

# Institutional Change Through Principles-Focused Focus Groups

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## Research Overview:

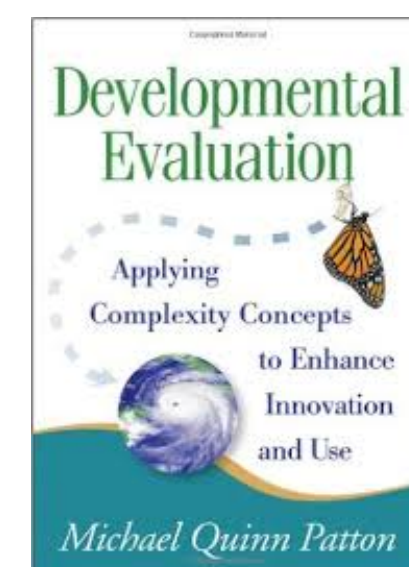
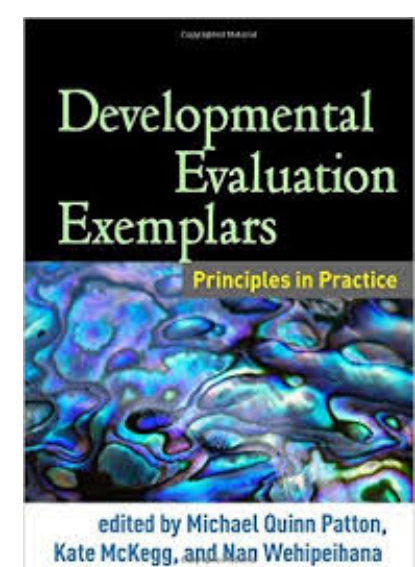
*Success* is a term that is often used in educational contexts, but it can be elusive and difficult to define. Furthermore, articulating what student success is, and who has agency over it, can influence the efficacy of the social actors charged with impacting it. Therefore, this qualitative study, intended to generate a grounded theory about conceptions of student success and done in collaboration with the teachers at an urban alternative school, initially pursued two research questions:

- 1) How is success conceptualized at an urban alternative secondary school?
- 2) How is student success depicted to those outside of that school?

During data collection, the teachers and I decided to articulate our central principles regarding our work with students – not rules but, rather, guidelines for our work with students. These principles, we believed, would help us more purposefully determine how success was conceptualized within the school.

## Principles-Focused as a Concept:

Michael Quinn Patton (2015, 2011) asserts that when organizations articulate their guiding principles, those principles can, in turn, be utilized for a sort of home-grown monitoring and evaluation of that organization.



The teachers and I, exploring the conceptions of student success within this school, decided to record these conversations and code the transcribed conversation as part of the data analysis. Not only did creating principles within our focus group sessions aid us in data collection, it also helped us to create a list of our values which we used to guide the organization even after the research had ended. The principles, for example, have been posted at the entrance of the school and are used during PLC conversations, guiding the group as they make organizational decisions (including budgetary decisions).

## Participants and Setting:

The participants/collaborators included 5 teachers and 2 administrators. I was a full participant observer/collaborator in this study. This collaborative approach was a purposeful and inclusive strategy, advantageous for this work. It allowed all of us to be both learners and experts within the context of our school. We interviewed each other, collected and analyzed documents together, and came together for both informal conversations and more formal focus group sessions during which we articulated our principles for guiding students toward success.

## Principles-Focused Focus Groups in Action:

As a group, the teachers and I met twice to generate the principles that guided our work with students. Both meetings were recorded, transcribed and eventually coded for comparison with categories emergent in other sources of data.

### Focus Group Session 1 -

1. The group gathered to discuss the categories appearing in the data through open coding.
2. We discussed the difference between principles and rules (Patton, 2015) and began articulating principles stemming from the initially emerging categories.

### Focus Group Session 2 -

1. We examined transcriptions of “powerful episodes” of conversation from the first focus group session.
2. After examining transcriptions from the previous session, we engaged in a second critical conversation about our principles using a guiding question for discussion.

#### Guiding question for discussion:

*“Using the transcriptions from the first focus group session and the categories identified in the data to guide us in our conversation, what can we say are our organization’s principles?”*

3. Using a sentence starter (“To help students become successful we...”), we began articulating our guiding principles.

## Principles at Ray of Light Alternative School:

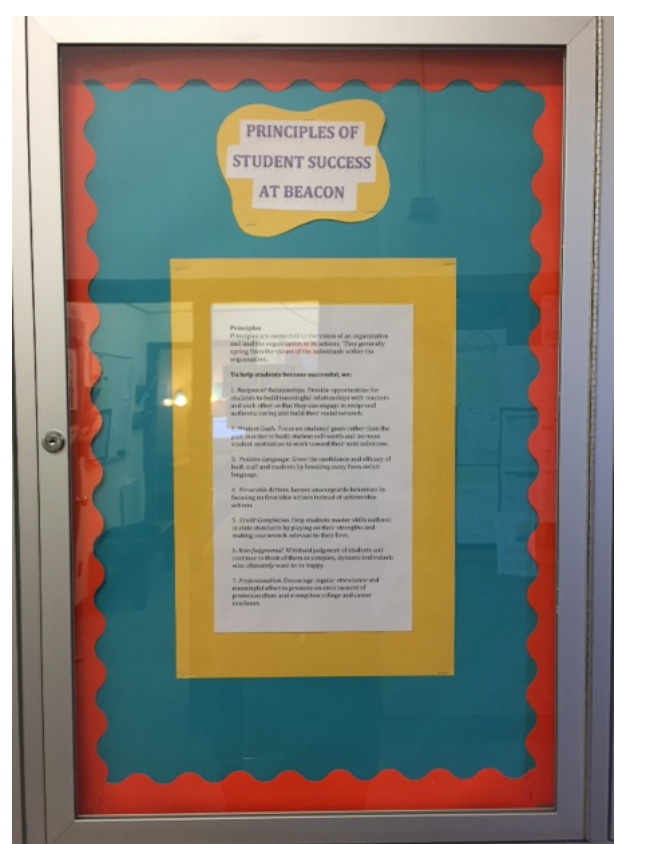
- ❖ **Reciprocal Relationships.** Provide opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with teachers and each other so that they can engage in reciprocal authentic caring and build their social network.
- ❖ **Student Goals.** Focus on students’ goals rather than the past in order to build student self-worth and increase student motivation to work toward the next milestone.
- ❖ **Positive Language.** Grow the confidence and efficacy of both staff and students by breaking away from deficit language.
- ❖ **Credit Completion.** Help students master skills outlined in state standards by playing on their strengths and making coursework relevant to their lives.
- ❖ **Non-Judgmental.** Withhold judgment of students and continue to think of them as complex, dynamic individuals who ultimately want to be happy.
- ❖ **Professionalism.** Encourage regular attendance and meaningful effort to promote an environment of professionalism and strengthen career and college readiness.

## Conclusions and Outcomes:

A focus group’s discussions of their organization’s principles can serve as a useful way to **collect qualitative data** for the purpose of qualitative research.

By articulating principles within focus groups, research collaborators are afforded an opportunity to **voice their values and take ownership** over the work and research of the group.

The principles articulated can guide the work of the participants and organization even after data collection has ended, potentially **leading to organizational change**.



\*Ray of Light’s principles are now posted at the school’s entrance.