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Julia Steiny: Studying classroom data shows teachers where to improve

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As a principal, Jeannine Magliocco's job now includes collecting data about math instruction in each of her classrooms at Lonsdale Elementary School in Lincoln. With a clipboard and an elaborate checklist in hand, she records what she observes on a standardized form developed by the Dana Center, consultants who are helping the school beef up its math program. Today, for my benefit, Magliocco also brings a sheaf of definitions of each of the many items with check-boxes. She's already memorized them.

The first class we visit is a beehive of fifth-graders working in groups of four. Each group is laying out the portion of the zoo that will house the animals they have been studying in science. The students have chosen to investigate either North or South American animals and their habitats, so they've already researched how much space their animals would need at a real zoo. Their task is to use graph paper to figure out the scale and layout of their animals' exhibits, and then transfer their results onto a big green sheet that will be the ground plan for their zoos.

Per the data-collection protocol, Magliocco asks the kids at one table what they are learning today. As two girls speak over one another, we learn that this is a math class. They explain that while they need to be correct about the science they're using to determine the space for each habitat, the lesson for right now, they emphasize, is about finding and plotting area and perimeter.

Magliocco scans her check list, finds "learning objectives are evident to the students," and checks "evident." The girls dive back into their work. I mention that the kids seem remarkably on task. Magliocco confirms that their teacher, Mike Maloof, is one of her most skilled.

Maloof is working directly with one of the foursomes to teach them a complicated concept, while the others work independently on their zoos. His intensive group is learning how to calculate percentages, or more specifically, how to tip waitresses. Each student has a restaurant's meal receipt and is calculating both a 15 and 20 percent tip, since they've also had a mini-lesson in the manners of being gracious about rewarding good service.

So, let's see. The checklist's long section on "methods of instruction" includes such items as coaching, hands-on experiences, modeling, providing opportunities for practice, and more check, check and check. This room has a lot going on. No one expects all things to be taking place at all times, but the list itself has prompted Lonsdale's teachers to branch out and use a wider variety of techniques more often.

The process is not about teacher evaluation. The data just helps everyone see what's going on. In the course of observing six classrooms through the lens of the checklist, I could see why some classrooms grabbed the kids' attention and why others were producing wrigglers working only half-heartedly.

The data collection process takes about a month to complete. At that point Magliocco begins the next part of Dana's "CARA" cycle — Collect, Analyze, Reflect and Act. She tallies up the checked items from each classroom and presents the information to the teachers. Data are just data; the numbers could refer to anyone's classroom. Teachers muse over the results and come to their own conclusions.

Magliocco has already completed one CARA cycle. "The first time I showed the results to the teachers, which is the 'reflect' part of the cycle, they said 'Oooooo. Good that the classrooms are well-managed.' But as they continued to look, they realized three classrooms' kids were disengaged and only one class had highly engaged kids."

Hmmmm.

Historically, teachers, principals and parents alike have always appreciated orderly, controlled and well-behaved classrooms. But were the kids learning? Likely not so much. The Dana Center notes that well-managed "behavior is often mistaken for authentic engagement," and only "willingly compliant" or "ritually engaged." Actual learning is far more important than keeping the noise level down.

Magliocco beams, "The teachers said that the data really opened their eyes. Personally, I value this part of the process the most. I just showed up with the data that day. The teachers developed actions they planned to take, based on what it had told them. They also decided what observable evidence would show that their actions were being carried out." Now, as she works on her second cycle of data collection, Magliocco looks specially for the evidence the teachers want to see.

"I can't stress enough how keeping the process non-evaluative is working. Teacher practice is changing."

Even so, Magliocco concedes, "The teachers in this building are not all in the same place. They all want their kids to be highly engaged, of course. But some have been teaching one way for a long time. The teachers who go for the Dana Center training on a regular basis come back and change their own practices pretty quickly. But the grade-level teachers are starting to work together more," meaning that each grade's teacher team is sharing practices, tips, advice and encouragement. That will speed up the process of change.

For years, researchers argued that schools should put good data in the teachers' hands, back off and let them figure out how to improve. Who on earth would know better how to do the work? Support the teachers and hold them accountable, but let them figure out how to reach the academic goals.

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