Education. Myers Education Press.