Data-in-a-Day: A New Tool for Principal Preparation

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A novel process has teams of prospective principals
visiting classrooms to take a quick "snapshot"
of teaching and learning.

IN BRIEF

This article describes how the Danforth
Leadership Program at the University
of Washington used Data-in-a-Day,
a collaborative, action-research
approach, at an urban elementary
school to create a reciprocal learning
experience focused on motivated
learning for diverse students.

Principal preparation programs focused on instructional leadership tend to offer a variety of curricular experiences directly related to teaching and learning. The Danforth Leadership Program at the University of Washington specifically challenges aspiring principals to use classroom observations to examine instructional leadership strategies and techniques grounded in principles of intrinsic motivation. One of the concrete ways the Danforth Leadership Program seeks to facilitate this search is through a collaborative, action-research approach known as Data-in-a-Day.

Data-in-a-Day Goes to School

Administrators of the Danforth Leadership Program, intrigued with the efficiency and focus of Data-in-a-Day, found an opportunity to implement the process at a school site that we'll refer to as Mountain Vista Elementary School. In addition to providing an authentic and meaningful context for applying feedback skills, the school also provided a context within which to extend the program's coursework on ethnographic observation.

At the time, Mountain Vista Elementary was in its second year of comprehensive school reform. Because the school is located in a large city with a population largely comprised of recent immigrants from Africa and the Pacific Rim, its focus on providing intrinsically motivating and culturally responsive instruction for diverse learners was one of the reasons attributed to recent double-digit gains on state tests.

Mountain Vista's teachers had begun to regularly apply data from student learning to the design of lessons based on intrinsic motivation, openly sharing and critiquing pedagogical practices while consistently focusing on the needs of English-language learners. They saw Data-in-a-Day as an opportunity to clarify instructional priorities, learn and practice instructional agreements, and transcend plateaus that can be expected in any process of instructional reform.

Preparing for the Visit

In preparation for the Data-in-a-Day visit, Mountain Vista sent representatives from the school community to the University of Washington's College of Education. The preparation was structured so that the program participants could continue to apply the rubric that Mountain View had been using for its instructional renewal (Ginsberg, 2005). The rubric was based on four "motivational conditions," with each condition addressing a related question.

Establishing inclusion. How does this learning experience develop a community of learners who feel respected and connected to one another?

> **"One consequence of Data-in-a-Day was a commitment to more consistent collaboration in terms of lesson design, implementation, and reflection."**

Developing a positive attitude. How does this learning experience offer meaningful choices and focus on personal and cultural relevance?

Engendering meaning. How does this learning experience engage all students in challenging learning that has social merit?

Engendering competence. How does this learning experience support individual students in knowing that they are becoming more effective in learning that they value and can use in authentic ways?

The preparation also included a brainstorming activity through which teams of classroom visitors formed agreements to:

- Demonstrate respect for teachers;
- Conduct classroom visits with minimal disruption;
- Focus classroom visits on Mountain Vista's instructional priorities;
- Maximize challenges in the daily schedule; and
- Provide feedback.

The Danforth Leadership Program administrators divided the Data-in-a-Day participants into seven four-member teams, with a member of each team focusing on one of the school's four motivational conditions. After watching a 20-minute teaching simulation, those assigned to each of the motivational conditions met in four groups to share notes and compare insights.

In and Out in Three Hours

The visit to Mountain Vista lasted three hours. After a brief welcome and schedule review by the principal, the teams left for various locations to look

First developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as a way to involve students in school improvement, Data-in-a-Day provides a structure for teams of classroom visitors to observe teaching and learning throughout a school in a single day. Although these observations are "snapshots" as compared to scientifically verifiable data, the process contributes to instructional conversations that identify promising practices and spark important questions.

for what the school called its "wows" and "wonders." "Wows" were examples of ways in which teachers were successfully addressing the framework's motivational conditions. "Wonders" were questions and ideas for additional consideration.

Following 90 minutes of classroom visits, the Data-in-a-Day teams huddled in the cafeteria, organizing themselves first in groups according to their specific motivational condition. An hour later, with the school day concluded, Mountain Vista teachers joined the teams for a feedback session. A facilitator charted responses as each group provided insights based on its observations. In less than an hour, all four conditions of the motivational framework had been examined and the school had a range of thoughts and questions on which to reflect.

What Was Learned

Prospective school leaders in the Danforth Leadership Program were asked to reflect on their Data-in-a-Day experience. For some, the design of the process was instructive in itself. They viewed it as an effective way for emerging leaders to learn a pedagogical language that could be shared with teachers to guide lesson planning, instructional coaching, and self-reflection. Several participants also noted the value of hearing other prospective principals offer feedback in ways that promoted growth.

"I was impressed with the concrete opportunities for action that were identified through the process," said one participant. Another noted, "This observation brought my understanding of a conceptual framework for aligning learning theories to a deeper level. It provided a collaborative way to apply instructional knowledge to an authentic context." A third participant added: "I found this to be a great experience in terms of observing and processing information. It was extremely helpful to watch other prospective principals offer feedback."

Next Steps

To further learn from the talent existing within the school, the Mountain View principal hosted a follow-up meeting for school faculty. At that session, teachers acknowledged that Data-in-a-Day requires a high level of trust and genuine commitment to school improvement. There was widespread appreciation for the opportunity to have a nonevaluative, outside lens examine teaching and learning. One consequence of Data-in-a-Day was a commitment to more consistent collaboration in terms of lesson design, implementation, and reflection.

To foster collaboration, the principal asked the teachers to identify one or two schoolwide priorities to focus on from each of the four rubric elements, while the teachers:

- Agreed to a specific calendar for instructionally focused, grade-level teams to meet;
- Strengthened their commitment to lesson studies within grade levels and visits to schools that are experiencing success;
- Provided an opportunity for parents and community members to visit their classrooms; and
- Volunteered to create a motivational framework with clearly delineated priorities.

Follow-up

The preparation for Data-in-a-Day at Mountain Vista followed a progression of coursework that included understanding the relationship between intrinsic motivation and learning, ethnographic observation, and communication and feedback. A follow-up principal preparation program might include:

- Further consideration of instructional attributes that cannot be observed but that contribute to student learning;
- Research into and design of a cohesive, instructionally focused school improvement plan;

- Discussion of ways to use feedback in challenging situations;
- Goals and purposes for repeating the process at a later stage; and
- Ways to apply Data-in-a-Day at their own school sites.

Many schools across the nation spend considerable time examining standardized test data for clues about ways to better serve *all* of their students. A challenge for principals is to fully understand what day-to-day teaching and learning looks like throughout their schools and to communicate their observations in a way that is respectful and reasonably accurate. This is especially important because there is frequently disjuncture between anecdotal information and teaching practices.

Even on the good days, when a teacher seems to reach a broad range of students, there are still students who need a compelling reason and way to learn. In elementary school, they are often children who are learning English as fast as they can within a text-based curriculum. Data-in-a-Day can be a powerful tool for helping teachers develop insights into everyday teaching and learning. It can also help participants in leadership preparation programs practice instructional conversations that are empathetic, practical, and just. **P**

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References

Ginsberg, M. B. (2004). *Motivation matters: A workbook for school change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Ginsberg, M. B. (2005). Motivation, cultural diversity, and differentiation. *Theory into Practice, 44*(3), 218-225.

Replicating Data-in-a-Day

The following suggestions can aid in the planning process for Data-in-a-Day:

1. Establish a planning committee that includes teacher-leaders as well as building and district-level administrators. This committee should draft a statement of purpose (Ginsberg, 2004), communicate with the rest of the school, organize a team-preparation session, and prepare teams to identify instructional attributes. Committee members also serve as guides and leaders for classroom visitation teams, develop visitation schedules, and participate in all team activities. Having a coordinator to ensure that the planning team has maximum support for each task is especially helpful.

2. Have the committee draft a brief letter to the faculty explaining the process.

3. Begin the process with an opportunity for team members to develop a sense of community. This can take the form of a dinner or an informal, large-group gathering.

WEB RESOURCES

For more information about Data-in-a-Day, read "By the Numbers: Data-in-a-Day Technique Provides a Snapshot of Teaching that Motivates." *Journal of Staff Development,* Spring 2001. **www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/ginsberg222.cfm**