

LEADING DATA-INFORMED CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

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PREFACE

Throughout the process of writing and publishing my first book, *Using and analysing data in Australian schools: why, how and what*, I became acutely aware of a number of things that I hadn't anticipated when I first started writing. The first was that while I attempted to find solutions to the question of how to use data well in schools, I was actually creating more questions than answers. Not only are there thousands of ways in which educators can use and analyse data, but some readers were already in a position where they were comfortable with some data collection and analysis but didn't know what to do next. Although there are still many people at the 'learning about data' stage, there are many more that have moved along the continuum and want to know how to further develop their analysis and insights as well as lead tangible, data-informed change.

Second, as the first book evolved, I realised that the data landscape in schools was changing. In Australia, the National School Improvement Tool has become an established framework in schools, but more broadly across the world, tremendous attention has been directed to learning about and using data across a range of different professions, including in schools. But little educational research and commentary exists to support educational leaders in tangible ways.

Third, in my consultancy work in schools, I learned that some leaders – even those with the best intentions – employed me to be 'the bad guy'. In some instances, I was responsible for having the difficult conversations with staff and asking the difficult questions about data because some leaders were not sure how or where to start or how to have those conversations with teachers. Leading data-informed change in schools should never just be about a consultant coming in and doing the heavy lifting.

Leading data-informed change in schools

Finally, since starting my first book in 2017, I have been reminded on countless occasions that the conversation about leading data-informed teams and change must be broader than a discussion of the Australian context, as educators around the world are grappling with similar issues to the teachers that I initially wrote for.

Through all of the discussions I have had as a school data consultant, as well as in my work on *Using and analysing data in Australian schools*, I began to see the need for guidance on methods for identifying strategies for change and how schools should step through the processes of collecting and analysing data, implementing change and celebrating improvements. If we are truly ready to develop effective and innovative data-informed learning communities, our middle and senior leaders must have the skills to conduct (positive and negative) data-informed conversations with their staff and employ them frequently.

This book offers middle and senior leaders in schools a roadmap for leading data-informed teams and communities through data-informed change. While there is much already written about leadership styles, leading change and the benefits of being data-informed, my experience has shown me that transferring an understanding of educational research and change leadership literature to a data-informed context is not always easy or seamless. While leaders may know some relevant literature and have an understanding of what it means to be data-informed, there are no adequate resources that combine research and experience to support the development of data-informed leadership.

As I discussed in my first book, I inherently believe that data have endless potential in our schools, and that data should always be used to have a positive impact in our learning communities and on our students. I believe that data should always be used to catch students out for the right reasons – to recognise things that we may not have known about them before; to show us areas of strength in students; to help us differentiate and cater better for their needs; and to provide opportunities to celebrate growth and achievement. Data should be used to motivate positive change and growth for each and every learner in our classrooms, as well as support their learning in a way that develops thriving learning communities where students are engaged and motivated, and teachers are inspired by the change they can see themselves leading. Data should never be used to catch teachers out, to hold them accountable or to scare them into action.

I also believe it is necessary for teachers and leaders to be able to articulate their views on, and assumptions of, data to others. If we, as leaders, are not able to clearly state our views on any element of our organisation (including data), there is a good chance our teachers will not be able to articulate theirs either. For this reason, and for true transparency, my position on the use of data in schools is as follows:

Preface

1. Data provide us with information about student potential (which can sometimes be different to what we thought).
2. Everyone can learn and improve with effort and application.
3. Using data can motivate and engage students.
4. Data can be inaccurate and/or may not reflect a student's true ability.
5. Data should be used to inform planning, programs and differentiation.
6. Data can surprise us for the right reasons.
7. Data should not be used to catch teachers out, but to catch students out – whether they are underperforming, flying under the radar or achieving great results.

As a leader and as an educator, you too need to be able to identify your views on learning and data, so you can articulate these to the teams you lead.

Leading in the data-informed educational climate has its challenges, but it is incalculably worthwhile to embrace the data with both hands and see what it can do for you. I have no doubt that when you approach data-informed leadership with and for the right reasons, you will see real change in your teams, teachers, students and the learning community as a whole. Data in schools has immense potential when it is used well – I hope this resource supports you in your pursuit of effective and compassionate data-informed school leadership, and in your change and improvement processes. Have fun with it!