

Finding the Root Cause of Our Literacy Outcomes

How do we honor professional autonomy while achieving more consistency in our literacy instruction?

This was one of the most important questions teacher leaders and I brought up during our recent data retreat/root cause analysis. We want a more equitable literacy experience for students. But how do we accomplish this if we are not sure about the reasons for our results?

Next is a description of our process of discovery, including examining our data, understanding relationships between influential factors, and drawing initial conclusions about how we might respond.

Phase 1: Examining our data

Our facilitator, Kristin, started our time together by having us examine our standardized test results from last spring (Forward). She broke down how many of our students were proficient in ELA by grades, then totaled them up.

Wondering how accurate this information was, we compared it with this fall's screener data (STAR).

3 rd - 5 th FORWARD SPRING 2021		2 nd - 5 th STAR FALL 2021
ELA	44% PROFICIENT	45% PROFICIENT

We were surprised by how close the two assessments were; it seemed to support that there was room for improvement. Next, Kristin presented graphs that broke down student assessment results within literacy. (Below are my notes.)

E.L.A. SUBTOTALS		READING	WRITING
3 RD		36%	33%
4 TH		38%	38%
5 TH		41%	37%

The data was affirming, validating our initial shared beliefs around the reading-writing connection. However, writing seemed to stand out as a more prominent need for students. This finding was supported by our previous schoolwide writing assessment.

Finally, we looked at subgroups within ELA. Two comparisons stood out:

- Students with and without disabilities
- Students who do and do not qualify for free/reduced lunch

Neither finding surprised us. Looking at trends over time, we could see that the pandemic hit our students with disabilities and students experiencing financial hardship harder than others.

Phase 2: Understanding relationships between influential school factors

After analyzing the data, we started identifying the possible factors that influenced our student learning outcomes, particularly with how factors influenced each other.

On sticky notes, we wrote down all factors that came to mind, such as: socioeconomic status, schoolwide focus, consistent high-quality instruction, responsive teaching, etc.

Next, we went around the room and shared one factor, along with whether we believed it was or was not within our control. What factors were within our control were posted on the wall.

Then we were allowed up to five votes for any or all factors that we believed were most influential in our teaching and student learning. The following five rose to the top:

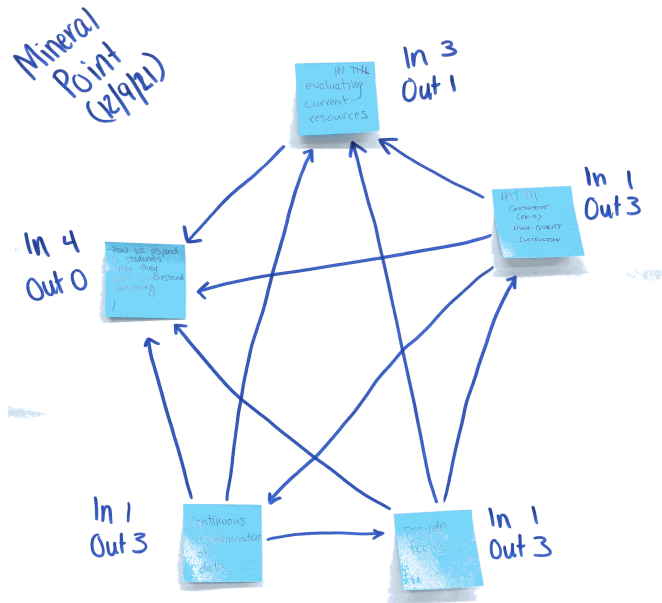
- **Evaluating current teaching/learning resources**
- **Consistent (4K-5) high-quality instruction**
- Providing schoolwide focus
- Continuous examination of student data
- Responding to students when they don't understand

The first two factors (bolded) received the highest number of votes.

Finally, the facilitator engaged in a protocol called “influencer circle”. For each factor, we were asked to determine whether it **influenced** another factor, or it **was influenced** by another factor. The purpose of this activity was to understand the root cause(s) of our current reality.

This was helpful as we tend to focus on the symptoms of our challenges instead of trying to discover the underlying issues. After responding to each relationship, we uncovered one theory of practice:

1. A continuous examination of student data influences our level of schoolwide focus.
2. Our schoolwide focus influences how consistent our instruction is for kids.
3. How consistent we are with our instruction influences how we evaluate curriculum resources.
4. Our curriculum resources, as well as every other factor, influences how we respond to students.



While I think we all knew this on some level, to see how deeply our professional beliefs and practices influenced what we did daily in our classrooms was an important insight. It confirmed the complexity of our work, while helping us to accept our current reality so we can consider next steps in our journey to excellence.

Phase 3: Drawing initial conclusions

Once we understood the possible factors and influences, we were asked to write out a problem statement. The purpose was to describe a possible cause-and-effect to explain our findings.

Prior, I had asked what the solution was for better supporting our students experiencing financial hardship. "They need background knowledge: experiences, meaningful content, vocabulary," responded one person. Yet if we had just stayed with this statement and not examined the factors that influenced why we may not be offering this type of instruction, we would have missed out on understanding the reasons for what we were doing and why we were doing it.

So, we crafted the following statement:

"Because the majority of our students are not proficient in reading based on multiple measures, especially students with disabilities and living in financial hardship, we believe we need a more consistent, relevant, and high-quality literacy curriculum."

Even though this was framed as a problem, we didn't want to present this to the rest of the faculty as if our instruction needed to be "fixed". First, we have had enough challenges and criticisms over these past two years. And second, we are already employing a lot of excellent practices.

At our staff meeting, I shared a slide which summarized our goal (80% of students proficient in reading) alongside some of the promising practices we have demonstrated, such as student-centered classroom libraries.

Our next step is to meet again as an instructional team to debrief about our data retreat and talk about possible actions, such as piloting a reading curriculum resource that meets our students' specific needs.