

## **Data: The Journey of Making Meaning Through Numbers**

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If someone had walked into my classroom three years ago and said, “Mary, I would like to meet with you and discuss the data from your last district assessment,” I would have complied and then politely gone back to my *art* of teaching.

Fast forward 27 months, put me in the PAHSCI, and give me a number any day of the week and I will now listen, and listen intently. As a coach, I have learned that relevant, usable data returned in a timely manner can be a teacher’s greatest dream. In our district, Language Arts assessments are given every six weeks and they are aligned to our curriculum. Math assessments are given every quarter. The anchors addressed in each assessment are scaffolded throughout the year. By utilizing the data from each assessment, teachers get a snapshot of student progress, i.e., skills and concepts, all year long. For each teacher and grade level, instruction can be enhanced by using the feedback from data.

Data can:

- Reveal a teacher who is putting forth great effort and show improvement in teaching methods;
- Show a teacher who does not take assessment seriously;
- Indicate teacher content knowledge;
- Demonstrate a teacher’s strengths;
- Show a teacher who, through challenges in classroom management techniques, cannot get the students to take the test seriously or complete it;
- Highlight a special education teacher who is working assiduously with her students and experiencing amazing progress!

Data can be an indicator of many things; most importantly though, data opens doors. Whatever the data shows, a coach who has access to providing district “data returns” to fellow colleagues has a great advantage in keeping her business booming. In our district, once the assessment is given, it is scored using a scanner and software program (Prosper) and specific reports are generated. The coach then meets with the building principal first and discusses the outcomes of the assessment by grade level, including results for special education students.

During “data return”, each teacher attends a thirty minute conference with the coach and the highlights, as well as areas of concern, are discussed. It is definitely a collaborative approach to “being in this together.” A coach’s role in this setting is to reinforce efforts made and offer support. It is a way to connect with teachers in a very intimate way—through the results of their teaching. Data returns are an opportunity to ask teachers to be reflective about their practices. After discussing what the numbers show, the question, “What stands out for you?” can garner a whole host of answers.

Responses often bring about conversations that start with “I thought I really taught figurative language well and I’m pleased that 67 - 74% of my students earned proficient on questions having to do with figurative language.” I have also had the opportunity to discuss the same response with the opposite outcome. “I thought I really taught figurative language well and I’m surprised that only 26-32% of my students could

answer questions having to do with figurative language.” This second response calls for more reflective questioning. Often, this is when the coaching opportunity occurs.

As I see the data, I challenge myself more and more about my early thoughts on the *art* of teaching. Coaching puts one in the warp zone as far as experiencing the outcomes of various methods of teaching. This insight has solidified my belief that we cannot, as teachers, *be* the explicators of text and content. Yes, we know how to do it. Yes, we can explain concepts, what each character meant, etc... very well. But until teachers realize *through data* that explicating and downloading content cannot replace true student engagement, rigor, and expectation, the outcomes will not change.

If we are to create in teachers the need to understand, utilize and make meaning from data, then we must as Rick Stiggins and Jan Chappuis argue in their article, “What a Difference a Word Makes: Assessment FOR Learning Rather than Assessment OF Learning” create teams of teachers learning the journey together. Individual meaning-making of numbers will not go nearly as far as a team who is learning and setting goals together.

Through the creation of grade level teams, data can be reviewed and target goals set. I believe that this approach helps individual teachers to realize the collective power of the feedback from the data they receive. Education is not moving toward collaboration, it’s there. The road ahead will be messy and the benefit to our students’ learning will be evident by student engagement and hard data—the numbers.

And so the journey continues, and I am now a believer in the science of numbers.

### **Reference**

Stiggins, Rick and Jan Chappuis. *What a Difference a Word Makes: Assessment FOR Learning Rather than Assessment OF Learning*. JSD, Winter 2006 v