

PDSA in Education: Creating the Home Library Project Using QI Practices

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Literacy Lab at Rees E. Price Academy

The realities of life in Price Hill necessitate a degree of grit unfathomable to many around our community in Greater Cincinnati. While a beautiful day on the east side of town connotes visits to the park and walks to an ice cream parlor, in Price Hill it often means violence, and possibly, a deadly shooting.

A recent review of crime statistics shows that District 3, the region in which Price Hill is located, reported 19 homicides, 53 rapes, 286 robberies and 152 aggravated assaults between January 1 and September 3 of 2016.²³⁰ Addiction is also rampant in our neighborhood. Over the course of two days in August, 78 overdoses were reported in Hamilton County, fourteen of which were concentrated in District 3, seven of which were directly attributed to West Price Hill.²³¹

²³⁰ This is in stark contrast with District 2 on the east side of town, which reported 3 homicides, 21 rapes, 70 robberies and 44 aggravated assaults in the same amount of time. Cincinnati Police Department STARS Meeting Profile, Reporting Period: 08/07/2016-09/03/2016. Pulled 09/06/2016

²³¹ Patrick Brennan and Kevin Grasha, "Region Continues to Grapple with Spike in Overdoses," *Cincinnati.com*, August 25, 2016, accessed September 03, 2016, <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2016/08/25/police-woman-found-possible-overdose-victim/89338930/> and Tom McKee and Greg Noble, "Police Hunt Heroin Dealers behind Cincinnati Overdose Spike," WCPO, August 25, 2016, accessed September 03, 2016, <http://www.wcpo.com/news/local-news/hamilton-county/cincinnati/police-hunt-heroin-dealers-behind-cincinnati-overdose-spike>.

Additionally, Rees E. Price Academy, a neighborhood school in Price Hill and the location in which I have the pleasure of working, had the highest rate of homelessness in all of Cincinnati Public School in school year 2015-2016.²³² All our students qualify for free breakfast and lunch, based off of CPS's Community Eligibility model.

I am the director of a program that works to close the achievement gap in my school. My program is known as the Literacy Lab, and I believe we represent a beacon of hope within our community.²³³ We use Dibels, MAP data and teacher recommendations to recruit fifty students from kindergarten to fourth grade, clustering students in scaffolded groups that offer the most stimulating and supportive environments. The Literacy Lab focuses on reading and math enrichments and interventions for ten hours per week after school, with time for snack, fitness, and social-emotional support. Our mission is to help counterbalance some of poverty's effects by creating a warm place for engaging education, with a low adult-to-student ratio and plenty of hands-on lessons.

As a grant-funded program, I diligently address all requirements of our proposal. Yet there is one phrase in our grant that particularly jumped out at me—that the Literacy Lab is charged to "help youth develop an intrinsic love of reading." This line reflects my core belief that the greatest gift you can ever give students is not only the skills, but also the enjoyment of, reading.

²³² As reported by Project Connect, the Cincinnati Public Schools program to support homeless families in the district.

²³³ Our program was made possible by the Community Learning Center model in Cincinnati Public Schools, in which individual schools partner with outside organizations to increase access for improved "recreational, educational, social, health, civic and cultural opportunities for students, families, and the community." Though I work in the school, I am employed by the YMCA of Greater Cincinnati, Rees E. Price Academy's CLC partner. "CPS' Community Learning Centers," accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.cps-k12.org/community/clc>.

Though I value the potential of Common Core to increase the analytical reading skills of our children, I continue to search for mandates that emphasize the components of exploration, discovery, and delight—experiences that made my own schooling a positive experience and that continue to motivate me as an adult. I accepted this one phrase as a ray of hope, a sign that our current system holds some of the intangibles of education in enough esteem to fund them.

In addition to our daily practices, which include reading beautiful books, increasing phonemic awareness and fluency, and reinforcing components of the STEM studies, we also support reading in the home. Originally, I thought that meant one objective: get more books in our kids' houses.

Whenever we had a parent engagement event, we handed out books. We gave away books as prizes for behavior. We distributed books as part of our holiday celebration. The stark statistics in Neuman and Celano's study, that a middle class home was likely to have 13 books per child, while in impoverished communities there may only be one book for every 20 children, spurred my drive to distribute as many texts as possible.²³⁴

It took a few attempts at this strategy for me to conclude that simply *sending* books with students was not going to lead to a love of reading. Both parents and children thrilled at our book giveaways, eagerly choosing books that fit their interest. However, when I would check in with the recipients, asking whether or not they enjoyed the narrative, I would often hear that they could no longer recall where the book was. The answers to the follow-up question, "Well, where do you keep your books,"

captured the crux of the issue. "In the toy chest," "On the floor," or "I don't know."

This immediately drew me back to my experience in third grade, when sundry papers, assignments, and folders would disappear into my cavernous backpack, never to be seen again. It took the dedicated instruction of my home-room teacher to demonstrate not only the importance of organization, but exactly how to do it. She labeled tabs in a binder, taught me how to use a planner, and checked in with me frequently until the practices became ingrained. I decided that to increase reading at home, educators may need to intentionally teach skills around organizational habits in addition to increasing book ownership.

While this discovery unfolded, our principal invited me to join a workgroup focused on increasing the rate of third graders reading on grade level, the line in the sand selected by the state of Ohio to determine whether a student is promotable. Through this workgroup, we met with experts in Quality Improvement (QI) from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and StrivePartnership, who explained the revolutionary concept of the PDSA.

PDSA stands for Plan, Do, Study, Act, and represents a QI model with similar qualities to pragmatist hope. It acknowledges that many industries, including education, identify issues in need of change and then attempt to boldly, rapidly, and unilaterally change them through new initiatives. However, these proposals often lack consideration of the human element in the actual process, and while solid in theory, in practice leave something to be desired. PDSAs disrupt this model by offering a different way, one of small changes frequently analyzed, which allow agile adjustments, timely feedback, and an end product that reflects and adapts to the realities inherent in rolling out a new program. The PDSA model provided a framework with which to tackle our guiding question: how do we get students to read more, and enjoy doing so?

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Our first task was to help our student designate a dedicated space in their homes for books to nurture their organizational skills. Our theory was that once the habit of book storing was established a student would be more likely to choose to read for pleasure, as they had both access and personal ownership of the books. The question of a proper receptacle with which to organize the books answered itself easily when I looked around my office and saw that many of my own books were stored in milk crates. They were sturdy, lightweight, and most importantly, portable.

Having the highest rate of homelessness in Cincinnati Public Schools means that a number of our students move multiple times per year, and many of their possessions are left behind. Providing a convenient, ready-to-move container was critical. I guessed that decorating the crates with ribbons, stickers, and oil-based pens might get students invested in these containers. If they felt pride about the exterior, there was an increased probability that they would care about the contents in the interior.

Two steps remained, creating parent buy-in and designing accountability measures. A solution that addressed both components was inspired by the concept of #shelfie day, a hashtag and movement originating in 2014 from the New York Public Library, in which selfies captured in libraries were encouraged to promote a love for and exploration of libraries.²³⁵ I knew that most of our parents had smartphones and enjoyed sharing pictures of their children. Weekly photos of a student with their home library would offer timely data points and could serve as a conversation starter for me and the students about the care and maintenance of a

space that was their own. For each picture I received, students earned a brand new book of their choice.²³⁶ By rewarding students for their efforts, we also hoped to engage any students who may have lost previous books as a form of resistance, as they may have been interpreted as a “hand out.”

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Our first family was selected using guidelines from the PDSA model—the idea was to approach participants who may be more likely to persevere through the snags associated with start-ups. Two sisters, who had been abandoned by their mother a few years prior and were currently housing-unstable, expressed an insatiable eagerness to read and desire to be the masters of their own small domains. They eagerly embraced the milk crate as a legitimate medium, decorated them with ribbons and

²³⁵ In one day over 3,000 photos were tagged, from fourteen different countries. Morgan Holzer, "20 Ways to Make People Fall in Love With Your Instagram: A Guide for Libraries and Other Cultural Institutions," The New York Public Library, December 23, 2014, accessed October 1, 2016, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/12/23/20-ways-make-people-fall-love-your-instagram-guide-libraries-and-other-cultural>.

²³⁶ The project was made possible by incredibly generous donations from across our community and the country. Jane O'Brien, a retired nun and teacher who volunteered with our program acted as our champion. She requested that I create an Amazon Wish List of everything I could dream of, from Caldecott and Coretta Scott King award-winners to oil based markers and ribbons, and ultimately posted it on her Facebook page and put out an appeal to her former students to donate. The response we received was overwhelming, and even included a check that funded our first purchase of milk crates. Their generosity underpinned my desire to offer bright, beautiful, new books as part of this process. This stemmed from a belief that simply because someone lacked something (in this case, funding for a home library) it did not mean they desired the beauty or value of new books any less than someone who could afford them. Privacy between the parties was protected by remind.com, a communication platform that allows text messages to be sent without either party knowing the other's phone number.

stickers, and selected their first book.²³⁷ Their father sent the first photo the day after the milk crates went home. From this first PDSA I realized I wanted the pictures right away, and that I should focus on engaged parents as much as interested students.

The teachers and administration appreciated the culture we were building around reading, and they were caught up in the spirit of the families' accomplishments when they viewed images of their students grinning in front of their own libraries. Not only did this project develop hope, it created joy.

Our next family was chosen due to the mother's interest in discussing her children's academic progress and delight in taking and sharing photos.²³⁸ They took four days to send their initial pictures, but once the brother and sister realized that each photo earned them a new book, they enthusiastically pursued me each time they knew a photo had been captured. Their mother sent creative pictures, which sparked a whole new trajectory for the project. The kids might be reading to younger siblings, or recreating scenes from the book with their toys, or drawing their favorite picture from within. This type of engagement was beyond my aspirations and reinforced the potential of the project to change how our students interacted with, and understood, reading. I took

this mother's direction and created a "shot list" to encourage other families to interact with the books in numerous ways.²³⁹

Our third family had excellent attendance and a mother who I knew she had the necessary technology. They ended up with the quickest turnaround time between the family receiving milk crates and sending a photo: a thrilling two hours! Later, a clear correlation between the day of milk crate receipt, sending the first picture, and overall project participation developed, as we can read from the chart: the sooner the picture was sent, the more likely it was that the family would send a picture on a weekly basis (see Figure 1).²⁴⁰

Over the following weeks, this mother and I developed our relationship when discussing the state of the home libraries and her children's reading level. We identified that one child was significantly more reserved about reading out loud than his younger brother. It also became apparent that their mom thought the apex of positive reading habits was having her kids read to her, and not the other way around. It felt gratifying to suggest to her own value—value that could be realized through her reading aloud to her children, and see how that impacted her children's love of books.

Based on her feedback, I started encouraging other adults to read to their children, in addition to being an engaged audience when their children read to them. When the school year started again in August, one parent asked for new crates because his sons had filled their original two—which I was thrilled to supply. The older brother is now officially on track to be reading at a promotable level by the end of the year, and is devouring books like *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

²³⁷ I had been concerned about the possibility that the milk crates would be seen as substandard in some way.

²³⁸ She had borrowed learning games from our program to help her daughter learn CVC words and attended all our family events, making sure to show me all the photos she captured of her kids.

²³⁹ Potential pictures ideas included "Child with home library and reading to their pet," "Child with home library dressed up like a character in a book," and "Child with home library and acting out a part in the book."

²⁴⁰ Many thanks to Gowri Madhavan, Senior Analyst at Cincinnati Children's, for transforming our numbers into a clear narrative.

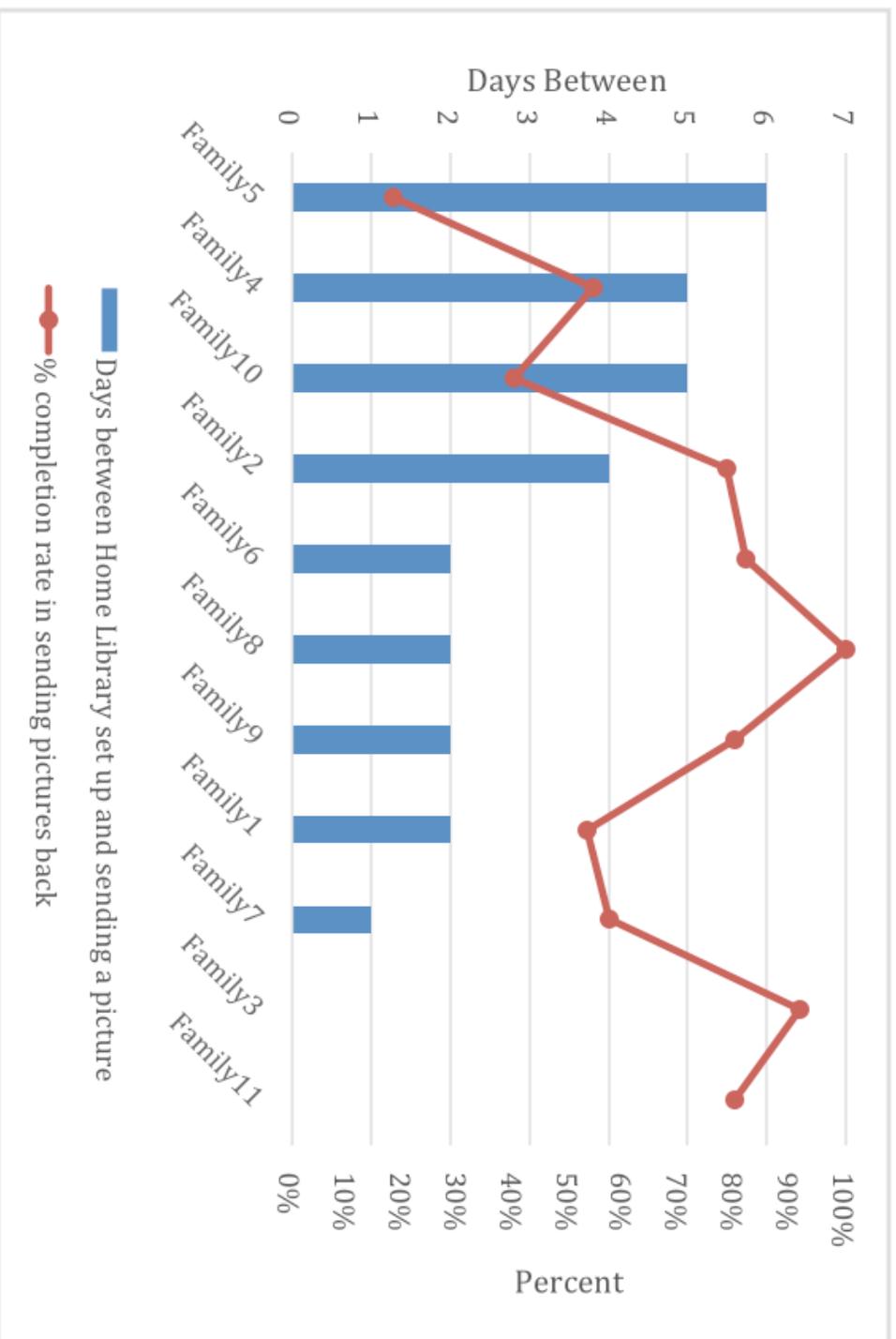


Figure 1. Home Library Set Up and Rate of Weekly Picture Responses.

Eventually we added eleven families, with varying degrees of response rates. I found sending a reminder text to one family always resulted in a new picture, and adapted my process to send out weekly prompts to all participants. Over the course of fourteen weeks, about 50% of the families sent a picture each week. Of course, this rate is more indicative of how busy our lives can become than interest in our project. Some weeks parents may have been exhausted from a taxing work schedule. Another family might be fixing up their house and therefore did not want to capture their domicile in less than optimal conditions. Occasionally, a child's primary caretaker was out of town. One family missed two weeks because the mom had just given birth.

This project impacted our community in big and small ways. Our students learned that their organizational efforts generated rewards. 83 percent of our parents strongly agreed that since starting the Home Library Project their children were more excited about reading, and 100 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that their children spent more time reading.²⁴¹ One parent commented, "Now they can actually find their books and ask to read." Another noted, "She reads out loud more to herself and others."

The teachers and administration appreciated the culture we were building around reading, and they were caught up in the spirit of the families' accomplishments when they viewed images of their students grinning in front of their own libraries. Not only did this project develop hope, it created joy. The children proudly showed their weekly Home Library photos off to fellow classmates and teachers, and excitedly chose their next book. They created thoughtful habits around book selection, organization, and discussion.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Of the eleven families involved, six chose to complete our survey.

²⁴² Per the request of our parents, we will continue the Home Library Project in November of 2016. This time, the project will include a

I find the PDSA process to share comparable origins to pragmatist hope as it focuses on concrete, rather than wishful, ways in which change can be wrought. The process is agile enough to meet the needs of those involved, rather than blaming them if and when a procedure does not succeed. It can capture the best ideas of those participating, therefore honoring the experiences, ideas, and insight of all involved.

The people we serve are not asked to fit to our expectations. Rather, we, the organizers of this project, are tasked to legitimately create workflows and projects that meet people where they are, not just where we expect them or would like them to be. The onus is on those in positions of power and privilege to adapt and persevere, incorporating timely feedback from the people they intend to serve—feedback which should ideally impact not only means, but ends.²⁴³

Though hopeful, the PDSA, by necessity, must embrace the realities in which it is situated. So, of course, should any worthy educational project that takes seriously Dewey's notion of an "end-in-view." The model identifies an issue or injustice and systematically applies hypothesis, trial, error, feedback, and reflection until a solution is found (or it is determined that this particular approach should be abandoned).²⁴⁴

As an educator, I found that the permission to fail was incredibly freeing. This permission felt like a rare gift in our current climate of

tracking element. To earn a new book, families will need to send two pictures: the first charts their reading each week, with a minimum of sixty minutes to earn the book, the second shows the home library.

²⁴³ This is in contrast to grit as defined by Angela Duckworth, in which the "singularly important goal" to increase reading levels could be set and gritty families would be assumed to be capable of figuring out how to execute the necessary steps with enough "stick-with-it-ness" and passion. "About the Book," Angela Duckworth, accessed October 01, 2016, <http://angeladuckworth.com/grit-book/>.

²⁴⁴ The "Act" part of the PDSA can either mean a decision to adapt the plan based on reflection, adopt the plan, or abandon it, in order to start a new PDSA fueled by a different idea.

high-stakes education. It enabled me to generate a more creative approach to tackle a problem. I am hopeful that others, particularly those in power throughout the education field, explore this model's potential to positively change their viewpoint and community, and that myriad students and families are empowered by innovative and evidence-based solutions generated by educators across the country.

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