

What's the data behind the data?

by Tovi Scruggs-Hussein

Numbers don't lie. It's time we got honest.

For decades, the disaggregated data of our schools has been heartbreaking. I assert that there are adult data metrics we ignore that directly contribute to the problematic trends we regularly find in our school data. This has led to a very pertinent question, especially now: What's the data behind the data?

Let me begin with a short personal story capturing a long history:

I was once a young teacher at a Bay Area urban high school that looked very much like many of the schools in our nation, with mostly white teachers and the demographics of the students, mostly of color, not reflected in most staff. In 1996-97, after three years of teaching there, the first wave of high-stakes testing came out and conversations quickly started to become, "Well, those kids are bringing down our test scores; well, if those kids' parents would just...; well, if those kids could do XYZ, then our school wouldn't look like ZYX." The conversation was not feeling good, and to be blunt, it was feeling racist. This disrupted my schema, as there I was with leaders and colleagues whom I loved dearly and who I knew loved me dearly. They cared about our school, cared about our

families, and cared about our students. I'm talking about people who are still my dear friends and colleagues to this day, 25 years later. How could they be talking about kids who looked like me in this painful way?

I wanted to get angry. Yet, at the same time, my self-awareness and growing emotional capacity were allowing me to stay centered in a key truth: My colleagues are not racist, but there is a cultural disconnect happening. It was showing up as an emotional disconnect when we talked about how our work was related to equity, and how race needed to be part of the conversation. We could be more successful in our jobs. Failing to have these conversations in a way that was helping our students was preventing us from being more successful in our work, killing my spirit and contributing to racial fatigue far too early in my career.

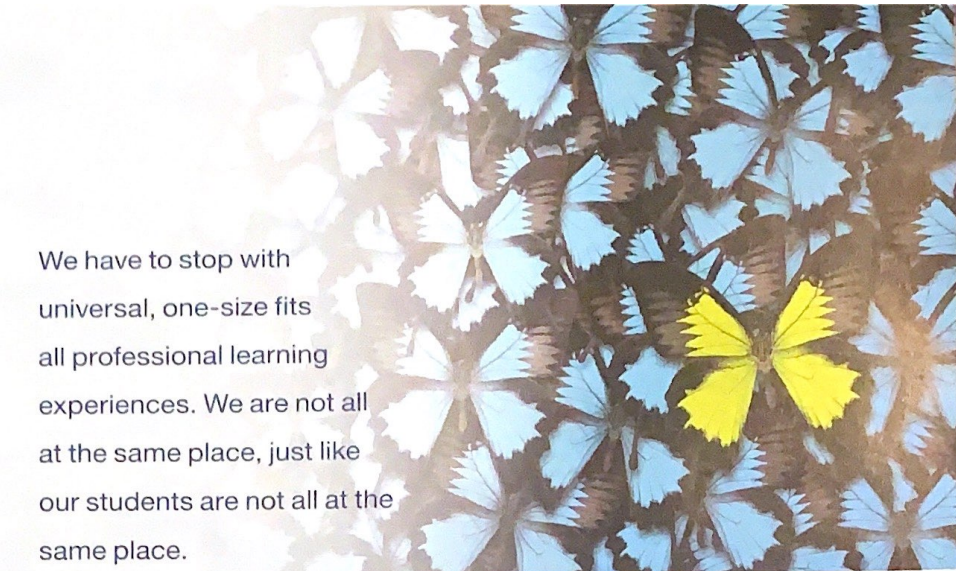
I got so disheartened, I left to begin my own school, focused on African-American youth, grades 6-12. We had a highly successful run for eight years until the recession of 2009. Shortly after, I returned to the same high school — this time as principal.

There I was at the same school, and I realized how happy I was to be back with folks

whom I love and care about — and they were happy, too. But this time I was the principal, and, shockingly, I immediately felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. The demographics of both staff and students had not changed, the data had not changed... and worst of all, the conversations had not changed. After all this time, it was still about why Black and Brown kids are not excelling in the same ways as our Asian and White kids. I asked my colleagues, “Why are we still having this conversation? I left because of this conversation! What are we going to do about it?”

Again, the internal part of me was saying, “These are people who care. These are outstanding teachers; they are skilled and have the strategies and know-how to teach. I’ve been in their classrooms.” Not only that, they are good and caring people. All the good stuff. So, what was the real issue? I was perplexed and concerned. As I tried to unearth the source of our failure in our data, I was targeted as “an angry black woman” for being upset about the data, but honestly, I couldn’t be a principal and have my name attached to that kind of data. In my mind, I had pictures of the kids and families attached to “that data.” That data had dreams, hopes, aspirations. That data had a valuable life attached to it.

After much reflection, it came down to this for me: We were not looking at the right data so we weren’t fixing the right problem — at the root — that created the problematic outcomes the data revealed. What were the various elements of these data? Which elements stayed consistent year after year, and which changed? It was clear to me that the consistent element was us — the adults in all of the systems. The students, year after year, decade after decade cycled through; they did not stay the same — but our data did. Consider, as a district, having the same kids for 12-13 years, and not even creating our own scholars in our schools, always watching the data reveal outcomes that are disparate and full of our biases. How can we have a system where we teach the same student K-12 and they are not algebra-ready for high school after eight years? These questions keep me up at night... and I had to be open to the shocking possibility: I must not be looking at the right data.



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What’s the critical data behind the data that we don’t capture that would shift the outcomes positively? I realized we had to begin to question what was behind the data: our biases, our habits of systemic whiteness, and our barriers to courageous leadership.

Once we systematically examine and address the data behind the data, we can get better outcomes for historically underserved students.

Our staff demographics require us to differentiate how we support staff themselves — this is critical. We have to stop with universal, one-size-fits-all professional learning experiences. We are not all at the same place, just like our students are not all at the same place. Effective, quality leadership development for the most important types of leaders in the world (us!) has been significantly lacking. Also, there have been decades of culturally responsive teaching and other equity work that focus only on “do-ing” which only minimally shift outcomes. Any improved outcomes have not been sustainable. Why? Because we have not focused on the “be-ing” aspects of the data. We have not focused enough on the data behind the data. If we just continue box-checking — even with fantastic culturally responsive materials — we will never get below the surface on any of it. We won’t change how inequity is perpetuated through us, the adults in the system. None of the interventions we have been persistently “using” to shrink the achievement gap have made any significant change.

Why? Because change is hard, and getting adults to change is nearly impossible — and pair that with the fact that we are

talking about racism, a 500-year-old system deeply entrenched in all of our institutions, especially public education where students of color were never intended to belong, only tolerated. The ever-present pushback on the mere mention of the fact that systemic whiteness practices are continuously supporting the achievement gap causes far too much dramatic white fragility and turbulence, and in these trying times, schools are turbulent enough. And the pushback is often scary and works every time to do what it is intended to do: keep adults comfortable at the expense of the well-being and achievement of students whom they often do not have a vested, humane interest in. You cannot properly educate those you do not genuinely love.

And, painfully, we all sit back and watch the gap widen. It’s a leadership failure of epic proportions. To end this failure, we must examine the data behind the data, where it reveals our heart sets and our mindsets as well as the limitations of our social-emotional competencies. Until we work to shift on a deeper be-ing level, all that we do will never be enough — we will have no inspiration or motivation to be more courageous in how we teach and lead to improving outcomes for students of color. So, I ask you, leader, have you been looking at the right data?

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