Using an Evidence-Decision Making Framework in the Exploration Phase of UDL Implementation

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Abstract
The majority of this paper is excerpted from the book Universally Designed Leadership (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016). The paper will focus on two important aspects of the Explore Phase: investigating UDL as a system-wide decision-making framework and building awareness with key players. This paper will highlight the need for administrators to use a variety of quantitative and qualitative information to identify strengths and needs in the district before preparing for implementation. The importance of completing meaningful research on "best in class" districts to guide appropriate goal setting will also be highlighted.

Keywords
Leadership, Implementation, UDL, Evidence

INTRODUCTION

According to a recent policy brief by the organization Chiefs for Change (2016), "ESSA incentivizes states to use evidence-based programs and interventions in districts and schools. Doing so will lead to stronger student outcomes at reasonable cost; not doing so throws dollars after uncertain or even negative outcomes for students and schools." (p.1) The beauty of UDL is that although it is still a new concept to many districts, it has a clinical background in neuroscience and decades of peer-reviewed research to back its effectiveness (Meyers, Rose & Gordon, 2014). The concept of using evidence in our work can be translated through stages of UDL implementation planning (Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F., 2005) In the explore phase districts are investigating UDL as a system-wide decision-making framework and building awareness with key players inside and outside the system. We can use these same constructs of evidence and inquiry to prepare ourselves to implement UDL in our systems and schools. One of the keys to setting up successful implementation is to ask the right questions in the exploratory stages of UDL implementation.

Building the Foundation of Purposeful Decision Making

Building a framework for understanding the purpose for data use, or the use of evidence, is an essential precursor to this work. As a first step, it is valuable to understand the dynamic of the leadership and learning matrix. Reeves (2008) developed the leadership and learning matrix to distinguish our efforts as leaders in four categories (see Figure 1).

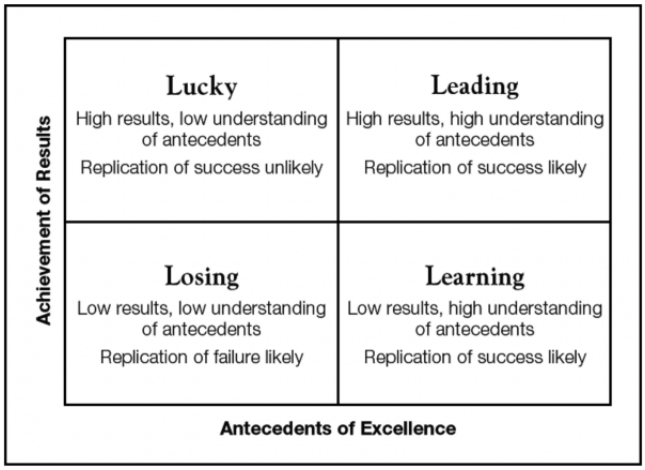

Figure 1: Leadership and Learning Matrix (Reeves, 2008)

The matrix articulates results data against the antecedents and categorizes our efforts into being lucky, losing, learning, or leading. We, as leaders, strive to be in the leading quadrant, as this assumes a high ability to replicate our results. If we frame our work around data and evidence so the efforts are demonstrated to inform our practice and increase outcomes for students, the work becomes meaningful to all stakeholders. A systemic process for data use must be established. Defined in that process are the ways we explore data, the structures to allow data analysis to occur, and defined products. Do we, as leaders, have a basis for effective data meetings? Have we invested time and energy to provide professional development (PD) in data use? Do we have systems in place to allow all staff, regardless of variability, to engage in instructional data meetings? Do we have centralized data clearinghouses of data? These very technical pieces should be established prior to implementing an evidence-based approach to our work. Underlying these technical considerations is potential push back around information use in our schools. Uncovering information about our performance is a very personal pursuit that often occurs in public forums with colleagues.

Engaging Stakeholders

In order to build a culture of shared evidence-based decision making, it's important to first gather important information about your district's data culture and what your community needs in order to embrace evidence. Your task, during this process, is to gather information to start important

conversations about data and use these conversations as a springboard as you build a sustainable plan for UDL.

In our practice, we began this important work with our teachers. Think of this as important site work before building a foundation. After a short presentation on our district improvement plan, we asked teachers to respond to prompts about our current data culture.

Completing this work is imperative in order to minimize the threat of data. It provides leaders with an understanding of where the district is starting and will allow for the meaningful development of opportunities to continue to explore data in an authentic way.

It is no surprise that people avoid data-based discussions because it often feels like an analysis and attack of their own work. We do not know any educators (effective or not) who go to work thinking they are doing a bad job. By dissecting information that demonstrates areas of strength and challenge, we are uncovering something intrinsically personal and exposing areas of need that undermine that educator's life's work. One UDL checkpoint reminds us to provide mastery-oriented feedback to support our stakeholders as they become purposeful, motivated learners. This feedback, however, can be tough to receive, especially if it activates one of the three triggers: truth, relationship, and identity (Stone & Heen, 2014). These triggers create barriers to accepting feedback and sustaining effort and persistence while exploring all data and evidence. We need to understand the three triggers before we begin to analyze the data on teacher perceptions, so we can further minimize threats and distractions as we begin this work.

The first trigger, truth, is when the feedback we are giving seems wrong, or based on incomplete data (Stone & Heen, 2014). For example, we may share college attendance rates with our school counselors, noting that there was a significant decline for two consecutive years without delving into cohort data. By providing incomplete data, there is a possibility that the information is simply a result of the cohort. When we provide feedback about how we would like to form a committee to begin the logic model process, we risk activating the truth trigger and losing engagement in an important process.

The second trigger, relationships, is when the receiver does not believe we are a reliable source, or truly understand the situation (Stone & Heen, 2014). For example, imagine we provide the decline in college attendance data, and we include an analysis of cohort data. We then provide what we believe is mastery-oriented feedback. The numbers aren't enough if our counselors know, for example, that a number of students have been joining the military because of local recruiting efforts, and we did not. In this case, they may believe our data is accurate, but they don't believe we know enough about it to make meaningful conclusions.

The third trigger, identity, is when the feedback is just too overwhelming and threatens the identity of the receiver (Stone & Heen, 2014). They believe that what we say is true, and that we understand the situation, but they aren't ready to hear that feedback. In the example above, imagine we provide the cohort data and highlight the patterns of students who choose to join the military, and have enough information to show that these variables did not contribute to the decline. After this analysis, we provide our mastery-oriented feedback, but when we do, our counselors may become defensive because of the identity trigger.

If we aspire to have meaningful conversations and make evidence-based decisions, we must first eliminate the barriers and triggers that have the potential to threaten our process. Our work must be built on the UDL framework. We cannot build engagement in the evidence-based decision-making approach if we do not provide options for self-regulation. Specifically, we need to provide expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation, facilitate coping skills and strategies, and develop reflection throughout the process. This work can be done by creating thoughtful norms to frame this process.

To provide expectations that optimize motivation and minimize threats, we suggest schools and districts be purposeful and careful to distinguish meeting expectations from thoughtful norms. Many people define items such as "arriving on time and having an agenda" as a norm. Although this is important to help people feel that their time is valuable, this fits into the category of meeting expectations. In our work, items such as these do little to change the framework of the discourse and get the team into a place to have deep and meaningful conversations. Establishing meeting expectations are easier and can be done first. Establishing meaningful norms about how we discuss this sensitive work is an essential next step if we are to create a culture where our colleagues are motivated to participate in this process.

There are a number of tools that can help you develop norms to minimize the three feedback triggers mentioned previously. If you are not up to the task of developing individualized norms, authors like Love, Stiles, Mundry and DiRanna (2008) have defined and provided packaged norms and accompanying resources to introduce and execute said norms. There are also free resources accessed through the National School Reform Faculty site that provide protocols to norm setting (Nsrfharmony.org, 2015).

Supported by these norms, the group can roll up their sleeves and get to work to review evidence and begin to share mastery-oriented feedback with one another without activating one of the three feedback triggers. Many districts went from a place of not having any data to being overwhelmed by it. Our experience has demonstrated that most districts have a great deal of data in some areas, very little data in other areas, few tools to analyze qualitative data, and almost non-existent use of research data. For example, a district may have a lot of elementary level literacy data, may have developed math benchmarks, and may have easily accessible state and national secondary data in ELA, math, and science. Yet, they do not have meaningful data in the areas of elementary social studies, fine and performing arts,

and social and emotional learning. They may lack growth data in science or have never done a vetted and thoughtful review of research into world language instruction. For example, how many districts have subscriptions to scholarly research and university level research sites and administrators who peer reviewed scholarly papers as a regular component of their decision making? Without all of this information, our evidence is incomplete, and as we mentioned previously, it is likely that we will activate the truth trigger and we will not be able to move forward.

Tying It All Together: Using Data and Best-In-Class

The need to triangulate quantitative data, qualitative data, and research is an essential. The readiness of the team is an important factor in engaging in this work. If a team member or team as a whole do not have the background to effectively do this work independently, then engage in this work collectively and build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance. What do we mean by this? One of the key stakeholders in this work is the administrative team. They need to model and lead this work at their schools and in their departments. Using a framework of collective inquiry, engage in district improvement planning that embeds this work and models it. This will maximize transfer and generalization which will allow the administrative team to become resourceful, knowledgeable leaders who can provide exemplars for other staff members.

By identifying districts who have succeeded through similar challenges, a district can learn immeasurably. Our peers can be very valuable resources as we begin our planning. In our case we conducted an analysis on "Best in Class" districts with instructional data teams.

This more comprehensive approach to district-level evidence-based decision making will include information found beyond the parameters of narrowly defined achievement results. But for the work of an instructional data team, the evidence needs to be small enough in scope to be utilized effectively. We define instructional data teams as teams of educators working together to review data and discuss information as a means of increasing student or school success by informing and thus improving instructional practice, programs, and services. There are collections of protocols that are used to begin the analysis of this evidence. States such as Massachusetts have created toolkits that data teams can freely use to guide their discussions (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). These toolkits are a great place to start, but you may need to design and deliver additional resources to meet the needs of your team. For example, when we were unable to find a resource that linked instructional data with SMART goals and educator plans, we created one.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that before administrators begin to analyze and share a variety of quantitative and qualitative information to identify strengths and needs in schools and districts, emphasis must be placed on creating a data culture and eliminating the barriers that can prevent meaningful improvement planning. When purposeful decision-making is built on a foundation of expert learning, and stakeholders who are open to mastery-oriented feedback, districts and schools have a tremendous opportunity to create meaningful and sustainable plans. These plans, when developed with stakeholder support, triangulated data, and research on evidence-based practices, have the potential to eliminate inequities among students and optimize growth for all learners, regardless of variability.

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