Data Collection: One Team's Story

By William M. Ferriter

Stories help to make complex ideas concrete. This story can be used as a starting point for staff discussion on your assessment practices, the core beliefs of your learning community, and how you collect, discuss, and use data in your classrooms.

The past few months had been impossibly frustrating for Michael, a sixth-grade classroom teacher and founding member of the Central Middle School faculty. The challenge began when his learning team—a group of six dynamic language arts teachers—met with Gayle, Central's instructional resource teacher. "I've always admired the strong bonds that you guys share with one another," started Gayle, "and your instruction seems to be top rate, but what evidence do you have that your choices are impacting student learning in a positive way?"

Michael and the other members of his team were caught off guard by Gayle's question. No one had ever asked them to prove anything about their work before. After all, the sixth-grade language arts teachers weren't short on accomplishments: between them, there was one district teacher of the year, three former school teachers of the year, and four teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Many had earned master's degrees, and none had ever been rated less than exceptional on principal evaluations. Parents loved the sixth-grade team, and students seemed to thrive in their active and engaging classrooms. "What more *evidence* do you need, Gayle? Are you doubting our abilities?" asked Michael.

"Not at all!" said Gayle. "I'd never doubt such an amazing group of teachers. But aren't you even a little bit interested in formally tracking the consequences of your work? Imagine how much more powerful you could be as educators if you systematically identified high-impact instructional practices versus those that were engaging but ineffective. You're already reflecting, aren't you? Collecting data and documenting how your choices are influencing learning in your classrooms would make decisions so much more targeted and efficient."

Gayle's argument struck a chord with almost everyone on the sixth-grade team. Over the past two years together, they'd made an unspoken commitment to becoming the best—and they'd invested countless hours into standing apart. All were avid readers who brought new strategies and suggestions back to the group on a regular basis, and all were willing risk takers. Experimentation literally defined the sixth-grade language arts teachers, resulting in innovative attempts to regroup students for remediation and enrichment, revised units that incorporated twenty-first-century skills, and nontraditional grading practices that respected the unique needs of preteens. The problem was they had no real proof that any of these efforts were making a difference.

"I think we've fallen into a comfortable pattern, guys," said Jennifer—a fourth-year teacher who often served as the glue between colleagues because of her commitment to developing positive relationships. "We're focusing on teaching but forgetting about learning, aren't we? And while everything that we've done has *looked* terrific, it's kind of meaningless if it hasn't helped our students to grow academically."

Gayle could sense an uneasy tension in the room that she'd seen dozens of times before. The sixth-grade team was worried that looking for evidence of learning might just prove that they'd failed—and failure for teachers had almost unthinkable consequences. She deftly stepped in to build their confidence: "You know something, Jennifer, '*meaningless*' is a pretty strong word when you're talking about all of the hard work that you've put into your teaching. Chances are that many of your practices have done wonders for students. Central Middle couldn't be one of the top-performing schools in the state any other way.

"But our goal at Central wasn't to earn awards, was it? Our goal has always been to ensure that *every* child succeeds—and that's no easy challenge when you're working with middle schoolers. Some master skills quickly, while others need repeated attempts and reteaching before they finally 'get it.' Half the trick of being a great teacher is having a dozen different ways to teach the same content, right? The hitch for you guys is that without dedicating time and attention to collecting data, you can't be sure which practices are working for which students, and you'll never be able to make adjustments in time to help every child. Does this make sense?"

Gayle's ideas did make sense, and each of the sixth-grade language arts teachers left the meeting energized, excited to tackle the challenge of analyzing student learning data in the same determined way that characterized all of their collective actions. They knew that succeeding would only improve their work, and continuous improvement was a part of the very fabric of their group.

As promised, Gayle stopped by a week later with a sample of a data notebook that the eighth-grade math teachers were keeping. Inside was what seemed like an amazingly tidy pile of paper sorted with colored tabs. "Each tab represents a different assignment," explained Gayle. "Teachers record the scores for individual students on every task in the appropriate section during their planning periods, and the team meets once every other week to look for trends in the numbers. They've even started tracking results by class and by individual student on a data wall in their workroom. Results really are transparent to the team, serving as a constant reminder that evidence matters."

After Gayle's visit, Jennifer had gone to see the eighth grade data wall in action and then set up the sixth-grade team's data notebook. The group decided to give a short quiz in the next week, determined to finally be results-oriented. Each teacher recorded scores on a class roster that was added the team data notebook in time for the next team meeting.

"So, what can we learn from our shared assessment results?" Jennifer asked after everyone had leafed through the binder.

"Nothing, really!" said Michael. "I mean, I don't want to be negative from the beginning, but I'm not sure that we can learn anything from these scores. There are a few obvious trends—the classes that serve high numbers of special education students did worse on our quiz than our academically gifted classes—but that's something we could have figured out without a data notebook."

Colin felt the same way: "Right, Mike. I'd love to know exactly which questions our students missed the most often. The overall average doesn't help me if I can't pinpoint the specific skills that our kids haven't mastered yet. I also wonder if there are any patterns in the types of questions that different subgroups answered incorrectly. That kind of information would help me to form groups for remediation."

The rest of the team agreed—common assessment results would need to be disaggregated before they'd be truly useful—and over the next month, they'd tried a thousand different strategies for recording information. First, they'd created separate tabs in their data notebook for each of the four main subgroups they were serving: English language learners, academically gifted students, students with individualized education plans, and regular education students. After each assessment, teachers began recording scores for individual students in the appropriate section of their binder.

Then, following up on Colin's suggestion, teachers started recording student answers to assessment questions separately. New binder tabs were created for each of the discrete skills that they were responsible for teaching: main idea, author's purpose, cause/effect, fact/opinion, and so on. Cross-referencing against the

data collected by student subgroup, the team was starting to spot trends in the kinds of skills that students were struggling with—and they were starting to make instructional decisions based on the information that they were collecting.

But the entire process was exhausting! "You know something," Mike vented after writing down the disaggregated scores of his eighty-five students on a particularly long assessment, "I spend *hours* here after school every week working in that binder. Sometimes I catch myself recording results in the wrong section and I have to start all over again. Other times I forget to write my scores down at all, which gives us nothing to analyze.

"Then, we come to these meetings and end up buried under paper! Just finding the data that we most want to look at is hard enough—and that's before we even start to think about what it all means. I'm also not even sure that we're getting the best information about our students' performance because we're so focused on assessment results. What about the interactions and observations that we make each class period? Shouldn't they be a source of data that we study, too?

"And by the way, if I waste any more energy flipping between tabs and making charts for a data wall that no one ever looks at, I'm going to go nuts. The hardest part is that I know what we're doing is the right thing to do—I actually like spotting trends and regrouping students, and I couldn't imagine not breaking our reports down by skills or subgroups—but this just isn't worth the amount of time that it's taking. I guess I'm just completely sick of data."

The rest of Michael's team nodded in agreement. "I know how you're feeling, Mike," added Jennifer. "I'm falling behind in almost everything—grading papers, designing lessons, answering emails—because I'm spending every spare minute writing down numbers. And while I want to do the right thing by our students, that shouldn't mean dozens of extra hours after school. Until we get more time—or until someone figures out an easier way for us to collect and disaggregate the kinds of information that we need to make good decisions about individual students—I'm done with data, too."

Gayle, listening in with high hopes for introducing data notebooks to every team at Central Middle, was dismayed. If the sixth-grade teachers—who had always demonstrated a willingness to go above and beyond, and who always seemed to find ways to "make it happen"–were ready to give up, something had to change. What had gone wrong? How could the team learn to embrace and use data for the benefit of all students, without becoming overwhelmed or wasting hours they didn't have?