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What Data-Driven Instruction Should Really Look Like

By Kathie Marshall

As I entered a Washington conference room a few weeks ago, where I would join a dozen experts from across the nation in a discussion of data-driven school improvement, I felt a bit as though I carried every single teacher in the country on my back. The sense of responsibility I felt to my colleagues was daunting.

The symposium event was sponsored by the Alliance for Excellent Education. The experts, drawn from across the nation, included administrators from both urban and rural school districts, several research consultants, and an advocate for teacher education programs—all leaders in professional development for educators. Rounding out the group was a first-year Teach for America teacher and me, a former literacy coach who returned to a middle school classroom this year—my 34th year in the profession.

My role, in essence, was to represent teachers in high-needs secondary schools (I teach in Los Angeles Unified) and to share my experiences and perspective on the use of data analysis to support student achievement. I spent many days preparing: researching, reflecting on my own experiences as a teacher and coach, and gathering input from my virtual colleagues in the Teacher Leaders Network.

From Compliance to Achievement

One early topic in our conversation was the need for a cultural shift—at the federal, state, and school levels—from using data for compliance to using data for improving student performance in each classroom. I appreciated this important distinction. I know from my own experience that much of the data provided to teachers seems to have little relevance to our daily work. As a result, it is often feared rather than valued.

I came into my role as a literacy leader in the early days of NCLB and worked with English teachers for a number of years analyzing the data from our district's periodic assessments. Yet, despite my increasing expertise as a data coach, teachers' interest levels remained low and their resentment high. It was only upon returning to the classroom and using the assessment data myself that I truly began to

understand. These assessments were designed on a practical and not necessarily pedagogical basis. As a result, they were not effective tools to improve day-to-day instruction or shape a teacher's professional development.

Even with my many years of classroom experience, I struggle with the apparent need to sacrifice a comprehensible sequence of instruction in order to “teach to the test.” It was satisfying to be able to bring my professional experience to the table and discuss with other symposium members the importance of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments created and analyzed at the classroom level.

We also discussed the huge sums of money states have invested to retrieve and manipulate high-stakes assessment data. Unfortunately, there is no reliable evidence to date that these assessments have significantly improved student achievement. On the contrary, in a recent editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*, Stephen Krashen, professor emeritus at the University of Southern California, criticized California's high school exit exam, stating that “researchers have yet to discover any clear evidence that High School Exit Exams benefit anyone except the companies that make and sell them.” It's clear to me that the disconnect between those who create or mandate high-stakes assessments and those who are expected to use them needs attention at every level.

I talked about the importance of taking a hard look at some of the negative consequences of the NCLB legislation in its use of a single, multiple-choice assessment as a tool for accountability. We now know that across the nation, many elementary schools have all but eliminated time for science, history, art, music, and physical education in favor of endless “benchmark” assessments in language arts and math. One result is that our students often arrive at middle school unfamiliar with basic science and history concepts. Further, in my district (and I suspect in many others), physical education in elementary schools has all but disappeared. Today's generation of children grows ever more overweight. My own students are developing early signs of diabetes and heart disease by the age of ten. Kids need to move!

Teacher-Led Inquiry and Action Research

Throughout the day, I was excited to hear my symposium colleagues repeat their support for groups of teachers working together on data inquiry and action research. This is the arena in which I felt most effective as a literacy coach. Only when a team of our teachers looked at data to develop an action-research question, try out strategies, and discuss the results, did I see real teacher buy-in and pedagogical growth. One year we created a unit for research-based instruction in writing revision. The next year we examined student discussions as an effective strategy for second-language learners. I also helped lead an after-school teacher group where we investigated effective questioning strategies. In all this work, the teachers valued the opportunity for collaborative learning. Instructional expertise grows exponentially when teachers are provided time to learn together. District-mandated formative assessments, state-mandated summative assessments, or other externally directed data-gathering initiatives just don't pack the wallop that collaboratively developed instruction and assessment do.

As I sat at a Washington roundtable with this group of influential educators, I found myself thinking back to 1970 and comparing how our knowledge base has changed over the decades. I recalled my university course in reading instruction. It consisted of a long list of theoretical books, 10 of which I was to select and read. As I read, I only grew more confused. Each theory picked apart the others, and the professor offered no insights or solutions. Back then there was very little credible educational research. Curricular and instructional decisions were made on the basis of common sense, cost, or the unproven theory in vogue at the moment. Now we are finally at a point where evidence-based decision-making can be a reality. But to achieve that reality, we must first help teachers access useful data. Then teachers need training in data literacy so we can become more adept at analyzing data to determine our next instructional steps.

What we don't need are more frequent benchmarks or "better" high-stakes tests. Nor do we need teacher-proof curricula or assessments. Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University has observed that, "When school leaders face pressure to improve achievement, they are

tempted to analyze data themselves and respond with instructional directives." Thus, in the Los Angeles Unified School District, we have content area instructional guides, pacing plans, concept lessons, periodic assessments, and even, in some cases, scripted curricula—all in the elusive search for improved student achievement. When you really think about it, these processes come at a very high price. Not only do they reinforce a mistaken idea about teachers' capabilities, they create serious roadblocks to building teacher capacity.

As we neared the close of the day, one member of our panel observed that teachers have the toughest job in education and shouldn't take so much of the blame. I commented that over the course of my four-decade career I have never before seen the kind of negative opinions about teachers that have emerged under the NCLB legislation. I also said that teaching is the most challenging, most creative work I have ever done, and I wished people better understood our profession and honored our commitment to it.

Even among many educators, teaching has yet to gain the respect it deserves. When I made the decision a year ago to return to the classroom, I heard dismaying responses from those "above" me, who stated that I was too talented and knew too much to return to being a teacher. Across the board, my return to the classroom was perceived as a step down. We still have a long way to go in positioning the teacher and student at the epicenter of the "business" of schooling.

In my developing role as a teacher leader, I do hope to have more voice in discussions about teaching and learning. This opportunity to spend a day talking with people who help shape national education policy was an important step in that direction for me. Stakeholders at every level need to understand the complexity of our role and support the valuable work of being "just a teacher." And it's really up to teachers, in the end, to make sure they understand.

After eight years as a literacy coach, Kathie Marshall returned to her Los Angeles classroom this year to teach middle grades language arts. She writes frequently about instructional practice and the teaching life. See, for example, her October 2008 article for *teachermagazine.org*, *Priming the Student Learning Pump*.