

THE FACES OF DATA

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Amassing more data is not the same as gathering useful information.

When data is connected to individual students it becomes more meaningful and actionable.

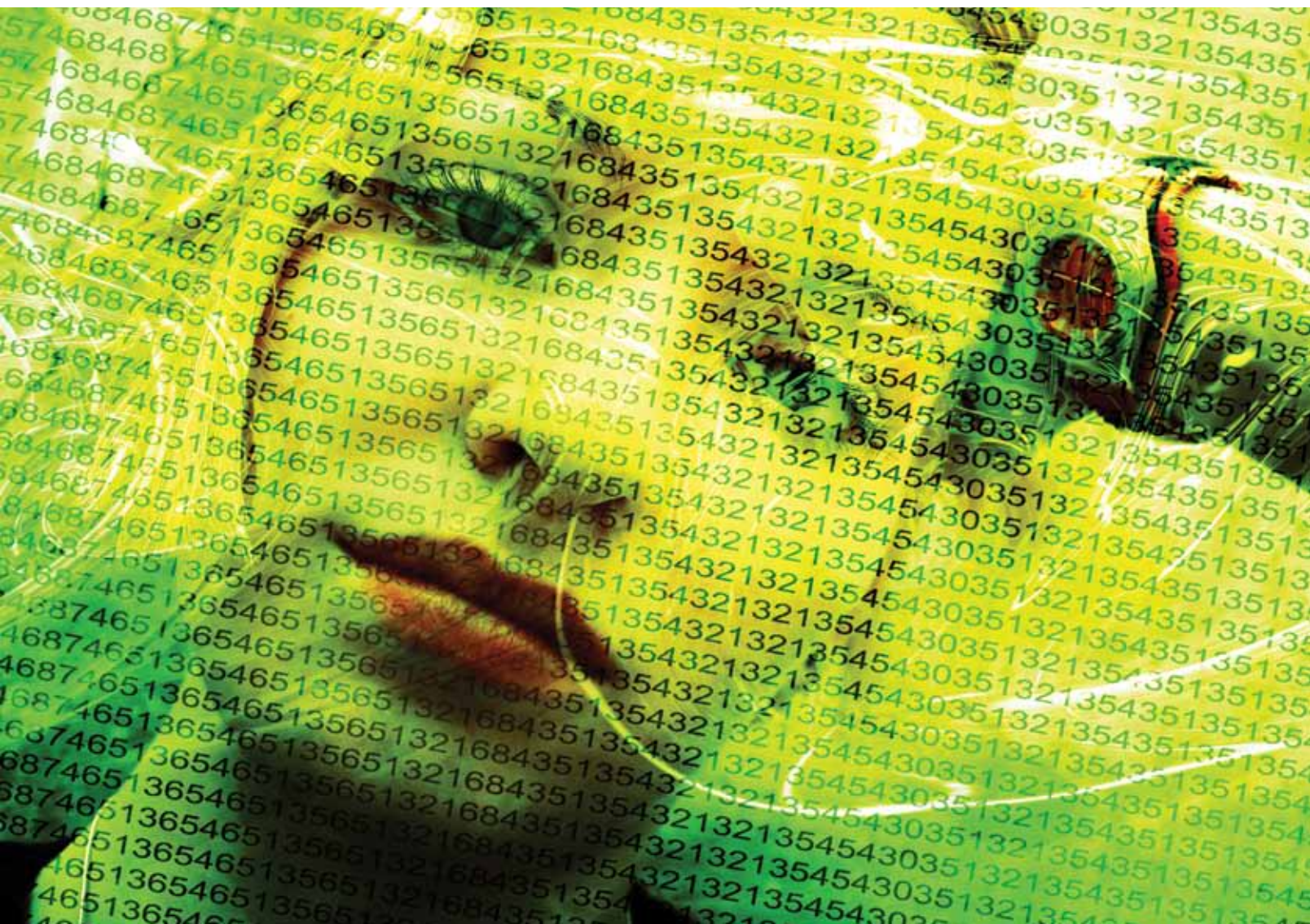
School leaders need know-ability, mobilize-ability, and sustain-ability to use data to promote student success.

The sheer volume of information available today is becoming overwhelming. Pariser (2011) wrote:

900,000 blog posts, 50 million tweets, more than 60 million Facebook status updates, and 210 billion e-mails are sent off into the electronic ether every day. Eric Schmidt likes to point out that if you recorded all human communication, from the dawn of time to 2003, it'd take up about 5 billion gigabytes of storage space. Now we're creating that much data every two days. (p. 11)

Yet more information doesn't necessarily make us smarter. In fact, Carr (2010) said, "What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation" (p. 6). Jackson (2009) argued that there is so much going on that we are losing our ability for "deep, sustained, perceptive attention" (p. 13). The result is that we are attracted to what is flashy and instantly stimulating, and less and less inclined to pay attention to what is important.

Educators are also experiencing the same distracting information overload and struggling to find a way to manage it as they support their students. By paying attention to the goals, aspirations, and context for each student's learning, principals and other school leaders can tighten their focus on relevant data and the necessary subsequent actions. But how can they translate that focus to systems, secondary schools, and classrooms? Our research says that principals must develop increasing intentionality and finite precision in their data analyses and follow-up actions and use data to make emotional connections with and to develop cognitive insights for every student in their responsibility. But again, how does that happen?



During our presentations, we asked educators, “What are the top three leadership skills needed to put *faces* on the data?” Responses from 507 educators clearly indicated that they want someone who:

- Will know what to do
- Is visible and gets people moving in the same direction
- Leads for the long term.

To be precise, 45% said that to lead with credibility, leaders must first model knowledge of classroom practice—that is, assessment and instruction, or what we call *know-ability*. Further, 33% said that the ability to inspire and mobilize others through clear communication of commitment was essential—what we call *mobilize-ability*. Finally, 21% said that knowing how to establish a lasting culture of shared responsibility and accountability was essential—what we call *sustain-ability*. Those three factors represent a specific focus to get results using precision leading and data gathering. When they come together, the result is increased student achievement for all.

Know-ability

Know-ability is when knowledgeable others make relevant data transparent. Data-driven instruction and the ubiquitous presence and use of data are core themes for promoting and maintaining efforts to improve. According to the respondents in our research, the key is principals' deep, structured understanding of evidence-based assessment and instructional practices in classrooms. The principal must be the lead learner, modeling continuous learning, committing to being a coleader and colearner with teachers, and participating in tangible assessment and instructional practices as a "knowledgeable other" (Sharratt, Ostinelli, & Cattaneo, 2010). As knowledgeable others, school leaders:

- Are attuned to what it looks like to use data to improve instruction in each class across the school.
- Stay the course by maintaining, reviewing, and monitoring lesson plans and school improvement plans to ensure alignment between the vision in the plan on paper and in the classroom practices recorded in lesson plans—this is the precise and focused use of data.
- Lead the case management approach, in which individual students are tracked and corrective action takes place on an ongoing basis and teachers have a regularly scheduled forum to discuss students who present them with instructional conundrums.
- Improve the performance of teachers who are struggling and know how to reward their best teachers.
- Provide environments in which teachers work together to frame good practice. That is where teachers and principals conduct field-based research (data collec-

tion), such as performing collaborative inquiry and action research together to confirm or disprove the approaches they develop and implement on behalf of students.

- Articulate the expected use of data to drive instruction and provide differentiated professional learning opportunities for teachers to see and experience it in action.



Deliberate Pause

Leaders who are outstanding continually take a deliberate pause and ask themselves these questions:

- Are my expectations high enough?
- Are all students excelling—not just getting by—or are some going unnoticed? How do I know?
- Am I leading by example?
- Am I out in classrooms daily and asking teachers questions about their practice?



KNOW-ABILITY EXAMPLE: INTENTIONAL USE OF DATA WALLS

The data wall at Park Manor P.S. in Waterloo Region District School Board, Ontario, Canada, a middle level school we work in, has all students on it, including the nine students in the special needs class. Specially printed sticky notes identify boys (blue) and girls (pink) because staff members are concerned about performance differences between girls and boys and want to be able to monitor the variance in an obvious manner. The sticky notes have students' photographs on them so that each student record truly represents a face and are updated each trimester.

The data wall carries a lot of decision-making information. The principal wrote:

Our data wall is in a confidential location we call the Staff Learning Center. It's a small room that we set up in order to come together to discuss issues like how to increase all students' achievement. Our learning goal for this year, arising from our data and connected to the Curriculum Expectations...has been to improve the written communication for all students, paying particular attention to boys.

All teachers of a particular student who is performing below expectations add data about that student and then together identify the root causes and countermeasures that might improve his or her performance. Then they verify their actions.

The data wall enables the principal and the teachers to quickly see all students' performance, the interventions needed and implemented, and whether those interventions worked. It also helps them determine which students to focus on during case management meetings, which is their first-level intervention. Together they evaluate the best instructional strategies for those students who didn't respond to individual teacher's efforts. The engagement with the data benefits everyone: teachers make students' achievement visible by putting faces on the data, and students have teachers who know what alternative instructional strategies are needed to support their learning. The data wall is alive with precise and endless possibilities for student performance and teacher growth.

Mobilize-ability

One of the principals we interviewed said, “Support and encouragement are crucial. Pushing too hard never works. Magic happens when teachers take initiative within a framework which has been developed by the district, like the 14 parameters. (See Sharratt & Fullan, 2009.) Incorporating professional learning into staff and department meetings needs to be led by staff not just the principal. When teachers share their best practices, things happen.”

Leaders must deprivatize practice, making teaching and learning transparent to all and debatable by all. How does that happen? Research from Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (Rogers, 2009) showed that

a school culture that focuses on learning for all students was repeatedly described as an important factor in enabling each student to experience some measure of success... [Principals mobilize stakeholders by openly:]

- Holding and sustaining high academic, social and behavioral expectations;
- Using and demonstrating a variety of teaching methods to meet, in real ways, the needs of different students;
- Creating a consistently positive and caring school community;
- Encouraging positive role models to whom students can relate;
- Ensuring strong and effective educational leadership from the principal, and,
- Maintaining ongoing active engagement of parents in the school. (p. 4)

MOBILIZE-ABILITY EXAMPLE: INSTRUCTIONAL WALKS AND TALKS FOR CONCRETE DATA COLLECTION

According to our research respondents, principals’ deep understanding of successful assessment and instructional practices in classrooms is key. Therefore, principals must be committed to walking into classrooms daily, not to visit or wander around, but to observe and note successful practices and to confer with teachers afterwards. Principals often make assumptions about what is going on unless they make a conscientious effort to walk into classrooms. Conducting daily instructional walks and talks is a way of monitoring expected practices in all classrooms—and is the most authentic data collection.



Deliberate Pause

During my instructional walks and talks, I want to determine whether all students can answer the following questions:

- What am I learning?
- How am I doing?
- How do I know?
- How can I improve?
- Where do I go for help?



Instructional walks and talks give principals opportunities to see what is being taught and enable them to address specific issues by tailoring professional learning at staff meetings and by strategically pairing teachers. Focused daily walks and talks in classrooms make monitoring enjoyable and less obtrusive and are a scheduling habit worth acquiring.

Sustain-ability

Achieving and sustaining substantial improvement for all students all the time is complex. Sustainability will be experienced when the data show that:

- All students continue to achieve
- Decisions continue to reflect caring about students and teachers
- Parents continue to feel like they are part of the fabric of school life—no matter who the principal is.

The conditions in which school leaders can sustain reform efforts individually and collectively are important (Fullan & Sharratt, 2007) because state- and districtwide reform relies heavily on mobilizing leadership at all levels of the system. One such condition is the creation of dedicated “second change agents” or what is sometimes referred to as “distributive leadership”—a critical mass of leaders led by the principal who are working on establishing a culture of ongoing learning. The principal is the first change agent—the lead learner. Having one or more second change agents is essential—for example, a teacher leader or an embedded instructional coach who has direct responsibility and time during the school day to work alongside other teachers in their classrooms to:

- Link teachers with each other internally and across schools
- Help set up data management systems
- Work with the principal on the school improvement agenda.

SUSTAIN-ABILITY EXAMPLE: THE ANNUAL LEARNING FAIR

Interdependent leadership practice and the 14th parameter (i.e., shared responsibility and accountability) are evident in the annual learning fairs now held in many of the jurisdictions in which we work. For those events, all elementary and secondary schools

prepare a half-hour multimedia presentation that is based on the following criteria:

- What the school set out to do that year
- Evidence (data) to support their students' increased literacy achievement
- The assessment and instructional strategies they used
- Lessons learned
- Challenges they are currently facing.

What is most impressive about the learning fairs is how articulate, consistent, and specific educators have become when they discuss the what, the why, the how, and the assessed impact of their work. It's all about precise use of data to improve instruction. Every school in the district participates in teams, which means many change agents spread across all schools, all engaged in the same phenomenon, all using precise language, and all pushing practice to the next level.

Every school administrator and teacher team prepares an evidence-based report (focused on student data) and then submits it to their district leaders. The reports show their improved school results and the intentional next steps to be incorporated in their updated school improvement plans for the next year. Low-performing leaders are supported, "pulled along," and energized in this process by strong leaders who reach out to share accountability and responsibility for all students.

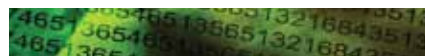
The annual reporting is a collaborative dialogue among schools and deepens participants' understanding of their individual roles and the collective learning that leads to the generation of additional next steps to be taken in their schools. In addition to generating new teaching strategies, it also broadens the interdependency from intraschool to interschool, with

one important result being a reduction in the overall performance gap between schools—definitely an energizing way to use evidence (data) to deprivatize practice and mobilize teachers across schools in a district.



Deliberate Pause

- How is the impact on student learning monitored?
- Who monitors student learning? How?
- Are learning goals aligned to standards or curriculum expectations?
- How are success criteria aligned to learning goals, and how are they differentiated for students?
- Is feedback to students and teachers factual, objective, immediate, and helpfully aligned with learning goals?
- What examples do you have of putting faces on the data in your secondary school?



Conclusion

It is clear that principals must be deliberately engaged in leading instructional improvement work with teachers. When Robinson (2012) found that the strongest leadership factor affecting student achievement in the school was the degree to which principals "participated as learners" in working with teachers to improve instruction and student learning, she was corroborating our findings (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

The three domains of leadership that we identified in this article are learnable, are specific and focused, and make a big difference in improving teacher and student learning.

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