The typewriter graphic is taken from an educational journal circa 1898 retrieved from Google's Public Domain Books. The Smartphones are now touted as the new standard for communication. We invite WERA members looking back in 2110 to comment on the "new" standard 100 years ago.
Editor’s Corner

With the bruising November elections behind us, I continue to stew over citizens being cast as taxpayers. Perhaps it is my history growing up in a small, New England college town 50 years ago where the high school auditorium filled with over 200 elected citizens for the annual Town Meeting. I represented our neighborhood. It was tough to paint the TM Members as "them" when there were so many. In my 40 years with public schools it has been similarly tough to see parents and community members as customers or clients. This business model of public education seems a poor fit for either the educators or the parents and citizens. Many parents have strong relationships to school leaders including teachers and they also make powerful contributions to their children's learning.

Brinnie Ramsey and Candace Gratama reflect on the role of public school leaders in their program evaluation of the Washington State Leadership Academy. They add a Problem of Practice tool to the more familiar Theory of Action and caution about using student achievement data after only two years of implementation. Ethics Editor Andrea Meld reviews a recent conference on Race and Pedagogy, calling for a "Color Vision" approach to our long struggle with race. The OSPI Data Analyst adds an annotated bibliography on race and education focusing on the past decade. Her Dr. D’Lema also alerts us to the new Privacy Technical Assistance Center as we wallow in student data.

Looking for an inexpensive (free) data analysis plug-in? David Denton gives us the low-down on EZ Analyze, of particular interest to educators in Skyward-served districts. Technical Editor Pat Cummings opens the window to podcasts with a brace of You-Tube links including tips on creating podcasts and folksy Excel tutorials.

Book Review Editor Phil Dommes brings us a trio of reviews including Michael Power's fair and balanced look at Waiting for Superman, the movie. Board member Mike Jacobsen takes on Winter Assessment Conference keynoter John Hattie's Visible Learning while Brenna Haines reviews Winning the Math Wars. So take a good book to The Engine House 9, a Tacoma restaurant reviewed by Foods Editor, Heather Bundeen.

Northwest education colleagues are invited to submit assessment, research, policy and program evaluation articles, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces for consideration in further issues. Copy deadline is March 4, 2011 for the late spring issue with a focus on Evidence-Based Practice in education. All submission should follow APA format and include the full name, affiliation and contact information for the writer. Time permitting, articles are forwarded to reviewers for comment before articles are accepted for publication. Letters may be edited for space.

--Peter Hendrickson, Ph.D.
Framing a District Wide Problem of Practice: Lessons From the Washington State Leadership Academy

By Brinton S. Ramsey and Candace A. Gratama, Ed.D.

With the passage in January 2002 of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), K-12 public school leaders in Washington State and around the country are facing increased scrutiny and demands for accountability and improved student performance, particularly in math and reading. These pressures combined with existing state reform requirements focused on district improvement have signaled a shifting focus for leaders. It is no longer true that principals alone are responsible for increased student achievement at the school level. The combination of state and national reform law has made district leaders equally accountable for school-level student achievement and has encouraged a focus on school improvement within a larger district improvement context.

In response to the imperative to improve student performance and align district and school systems and leadership to support student learning, the Washington State Leadership Academy (WSLA) was formed in April 2007. WSLA’s mission is to develop and support school leaders in creating educational systems where powerful instruction helps all students succeed. A non-profit organization sponsored by the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) and the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), WSLA is supported by funding from the Washington State Legislature and a start-up grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Washington State Leadership Academy offers a two-year program for central office and school leaders to come together to examine the specific issues they face in their own districts. One of the most powerful elements of the WSLA program is the requirement that all participating leadership teams develop a specific, evidence-based Problem of Practice and Theory of Action that provides both a focus for the team’s work within WSLA and a framework for disseminating the team’s work into their own districts and schools. This article outlines the process that teams went through to develop their Problem of Practice and Theory of Action and highlights evaluation findings from a three-year study of the WSLA program conducted by The BERC Group (Baker et. al., 2010).1

The Program

The WSLA program is based on a constructivist model that provides an opportunity for leadership teams to analyze evidence and address issues in teaching and learning from their own districts and schools. Each leadership team participates in quarterly regional workshops, which provide the programmatic content and background for on-site work. Content delivered during the workshops is based on six instructional strands reflecting current research in leadership, education, and learning - which serve as the framework for the WSLA program (see box). Between workshops, WSLA participants complete specific assignments as a team. An external WSLA coach provides on-site coaching. To encourage inter-district communication, WSLA also developed a website where instructors post workshop materials and participants may access a discussion board to share information and ideas. The overall program provides participants with a common, research-based language around leadership and instruction, and the requirement to attend as a district leadership team helps build a foundation for collaboration and team planning that many participants find valuable.

Focusing on a Problem of Practice

Although many elements of the WSLA program work together to help leadership teams begin to create a systematized, aligned focus on student learning, one element, the development of a Problem of Practice and Theory of Action, is particularly powerful. This curricular strand is a central focus of regional meetings, coaching discussions, and district team meetings and provides a framework for the team throughout the program and beyond.

To develop a Problem of Practice, participating leadership teams are asked to work together to create a problem statement based on a specific district issue. To do this, teams work together in their districts and schools to gather evidence to answer specific questions (see box). Once a team has developed a clear and common understanding of their problem statement, they develop a rationale and set of strategies (a Theory of Action) that they will use to work on the problem. A Theory of Action incorporates beliefs that the leadership team has developed regarding how they will address their Problem and what strategies will be most

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1 Data presented in this article comes from The BERC Group, Inc.’s evaluation of the experience of the first cohort of participants during the initial pilot and implementation phase of the program. Detailed findings and a description of the methodology used to evaluate the first cohort of participants are documented in the 2009-2010 Program Evaluation Report and can be viewed at www.waleadershipacademy.org.
effective given their particular set of circumstances, resources, population, staff, and location.

Developing a Problem of Practice and Theory of Action was difficult and time-consuming for many of the leadership teams, often challenging the ways they related to each other and conceptualized their own practice as administrators. To develop this element, teams worked together to look at district and school data and to face their own realities, attitudes, and contextual barriers. Critical feedback from WSLA instructors encouraged teams to be learners rather than experts and to grapple with tough questions about priorities and resources. In addition, because this was to be a district-wide Problem, the teams also had to broaden their thinking and adopt a systems approach, which was new to many of them. Several teams realized that their initial framing of the Problem of Practice was not broad enough to encompass a systems approach. These districts refined their Problem of Practice statements, generally moving from a narrow focus on a specific subject area (often math) to a broader focus on improving instruction throughout the district. Some teams also refined their Problem of Practice statements to better align with the instructional improvement work going on in the district and schools. As one administrator described it:

> Our original [Problem of Practice] focus had to shift so it was useable by everyone in the district, so that it was a true system approach that we were taking to solving a problem. But it took a lot of time to really recognize the depth of the problem that we were working on. One content area is much easier to wrap your brain around than all instruction.

At the same time, Theories of Action also evolved, shaped by the development of core values for the district, a shift to a system wide focus for improvement, and influenced by work presented at WSLA regional workshops emphasizing attention to student engagement, instruction, and content.

Many administrators reflected that this process was valuable in helping team members set priorities and to create a frame of reference from which to make decisions and plan interventions. Creating a viable, relevant, and dynamic Problem of Practice required a shift in thinking from “fix it now” to “what is the real problem?” and then to “what do we believe will solve this problem?” One administrator described her experience in this way:

> I didn’t get the Theory of Action for like half a year. I just wanted to go, ‘let’s do this, this, and this.’ And then it dawned on us that the Theory of Action had to do with the approach we were taking and a belief system. So it rested on the belief that we needed coherence across the system. So that gave us an answer to the holdouts. If we’re moving forward in math and we have holdouts saying, ‘I’m doing my own thing, you guys go ahead,’ we can come back with, ‘No our Theory of Action is coherence across the system. That means it’s not hide in your room anymore, you have to be part of what we’re doing. We’re marching forward together, system wide, we’re all connected.’

As teams developed their Problem, and then began implementing their solutions, the common struggle helped bring team members together into a collaborative learning group. The need for data of all kinds to understand their Problem of Practice generated new understandings for school and district leaders about the reality of their work and student achievement. In some cases, the process also gave new purpose to data collection and analysis in the district. Several district teams reported that their work on a Problem of Practice and Theory of Action led to a focus on the system as a whole, and generated system-wide initiatives such as K-12 curriculum alignment and the creation or adoption of a district wide instructional framework. In some districts, the process was adopted by individual schools so that each building developed their own Problem of Practice and Theory of Action that would address building level issues while staying aligned with the district-wide goal.

Although two years is not enough time to see a change in student achievement as measured by state standardized tests, survey findings and interview data reflect intentional and focused movement toward a shared responsibility for school improvement across the entire system in districts.

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<th>Identifying a Problem of Practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. What issue are we trying to solve in our district/school? (create a problem statement)</td>
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<td>2. How do we know this is a problem we need to solve? (list current perceptions and understandings about the issue from school, district, system levels)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. What are we doing about it now? (identify current efforts to address the issue at school, district, system levels)</td>
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<td>4. What more do we need to know to understand the problem as fully as possible? (list current data used to identify and assess the issue – do we need any other data sources?)</td>
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<td>5. What would be different if the problem were solved? (envision the outcome)</td>
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participating in the WSLA program. Survey findings from program participants and non-participants show an increasing awareness and focus on a particular district-wide Problem of Practice in several participating districts. The jump in non-participants’ understanding of the Problem of Practice was at times dramatic. For example, in 2009 57% of non-participants agreed that the Problem of Practice focused on improving student learning but that percentage rose to 85% in 2010. In 2009 only 48% of non-participants agreed that their administrative team had identified a Problem of Practice but in 2010, 90% agreed. This increased awareness of a common Problem bodes well for leaders’ efforts to align the system to address it.

The development of a system wide Problem of Practice and Theory of Action, although time consuming and frustrating at times for the teams, set up important foundations for collaboration, data analysis, and team planning that will support the teams’ work as they move forward. There is still a long way to go to align systems to support teaching and learning and student achievement but finding a common language and focus is a crucial first step. For these participating districts, WSLA’s model of developing a district-wide Problem of Practice and Theory of Action was an effective tool to begin that process.

Reference

--Brinton S. Ramsey is a Research Associate and Candace A. Gratama is Executive Vice President for The BERC Group, Inc. For more information about The BERC Group and its research, evaluation, and consulting work with schools and districts across the country, please visit www.bercgroup.com.

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1 For survey purposes, “participants” are those school and district leaders who attended WSLA meetings and were part of the WSLA leadership team. “Non-participants” are leaders within the same district who did not attend WSLA meetings or participate in the process.
It’s the end of a conference on Race and Pedagogy that was held at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma. I am completing my conference evaluation and talking to a history teacher in a Race and Pedagogy t-shirt. “Thank you,” we say to each other. Appreciation is expressed for coming to the conference and appreciation for organizing it. “We are all in this together,” I comment.

Then I am walking in the rain thinking about the days’ events. What struck me most amidst the “pedagogs” was the shorter presentations by students and recent graduates. Not so scholarly, but with clear voices and visions. For example, a young light-skinned woman describes her discovery of “historiography” of the Black Student Union at the University of Puget Sound. A young Vietnamese woman recounts her father’s horrific experiences in North Vietnam as a young man. His nightmares vanish only when he returns to his homeland and confronts his past. Another young woman has been writing a novel from the perspective of a young, dark, black woman. At another session, a Tulalip woman who has grown up in the Swinomish Reservation is now an accomplished photographer. She tells her story and that of her family and community through masterful black and white portraits.

I was also struck by the commentaries of Mark McPhail, Dean, College of Arts and Communication at University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, on the rhetoric of racism (2002), describing how language shapes our perception of race, and the metaphor drawn by Lani Guinier, Professor at Harvard Law School, of the canaries in the coal mine (2002). Don’t just save the canaries, who are gasping for breath, change the atmosphere in the mine. It’s toxic to everyone. We are all in this together.

How much do we see individuals through the lens and filters of gender and race? I had been thinking of writing an article called Colorblind or Color Vision, and now the word Colorless comes into focus. What do these words evoke, and how are these related to data and research ethics?

**Colorlessness** – What if we lived in a world without color? What if we were all the same, what if we were all without color? I am reminded of a scene from a movie version of Ursula Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971). A young man has “effective” dreams that not only foretell the future, they become reality. As misguided scientists attempt to harness this incredible ability, each effort to create a world without strife creates unintended consequences. He dreams that there are no divisions by race or color. Everyone is the same shade, without an end to grief and social hierarchies. Maybe you tried this experiment as a child. Try melting all the crayons together, and the resulting color has no color.

**Colorblindness** – The human eye perceives a spectrum of colors through cones that recognize the oppositions of red and green, blue and yellow, black and white. If these receptors are lacking, a person cannot tell green from red, for example. They learn to adapt to conventions that red signals danger and green signals go ahead. Oliver Sacks (1997) wrote of his experience in *the Island of the Color Blind*, a small community in the South Pacific where due to the combined effects of a genetic difference and a tragic history, almost everyone in the island is completely without color vision. As a result of not having color receptors, the people there are more likely to be sensitive to light and have difficulty reading. Yet the whole community gathers on the edge of the ocean toward dusk, swimming and enjoying the gentle ocean surf.

“Colorblind” has other connotations, of course. We talk about colorblind casting in theatrical productions. For example, the actor playing “King Lear” might be African American or Asian. The term “color blind” is also used to refer to the policy of ignoring differences due to race or ethnicity in social or educational policy. This approach, often well-intended, can actually make racism worse according to Tom Wise in *Colorblind: The Rise of Post Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (2010). Warning of the negative consequences of color blindness, he writes that “that educators would take little account of whether their curriculum was multicultural and inclusive of multiple voices and perspectives. To be colorblind, after all, is to not think about such matters (p. 138).” Further, to be color blind can also “reduce the likelihood of addressing racial disparities in discipline or tracking, not because these practices would suddenly vanish, but because we would be discouraged from keeping track of such information (p. 139).”

The same argument can be made that in order to eliminate the achievement gap, we first have to be able to see the achievement gap. How can we even see much less eliminate the achievement gap(s) unless we collect data on student race and ethnicity? It may be necessary to explain this to parents who wonder why we can’t all “just be Americans.”

Yet there have been times in recent history where being identified as the member of a minority group led to expulsion, relocation, “ethnic cleansing,” or even death camps. Knowing this can lead not only to guilt, the feeling that we have done something inexcusably wrong, but shame, the feeling that we are fundamentally bad or wrong, as Mark McPhail (2002) points out. We don’t like to dredge up such feelings. There is a certain amount of risk in being different and being identified as different that somehow must be dealt with, too.

**Color Vision** – Can we see and treat each other both as individuals and as members of a diversity of identities and communities? Tom Wise (2010) refers
to this as “Illuminated Individualism,” which tries to assert this truth, “that we are made up of many identities, and that these matter” (p. 157). So why can’t we all “just be Americans,” as some would like, without other identity or baggage? For some people this has been something that could be taken for granted, those who never had to confront being different from the “mainstream,” while others have experienced being on the outside looking in. Wise points out that none of us is or has ever been strictly “just” an individual, without group identity or identities. We all are social beings who experience life as part of a family, nationality, religious group, sexual orientation, or economic class, for example.

What does color vision look like? Following Wise, we would encourage dialog and discussion about race and racism, and do everything within our power to advance policies that end discrimination, not out of guilt or shame but out of a sense of responsibility to ourselves, our children, and our communities. It is not enough to simply observe achievement gaps. We need a better understanding of the dynamics of race and identities. We need to find the resolve and the resources so that all children have equal opportunities to achieve. Can we adjust our gaze toward Color Vision?

References


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Annotated Bibliography on Race and Education

By Andrea Meld, Ph.D.

While certainly not definitive, the list of books in this annotated bibliography represents a broad variety of perspectives on issues of race and education. All were written in the past few years, with several published as recently as 2010. As we try to understand the outcomes of 2010 midterm elections, it’s fair to ask whether the election of Barack Obama ushered in a “post-racial” era where race has become less important to educational policy, or whether color-consciousness is required to end disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. How much attention should we place on race and ethnicity? Whatever your views, these books will provide substance for dialogue and discussion.


Joseph Graves, who describes himself as an “African American intellectual,” traces the history of race as a social and political construct in Western civilization and the consequences of the distortions caused by racism. He takes the position that there is no biological basis in dividing humanity into racial categories. A particularly interesting chapter discusses the history of slavery, colonialism, and conquest in the New World and its legacy. Later on in this book, the role of eugenics, fascism, and race-based theories of intelligence are analyzed and critiqued. “No issue in the history of racial theory has been more pernicious than the idea that the races within human species differ significantly in their innate intelligence (p. 157).” The author not only tackles the “Bell-Curve” fallacy (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994), but also takes issue with the particular racial categories as codified by the Office of Budget and Management that are currently used by most federal and state agencies. (Why “White” rather than “European American,” for example?) While cautioning against biological interpretations of race, Graves is not advocating for color-blindness, rather he implores us to seek solutions to social inequalities and socially defined racism that will lead to improvements in educational systems and housing.


Less a book about education per se, and more of a book about racial politics and social justice, Guinier and Torres explore the metaphor of the canary in the coal mine. In the old days, miners took canaries into the coal mine. The birds’ delicate systems were first to respond to toxic and possibly fatal gasses, thus warning the miners to escape to ground level. Similarly, African American and Latino students, and all those at the far side of the achievement gap, serve as a warning that the entire educational environment may be toxic not only to the “canaries” but to the miners as well. The remedy is not to outfit the canaries with gas masks or somehow rescue them, but to improve the environment for all students. Guinier and Torres, arguing against “color blindness,” discussing strategies to improve educational and political processes from the classroom to the courtroom, to help us escape from the coal mines by engaging in powerful coalitions, alliances, and other forms of power sharing.


In spite of the title, this collection of essays regarding the psychology of racism and how to overcome is not strictly speaking about neurology or how our brains construct racial categories. This book, a series of essays, does address the achievement gap, how racism can affect our health and well-being, the perils of color blindness, and how to promote tolerance and equality in schools. This slim volume might be a good choice to initiate group study or discussion, but does not go into great depth or detail in any one chapter.


This book provides directly opposing viewpoints on causes and strategies to close the achievement gap. It would be a great book for classroom discussion. For example, the first chapter is called, “Racial Differences Contribute to the Achievement Gap,” while in direct contrast the second chapter has the title, “Racial Differences Do Not Contribute to the Achievement Gap,” arguing that differences in achievement are “a question of personal challenges faced by individual students” (p. 30). Later on in this volume, one chapter argues that No Child Left Behind is responsible for an increase in student achievement, while the following chapter argues that No Child Left Behind has actually widened the achievement gap. Also of value to researchers and educators, the book includes a list of for further information about the achievement gap as well as a lengthy bibliography.


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“The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are assumed to be at risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent... most never have a chance to be thought of as potentially smart and talented or to demonstrate talents in science, music or literature (p. xxi).” The way they are treated leads to a viscous cycle of failure, writes Noguera. This is a tremendous work of scholarship and reflection about various aspects of race, education, student achievement, and public policy. Noguera begins with his own son’s struggles, and concludes with strategies to transform urban schools. This is a book of great urgency. As written in his introduction, “Black males in American society are in trouble.” According to all reliable indicators, they face “hardships, disadvantages and vulnerability,” in terms of “health, education, employment, income, and overall well-being (p. xi).” Noguera explores the underlying causes for these “troubles” and offers possible ways out of this quandary that involve students, teachers, parents and community, as well as policy makers.


Rod Paige served as the U.S. Secretary of Education from 2001 to 2005, under president Bush. Elaine Witty, worked in all levels of education for over 27 years, and currently serves as dean of Education at Norfolk University. The four major premises discussed in this book are: 1) that the Black-White achievement gap is the most important civil rights issue of our time, 2) that closing the achievement gap has greater potential of advancing racial equality and social justice than any other civil rights strategy, 3) that an African American leadership culture is an essential element in closing the achievement gap, and 4) that African American leaders need to engage in activities that close rather than enable the achievement gap. They describe the ongoing negative impact of achievement gap in terms of perpetuating the notion of black intellectual inferiority, inhibiting the growth of wealth in the African American community, and contributing to more African Americans dying without health insurance, being in prison, and dying at a young age. Following a discussion of the causes of the achievement gap, the authors focus on the importance of committed leadership in providing solutions.


Claude Steele, a psychologist, is currently serving as provost at Columbia University. Earlier in his career, he taught psychology at the University of Washington. Steele’s area of interest is the apparent underachievement of minority students in higher education, and the role of stereotypes on individuals who seem to sabotage their own academic efforts. He calls this perplexing issue the “stereotype threat.” A familiar experiment from social psychology texts is the “blue eye and brown eye” experiment conducted by an Iowa school teacher in the 1950s. The teacher’s intent was to allow her third grade students to gain first-hand experience of prejudice and discrimination, yet, it worked only too well, turning her polite students into “little Nazis.” Steele also describes “the mind on stereotype threat” and suggests remedies and solutions for the stereotype threat. This is a fascinating and engaging book, especially for those with a background in social psychology.


Beverly Tatum, who previously wrote Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria (1997), is a clinical psychologist and now president of Spellman College. Born in 1954, Tatum describes herself as an “integration baby”. She tackles the thorny issue of schools reverting back to segregation in a series of engaging chapters as she addresses issues of race. She raises the question of what it mean to talk about race, and whether we can even be comfortable discussing race. “Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong thing, or using the wrong words and have an honest conversation about racial issues (p. xii)?” Further, she discusses the achievement gap and the affect of stereotypes and expectations on student test-taking and performance. This is a well-documented and well-researched book that would be of value in any discussion of race and education.


Tim Wise, a civil rights activist, contends that in the “post-racial” age, ushered in by the election of Barack Obama, we need to be particularly cautious about being color blind. He outlines the problems and pitfalls of color blindness as a social and educational policy. Wise maintains that color blindness can make racism worse because it obscures the evidence. He argues instead for an
“illuminated individualism,” as a “paradigm for progressive color-consciousness.” In regard to education, he is especially critical of student tracking and the lack of resources to close the achievement gap following the No Child Left Behind mandate. Not only are material resources needed to close the achievement gap, he asserts, but also teacher preparation and training to understand and overcome “the specific dynamics that are contributing to the racial achievement gap in the first place (p. 187)”. This is another book that would be great for guiding group discussions about race and education.

References

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**Dr. D’ Lema: A WERA Journal Forum on Data and Research Ethics**

_We live in a complex world of data and information. Misinformation abounds. This column is intended as a meeting place for advice on data ethics, discussion about data and research ethics, and advocacy. Looking forward to lively discussion, we encourage you to submit articles, letters, and other forms of commentary to the editor._

**U.S. DOE Guidance: Guarding Student Privacy in Longitudinal Data Bases**

Almost every state now has the capacity for longitudinal data bases that track individual student information from preschool to higher education and the workplace. While this creates tremendous opportunities for educational research, there may be unintended consequences for student privacy and other aspects of data ethics. For example, should information about substance abuse, medical conditions, and pregnancy be stored in student records?

Anticipating such concerns, the U.S. Department of Education plans to propose amendments to update the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and address longitudinal databases, privacy concerns, and inter-agency data sharing. The department has also initiated a new privacy-technical-assistance center at NCES to help districts and states use and share longitudinal student data appropriately.

The new Privacy Technical Assistance Center has the task of developing training materials for using longitudinal student data and plans to set up a database to respond to common privacy questions. Along these lines, several guidance briefs will be released this winter and spring discussing student privacy and best ways to manage electronic student records.


Educational leaders have suggested that research evidence has less of an influence on decision-making in comparison to other factors, such as public sentiment and the welfare of individuals (Nelson, Leffler, & Hansen, 2009). Two characteristics associated with the reduced influence of research evidence include an absence of local relevance and credibility (Nelson et al., 2009). One could argue that since educational leaders face numerous challenges in their attempts to include research evidence as part of policymaking and practice, then educators at the school level also encounter similar obstacles in trying to achieve the same end. One way to deal with this problem is to encourage and assist educators, specifically school leadership teams, in generating and analyzing local data, specific to their school. Such efforts would help alleviate the sense that research evidence is irrelevant and misleading.

Analyzing Data with Skyward, Excel, and EZAnalyze

There are several computer applications available for conducting data analysis. However, some of these, such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), provide more options than are necessary for everyday use. Most educators are familiar with Microsoft Excel, which can perform many operations with specialized data analysis software. In addition, nearly all of Washington’s 296 school districts utilize Skyward, which is an online student record application (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2010; Skyward, 2010). Skyward users are able to export school and classroom data into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis, using the method shown in Figure 1. This means that teachers and administrators gain access to a basic set of software tools necessary for analyzing data efficiently and at various levels of sophistication.

School personnel can export data from Skyward to Excel by selecting appropriate commands on the toolbar. This figure shows a grade book where school personnel can export student scores into a spreadsheet for statistical examination.

Despite Excel’s data analysis capabilities, its breadth of formula selection, use of function arguments, and placement of reported calculations may appear inconvenient to some users. An effective way to focus Excel’s analysis capabilities is by using EZAnalyze. EZAnalyze is an Add-In file that enhances and simplifies the data analysis functions of Excel. As an Add-In, EZAnalyze automatically loads when a user opens Excel. Currently, the file is free at www.ezanalyze.com. Users can install the file manually or by using an automated program.

Two important advantages of using EZAnalyze are its efficiency in performing statistical calculations and simplicity in generating numeric and graphic reports. Similar to Excel, EZAnalyze is capable of calculating various descriptive statistics, either in aggregate or disaggregate form. Notably, users can perform these functions from one command menu, as shown in Figure 2. These characteristics reduce the number of steps necessary for selecting, calculating, and showing statistical values.

Figure 2
EZAnalyze Toolbar

EZAnalyze is a free Add-In file that starts when a user opens an Excel spreadsheet. Once a calculation is complete, EZAnalyze compiles the results on a separate sheet, as shown in Figure 3. This function simplifies the reading of results while the original data set remains unchanged. Likewise, this option facilitates exploratory calculations without the concern that the user will change or clutter the original data with additional formulas or reports.

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Along with calculating descriptive statistics, EZAnalyze has a number of graphing commands, including options for making histograms, as shown in Figure 4. Similar to other report outputs, EZAnalyze shows graphs on separate sheets from the original data set. Creating a graph does not require the selection of a specific range of values, but includes all of the values for a selected variable. This option reduces the number of choices that a user has when creating graphs, but by simplifying the graph-making processes, a user can create several graphs in quick succession for purposes of comparison or investigation.

For the interested user, EZAnalyze also offers a set of basic inferential statistic operations. These include correlation, t-test, ANOVA, and Chi Square. The primary step for conducting these operations is to choose the variables under examination. The list of variables available for statistical analysis is generated from the first row of data in the Excel spreadsheet. Similar to other statistical software such as SPSS, EZAnalyze produces a variety of numerical data for each test. For instance, calculating a one-way ANOVA shows standard deviations, means, p-value, and Fisher’s statistic.

The command menu in EZAnalyze also has several options for creating new variables from pre-established data. Some of these options include calculating sums, differences, and percentile ranks. Unlike the functions previously discussed, EZAnalyze places data for new variables in the last column of the original data set.
School-Based Example

The key benefit of using these applications is that users can analyze data from a specific school or classroom. Since the data is local, school leadership teams, or other school personnel, can reduce two effects often associated with the integration of research evidence as a component of decision-making, namely, local relevance and credibility. For instance, a middle school leadership team may be working to improve student attendance rates. The team begins by asking questions relevant to their investigation. One of these questions is about the relationship between absences and achievement. The team begins by consulting current literature relating to this question and locates numerous articles on this topic (Gottfried, 2010). However, the evidence lacks local context. It does not fit the school’s demographics or particular set of issues. As a result, some members of the leadership team remain skeptical about the importance of this issue, given the number of other problems that the team is responsible for solving. Nevertheless, the team decides to analyze their particular school data to determine the level of urgency that the attendance problem really presents.

The team might begin by examining information for one grade level from the previous school year. They would take this step in order to simplify their efforts and incorporate preexisting standardized test scores for comparison purposes. The team would then compile data on three variables for each student, including the number of days absent for one academic quarter and standardized math and reading scores. A few members of the team could compile this data using Skyward to convert Excel spreadsheet, as shown in Figure 5.

According to the example, leadership team members compile data from Skyward for each student showing the number of days absent for one academic quarter, along with standardized math and reading scores.

As a final step, the team then calculates correlations between days absent and standardized math and reading scores using EZAnalyze. Even though it has been a number of years since anyone on the leadership team has taken a class in educational research and statistics, they now have enough background knowledge and initiative to analyze their data using this technique. The results show that student absences and low achievement on standardized math and reading scores go together, according to the reports in Figure 6 and 7. In fact, the relationship appears to be stronger between math scores and absences in comparison to reading scores.

These analyses confirm what the team suspected and what its members had been hearing anecdotally from staff around the school. However, the results have more impact and credibility since the team analyzed their school data, working through each step. In this case, the graphs in Figure 6 and 7
show a connection between school attendance and achievement. These results provide an empirical basis for action by the leadership team. Moreover, the results are visually interpretable so that the team can present them to the entire school staff with a minimum of additional commentary. Even better, the leadership team can use these initial results as pretest data for comparison after the application of an intervention.

Conclusion

Educators have an array of computer applications on hand that are useful for analyzing school data. This paper describes how users can combine three of these to examine local data in efficient ways. School leadership teams may find these methods particularly helpful in overcoming two problems associated with research evidence, including lack of local relevance and credibility. Arguably, the example described above simplifies the steps and knowledge necessary to initiate this approach. Nevertheless, learning to utilize these types of processes provide school leadership teams with an empirical basis for their decision-making.

References


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Podcast Tips for Working with Education Assessment Data
By Patrick Cummings

In the past we have included many suggestions on how to be more efficient in Excel, Access or SPSS in our Standard Deviation newsletter. The following podcasts are a collection of “how to” videos that provide tips for assessment directors in improving their productivity when working with education assessment data.

Title: Tips01-Introduction (HD)
Author: Pat Cummings, Director of Research and Evaluation, Tacoma Public Schools
Time: 4:33
URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZCHoWa-62M
Description: This is an introduction to the podcast version of “Tips for Assessment Directors”. In this video you will be given a few short cuts on how to start Excel and alter display features.

Title: Tips02-Recording Macros (HD)
Author: Pat Cummings, Director of Research and Evaluation, Tacoma Public Schools
Time: 6:49
URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpGc1HqGzfM
Description: This is an introduction to recording macros in Excel. This video will demonstrate how to record a macro that will create a short cut for placing a document file path, data and header on your file.

Title: Tips03-Basics of Vertical Lookup (HD)
Author: Pat Cummings, Director of Research and Evaluation, Tacoma Public Schools
Time: 5:26
URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MgcJwKgTd0
Description: Vertical lookups are a quick way to match two lists of information based on a common field (usually a student ID). The VLOOKUP function is extremely useful to assessment directors in connecting multiple data sets to single file.

Title: Tips04-Beginning Work with Pivot Tables (HD)
Author: Pat Cummings, Director of Research and Evaluation, Tacoma Public Schools
Time: 4:28
URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXuqTgqvi1g
Description: One of the most powerful features of Microsoft Excel is the Pivot Table. Pivot tables allow rapid, dynamic, flexible data analysis. This article describes how to create pivot tables and pivot charts, and how to create normal charts from pivot tables.

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Still Waiting: A Review of “Waiting for Superman,” a film by Davis Guggenheim  
Reviewed by Michael Power, Ph.D.

“Waiting for Superman” is more than a movie; it’s a full scale cultural phenomenon. If you go to their website you can find out about the film, the book, and even the concert. You can also click a “Take Action” link which takes you to a page which prominently says, “Demand Great Teachers.” Clicking on that takes you to a site where you can find your local school board to which you would presumably direct your demand.

“Waiting” has been extensively reviewed, analyzed, deconstructed, attacked, and defended in the popular and professional media. An extensive analysis by Diane Ravitch in the New York Review of Books (myth-charter-schools) has been circulated among educators almost as much as the email lists “Silly Metaphors from Student Essays.” Critics question whether it adds anything to the work of educators such as Jonathan Kozol (e.g., Savage Inequalities, 1991). No one questions that the film has sparked an important discussion. The wide distribution of the film has benefited from the fact that Guggenheim won the Academy Award for his film, “An Inconvenient Truth,” and most likely is appealing to much the same audience, but it seems to have sparked a great deal more conversation. Not everyone lives near a melting glacier, but everyone knows someone who has been to a public school.

I have seen “Waiting” twice. I saw it in Bellevue in a showing sponsored by Stand for Children, and again in Tacoma sponsored by Communities in Schools. The experiences were quite different. The Bellevue audience, judging by the conversations going on before and after the movie, was mostly made up of parents, some at public schools, some at private. The Tacoma showing included a lot more educators. The difference was audible. There were many more gasps of outrage in Bellevue, whereas in Tacoma there was more of a nuanced reaction and even some laughter at points the filmmaker probably didn’t anticipate.

It’s easy to find fault with “Waiting for Superman” so I’ll get that out of the way. It is wildly over-generalized, it plays fast and loose with data, it presents images which have a powerful impact but which are not necessarily related to the content (e.g., a shot of Asians doing calisthenics during a discussion of Chinese math scores), and it uses selective examples without any consideration of balance, perspective, or context. Many people I have talked to about the film summarized Guggenheim’s message this way – “Public schools are terrible, teachers unions and teacher tenure are the problem, and charter schools are the solution.” Of course some people agree with that conclusion, whether they got that perspective from the movie or it just reinforced their opinion. Others disagree with that conclusion and consequently have serious issues with the film and the fact that many people who don’t know much about public education will be led to believe this black and white characterization. Is the truth somewhere in between? You’ll have to see it for yourself to find out.

Guggenheim is fond of quoting talking heads such as the journalist who claimed that even some progressive educators believe the achievement gap cannot be closed. I don’t know who those progressive educators are or how many of them there are, but the impression left by that statement is quite powerful. Here’s another. Bill Gates Jr. is featured prominently in the film and at one point he says, “The best charter schools send 90% of their graduates to four year colleges.” This is no doubt true. It is also true that the best public schools send 90% of their graduates to four year colleges. The question left unexplored by Guggenheim is who gets to decide which are the best and where are the data accurately comparing the two.

Early in the film the narrator (Guggenheim) mentions that only 1 in 5 charter schools “produce amazing results.” (There is a good deal of research coming out that shows charter schools in general do no better or worse than non-charter public schools, though of course studies differ. See www.edweek.org/ew/issues/charter-schools.) Despite this nod to data, the images of public schools (all but one in terrible physical condition) and public school students (unsmiling and disengaged) contrast starkly with the featured charter schools (brightly lit and full of resources) and charter school children (happy and on task).

Despite all of this, I have to give Guggenheim a lot of credit. The film is very well made from a technical standpoint. There is no wasted time, no scenes without substantial dramatic impact. It never fails to engage the audience and there is no doubt whatsoever what the filmmaker was trying to do. The film’s frame is well defined, and the issues are presented with a great deal of clarity. We are left with the question of how we will proceed.

Continued on next page
to achieve. The charter schools featured in the film, including the Harlem Children’s Zone and KIPP LA Prep, are clearly doing good work with challenging populations. “Waiting” errs mostly in its omissions as noted above. What Guggenheim has done very well is spark a lot of conversation, and to judge by the press and my own experience, the chatter is getting at some very important issues that our society needs to resolve, and fairly soon if we are not to continue to deprive many of our most needy students of the advantages enjoyed by those who attend excellent schools –public, charter, or private.

At the conclusion of the showing in Tacoma, about half of the audience reconvened for a panel discussion with the Tacoma Public Schools Superintendent, the Mayor of Tacoma, and a public school teacher. What was most interesting to me was that the discussion returned repeatedly to something never mentioned in “Waiting” – the role of the community in creating and sustaining great schools, whatever form they take. Parent involvement, the role of community partners, the need for coordination of a wide variety of support services for families, all of these were highly valued by the panelists and indeed considered essential for children to succeed in school. (Guggenheim even neglects in his discussion of the Harlem Children’s Zone to talk about the range of family services that the Zone provides and considers essential to their success with children in school.) We know that successful schools have these advantages and we know that many struggling schools do not, and we know from the research the impact of community on learning.

Yes, as the film emphasizes, we need excellent teachers, we need a lot more of them, and we need to support them in any way we can. But just as families cannot do it alone, neither can teachers. “Waiting” may want us to “Take Action” but it makes no mention of the action the community can and needs to take in to make all our schools great. So, I am still waiting for a film that gives a balanced, nuanced, portrayal of the challenges of educating all our children and the options before you. But, in the meantime, I am grateful for the conversation.

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By John Hattie
Reviewed by Mike Jacobsen

Educational research is absolutely critical to the process reforming our current education system. School districts must become active and knowledgeable consumers of research data to guide their efforts. As a central office administrator working in a district committed to increasing learning for all students, I recently did a quick inventory of the books in my office related to educational research. I noted eleven books by well-known authors that discussed educational research, three graduate college level texts on educational research, seven books on statistics and two feet of shelf space given to copies of Educational Leadership. Do I really need one more book on educational research? Perhaps, suggests Past WERA President Don Orlich (2010) who calls it “MUST reading for all involved in teacher education programs, those who determine educational policies and standards, and school evaluators.” I would add parents, teachers and school administrators to Orlich’s list.

What makes Hattie’s work a "must read?" In answering this question, I would include the following three reasons: 1) the sheer volume of studies reviewed (more than 52,000), representing 800 meta-analyses; 2) a focus not only on what works but what works best; 3) the “dashboard” display of effect sizes (results).

Hattie began with a goal of placing results of 800+ meta-analyses along a single continuum. To do this, he adopted the single scale inherent to effect size analysis. Hattie’s use of effect sizes, a common and well-accepted practice in the fields of education, medicine and economics, allows for a comparison of results from multiple studies conducted over multiple years. An effect size of 1.0 for implementing a new program would mean that on average, students receiving the treatment would exceed 84% of students not receiving the new program. Put another way, an effect size of 1.0 means that students in the new program would make gains of two to three years over students not in the new program.

In an effort to assign levels of significance to the potential influences on achievement, Hattie created four different categories:

1. Reverse effects (d is less than 0.0) suggest that a given influence might actually be detrimental to student learning. Contributors with effects of less than 0.0 are student retention, welfare policies, mobility, television, and summer vacation.

2. Developmental effects (d = 0.0 to 0.19 range) represent the improvement a student would be expected to achieve with maturation, without any schooling. Among the 25 influences within this range are multi-grade/age classes, whole language, home schooling, and web-based learning.

3. Teacher effects (d = 0.2 to 0.4) represent the typical growth in a year. Hattie explains that “they should be seeking to greater than d=0.40 for their achievement gains to be considered above average and greater than d=0.60 to be considered excellent.” The 43 contributors in the “teacher effects” range include co-teaching/team teaching, individual instruction, aptitude-treatment interactions and bilingual programs.

4. Desired effects (d=0.40 or above), represent the value-added contributors with significant effects attributable to a specific instructional strategy or approach. The 66 contributors here include phonics instruction, direct instruction, providing formative evaluation, and feedback.

Hattie’s particular brilliance is in graphing effect sizes in a “barometer” gauge that provides a clear answer to the question: “Does a given educational influence, strategy or process work and if so how well does it work?” Hattie identified 138 educational influences/teaching strategies/processes represented in Figure 1.

One of Hattie’s strongest points is: what teachers do matters. The caveat is that effective teachers are those who “teach in a most deliberate and visible manner” and when learning is not occurring “they intervene in calculated and meaningful ways to alter the direction of learning to attain various shared, specific, and challenging goals” (p. 22).
As the title implies, visible teaching and visible learning is a major theme throughout the book. For John Hattie this model is best expressed by the following: “When teachers SEE learning through the eyes of the student and when students SEE themselves as their own teachers.” (p. 238)

Although a reader might be tempted simply to turn to Appendix B where the one hundred thirty-eight influences on achievement are rank ordered, it is important to read Hattie’s full descriptions of the various approaches and the associated research. Sometimes, the overall effect attributed to a particular approach has varied effect with different audiences. Other times, a reader might have a different definition of an approach than Hattie which a full reading of the text would address.

I recommend this book for all educators. I also encourage readers to begin with the first three chapters and the last chapter to gain a fuller understanding of the scope of the book.

About the Author
John Hattie is Professor of Education at Auckland University, NZ, and director of the Visible Learning Lab. His areas of interest are measurement models and their applications to educational problems including meta-analysis. He was the Keynote Presenter for the 25th Annual WERA/OSPI Assessment Conference in December 2010.

Reference


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In *Winning the Math Wars: No Teacher Left Behind*, Abbott et al. stress the need for math reform, not because of inadequate standards or curriculum, but because teachers need to increase their level of math knowledge in order to adapt their classroom practices and teaching styles. One of the challenges in math education reform is the need for school districts to support teachers in this endeavor. The authors analyze the difficult process of reform by distinguishing between first and second order changes. They argue throughout the book that adopting a new curriculum or standard is a first order change that is often left without follow through. Therefore, second order changes, such as teacher training in the new curriculum, are not realized. The authors do not take sides in the “math wars,” because they claim most reform movements are only partially completed. How can one really judge a reform movement when math teachers have essentially been “left behind” to implement ever-changing reform efforts without proper support?

Over the course of three chapters, Abbott et al. use their research and findings to provide a powerful realization of exactly where math education reform movements remain incomplete. In addition to the overarching theme of improving teacher preparation in math, the authors describe three global math issues. First, the authors address the concern that America is lagging far behind other developed countries; yet there are many differences in how countries measure math achievement. For example, the United States measures children at each level while other countries measure at the end of secondary school, or only report the top, elite math student scores. Second, the authors analyze what kind of mathematical knowledge is important, or at risk of being neglected, in the curricula around the world. They claim that combining a constructivist, traditional and ethno-mathematical approach to teaching math is best as long as teachers are comfortable with underlying math ideas. The third global issue is that of equity among students. The authors make a compelling argument that math educators often support traditionalist or constructivist methods that work well for only the elite in society, while other children must rely on a skilled educator to maneuver, translate, and sync ideas together.

The issue of equity continues into Chapter 2 as the authors examine U.S. math education. They speak out against continued focus on pendulum-swinging curriculum reform efforts in favor of improving teacher knowledge and instructional practices. They also point out that, at the state level, national standards are often adopted but disconnected from state standardized tests. This practice has produced conflicts that, “… have deflected attention from what happens in the classroom” (p. 78). They reason that teachers and children suffer unnecessarily when high-test scores provide financial incentives for schools while innocent parties are left behind to deal with improper implementation and often-inadequate results.

The authors use their findings to contend that all states need additional analysis of what math teachers actually know about mathematics. As an example, they point out that elementary school teachers often struggle to teach math of which they have little knowledge. Referencing the truism that teachers teach the way that they were taught, the authors suggest that teachers’ approach often reflects a skewed, traditionalist perspective. In general, Abbott et al. recommend that teachers gain a "knowledge of math, knowledge of learning math, and knowledge above all about the best way to engage all learners,” (p. 101). However, the authors also contend that the qualities of engaging, influential math teaching are largely unknown and unexamined.

Chapter 3 highlights the state of Washington as an example of math reform. The authors show that Washington State, among others, has helped lead the way in reforming curriculum and standards in math, as achieving broad consensus about math standards and curriculum at the state level. Several organizations have been at the forefront of math education reform in Washington State, in particular The University of Washington, the Washington School Research Center, and the BERC Group. They have conducted qualitative and quantitative studies relating to math graduation requirements, the curricular placement of algebra, whether calculus should be taught in high school, and the importance of problem solving and statistics.

Abbot et al. use their research and findings to illustrate specific problems and solutions in the math education reform movement. They build a persuasive case that it is necessary...
for all states to further analyze and assist pre-service and in-service teachers, specifically elementary teachers and their knowledge of math. The authors argue for more research directed to analyzing second-order changes (i.e. changes in instructional practices). They also highlight overriding issues that “math wars” reform has produced on a global, national, and state level. Though the authors suggest providing teachers with the opportunity to relearn math through peer observation/mentoring and participation in “lesson study,” they do not provide details for implementation. Winning the Math Wars is an essential read for math educators, policy makers, and anyone concerned about the recent state of math education reform.

Providing a comprehensive, informative update on math education reform, the authors of Winning the Math Wars demonstrates that reform movements cannot be properly evaluated until they are fully implemented.


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Restaurant Review: The Engine House 9
Reviewed by Heather Bandeen, Ph.D.

As the Northwestern weather turns cold, comfort food is a common craving. An evening tucked away in a cozy restaurant with warm carbs and great conversation is the perfect, all-purpose anecdote for the rain. This is why I recommend The Engine House 9 in Tacoma. Known simply as “E9,” this restaurant is a great choice for lunch, dinner, or please-tell-me-its-Friday evening drinks.

Built in 1907, E9 was placed on the National Historical Register in 1975. The restaurant is located near the hip and trendy 6th Street watering holes and shops though it is a little off the beaten path. Surrounded by old trees and a growing neighborhood, it is housed in a gorgeous brick building on North Pine Street.

Once inside, friendly servers greet everyone with a shout to “seat yourself.” The atmosphere is reminiscent of a rustic firehouse with an outdoor patio perfect for the summer months. Personalized historic décor cover this restaurant from floor to ceiling, so if you find yourself here -- take a minute to walk around. The back of the restaurant is divided into a funky bar area while the front dining room features tables that can easily accommodate any size group.

E9’s menu is filled with pub food, including buffalo wings, hamburgers, beer battered onion rings, and, of course, fish and chips. On my first visit, I indulged in the deep fried mac-and-cheese wedges with a side of ranch dressing. The first bite was truly a transportive experience for my Midwestern soul. E9 also serves a wide variety of lighter fare, such as salads, sandwiches, and soups, made-from-scratch each day. On a swing into this historic firehouse after work, you will be happy to hear about their list of fresh ales that include Irish stout, India pale ale, and a roasted porter. The brewery is actually next door.

This restaurant may not be the best pick if you are in a hurry or would wish to discuss something top secret as you will probably have to wait a bit and will, most likely, need to talk loudly over the banter.

For me, this local spot is a frequent guilty craving. With reasonable prices and a great atmosphere, it is easy to see why The Engine House 9 is one of the top 10 restaurants in the South Puget Sound.

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