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BOOK REVIEW:

Authors: Lesaux, N. K. & Marietta, S.H
Publisher: New York, NY: Guilford Press. ISBN 1462502466
Reviewer: Tarie Lewis

Data, Data Everywhere!

Given the current accountability-driven climate of education, schools are generating large amounts of student data. As a result of Response to Intervention (RTI) and Race to the Top initiatives, teachers are regularly being asked to administer more assessments. Many literacy leaders are struggling to manage, analyze, and utilize their school-wide assessment data to improve instruction. In Making Assessment Matter: Using Test Results to Differentiate Reading Instruction (2012), Nonie Lesaux and Sky Marietta offer a framework for more purposeful use of student literacy data.

This book is a primer on types and uses of assessment, as well as a blueprint for supporting school-wide implementation of purposeful data analysis. Lesaux and Marietta provide educators with clearly-articulated steps for implementing a robust RTI program. The authors weave together current research on effective instruction and assessment with narrative accounts of the researchers’ work with teachers and students at Rosa Parks Elementary School: a school in which teachers work hard to meet the needs of their students, many of whom are English learners (ELs), and half of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. The authors’ discussion of assessment focuses on the experiences of four focal students. Each of these learners is experiencing reading or writing difficulties, and all four are varied in their literacy-learning trajectories. The authors walk readers through the steps that the Rosa Parks’ staff took to understand, modify, and use assessment. Worksheets are included, so that readers can also analyze and evaluate their own assessment protocols. The content of this book is directed at district- or school-level leaders and literacy coaches. Thus, for teacher educators of literacy specialist candidates, this book is a valuable resource.

Different Assessments Serve Different Purposes

Lesaux and Marietta emphasize that, in order to have an effective assessment plan, there must be balance in terms of purpose of assessment as well as balance between code-based and meaning-based domains. Accordingly, a comprehensive assessment battery equips literacy leaders with (1) diagnostic assessments to document performance on authentic reading and writing tasks (2) screening assessments that identify the potential for risk of literacy problems (3) progress monitoring assessments to determine growth over time and (4) outcome assessments to analyze grade- and school-wide performance (pp. 33-34). Explanations of the distinct features of, and rationale for, each of these types of testing are supplemented with descriptive charts and useful sidebars which address key terminology and concepts. Of particular value is the authors’ discussion of the overuse of diagnostic assessments and the misapplication of screening measures -- two conventional assessment practices that result in inaccurate evaluation and misguided instruction.

Understanding the Needs of English Learners

Given Lesaux’s extensive research in the fields of vocabulary acquisition and instruction for English Learners, it is not surprising that a strength of this book is the way in which the needs of English learners (ELs) are front-loaded. The authors share important research about ELs’ literacy acquisition, like the finding that most ELs acquire word reading skills at rates comparable to those of native English speakers. This fact has important implications: teachers should not assume that ELs who struggle with early code-based literacy tasks are doing so as a result of language development. Instead, the authors advise that such difficulty indicates the need for intervention. However, Lesaux and Marietta emphasize that this same principle does not hold true for meaning-based difficulties among ELs. In fact, the authors caution that fluency measures for ELs can be misleading, so it is crucial to supplement such measures with vocabulary and comprehension assessments.

A Blueprint for School-Wide Implementation

The final chapter of this text addresses specific information literacy leaders need to consider in order to facilitate the transition to the types of data-driven instruction advocated for in this book. The authors address common obstacles that leaders face as they develop an in-house assessment leadership team, establish a new assessment strategy, and manage the logistics of adopting and utilizing new measures. This chapter provides helpful resources, such as sample calendars and rubrics for self-evaluation that will complement coursework focusing on literacy coaching.

To truly implement data-driven instruction, teachers and schools need to know more about the types and purposes of assessment, the specific needs of ELs, and the process of translating results into effective and meaningful instruction. Making Assessment Matter provides the information literacy leaders need to accomplish this task in an accessible and engaging format.

Tarie Lewis is the Coordinator of Literacy Programs and a Lecturer at the State University of New York, New Paltz, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy education. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Reading at the University at Albany, SUNY. Her research interests include approaches that support English learners’ literacy development and morphological awareness instruction. She can be contacted at lewist@newpaltz.edu.