Putting a Human Face on Data

The principal of the local elementary school, after returning from a personally rejuvenating school-improvement conference, has called an early morning staff meeting to share the excitement and aftermath that often accompanies a worthy professional development opportunity. She was sure the staff would be eager to hear the latest cutting-edge research on effective instructional strategies, and was eager to share what she had learned.

At some point early in the meeting, however, she suddenly became aware that the staff was not showing much interest. She began to pick up nonverbal signs of passive resistance. The principal knew that selling a new idea would be difficult, but she had not expected resistance this early.

She quietly sought out one of her confidantes on the staff and asked for her opinion. “You lost them,” volunteered her friend, “when you used the two most dreaded words to teachers’ ears—‘research’ and ‘data’—and you used them in the first sentence! They are tired of hearing about research and data. They want to know when you are going to talk about the kids!”

“It’s About the Kids, Stupid!”

Most people have heard about the famous battle cry of President Bill Clinton’s 1996 re-election campaign: “It’s about the economy, stupid!” The constant drumbeat of this singular message helped Clinton secure a second term.

School administrators must remain similarly focused on their students, even as current research and emerging data reveal ever-increasing complexities in their practice. They must adopt the message, “It’s about the kids!” All discussions should focus first and foremost on the students, with research and data used simply to inform decisions that affect the children. In every situation involving either research or data, school administrators must help bring the kids into the picture.

So how do we put a human face on data?

Personalizing the Data

The importance of personalizing data came forcefully to me one night during a school board meeting. I was in the middle of a report on the school district’s test scores on the latest state assessment. My “aha” moment came as I tried to draw the school board members’ attention to the colorful charts and graphs, with various lines indicating a slight upward trend.

“This indicates our improvement in mathematics at the sixth-grade level with our most able students,” I said, while noting from their expressions that the message of the charts and graphs was not resonating with them.

I tried again. “If you look at the sixth-grade line, you will notice the upward trend. In human terms, what this means is that there were 121 more students in the highest levels of math measured on the state test.”

I noticed a few board members lift their eyes. Sensing a change in their demeanor, I continued, “This means almost six more classrooms full of students scored in the highest levels of math this year.”

“I glanced again at the board members and was surprised to see two of them pick up pencils and make notes. Reflecting on this experience after the meeting, I vowed never again to show charts and graphs without putting a human face on the data.

This requires caring principals to carefully choose their words when addressing the faculty. Talk about how numbers involve your students. For example, it is common to hear a principal say, “Our test scores went up this year!” To put a human face on the data, you might choose to say, “Our students improved on their state tests this year.” Or you might say, “This year’s group of students scored higher than the students from previous years.” This seems so simple, yet the unintended message your teachers hear in the first example is “Test scores first, students second.”

Why Teachers Mistrust Data

Perhaps the most powerful reason teachers have to be skeptical about data is that most schools focus their data collection and reporting almost exclusively on standardized test data. Teachers tend to see their students as individuals, but individual student data, collected in large enough samples, also represents a group. Teachers can point to specific individuals in their classrooms who have test scores unrepresentative of what they know or can do. What teachers often fail to see is that in almost every test there are likely to be students whose scores are unrepresentative. But when looking at large samples over time, these scores tend to wash themselves out. However, this remains a tough sell to teachers.

Making Data Meaningful for Teachers

To make data more meaningful for teachers, we must first make it more useful. So what types of data would teachers find valuable? How can we help them see the need for a data mosaic and not just individual data?

I have asked thousands of teachers the following question during presentations on using data: “What are the barriers to student achievement that come to mind that, if you could overcome
them, would make a big difference in student achievement in your room? The answers may surprise you. The barriers to achievement most frequently mentioned are:

- Students with incomplete work;
- Students who don’t bring materials to class;
- Interruptions to instruction;
- Student and parent apathy; and
- Student behavior.

Perhaps if teachers could apply data collection and data analysis strategies to the problems that plague their daily classrooms, it would help them see data in a more classroom-friendly light.

I remember one teacher who demonstrated data collection and graphing techniques by having students collect daily and weekly data on students who bring materials to class. The goal was to improve the percentage of students who came to class prepared every day.

Data-rich but Knowledge-poor

Virtually any principal can show you a room full of data printouts from a variety of assessment sources, yet most schools are data-rich but information-poor. Data is useless unless it is shared in human terms and organized so that patterns among students emerge. It is then that the data becomes informational to the user. When information is applied to our experiences we become knowledgeable, and knowledge when acted upon in ethical ways becomes wisdom.

Wise principals put students first by using data to help inform teaching and learning processes. They can use the R-word and the D-word because they are always cognizant of putting a human face on the data. As a result, they are able to break down the barriers that stand in the way of their faculties and consequently their students.

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