



Using Data to Improve Learning
A practical guide for busy teachers
 Anthony Shaddock
 ACER Press
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“I’d like to talk to you about my child’s NAPLAN results.” I suspect that this comment at a parent-teacher interview has replaced that previous horror “What you are doing about my child getting bullied.” The result of this shift in emphasis seems to be that today’s teachers sense a growing need for increased knowledge about how to handle data.

Let’s face it: teachers have always been great data collectors, but today the data collection exercises are far more sophisticated (though arguably, not much more effective) than the old grade books that were a teacher’s constant companion, recording everything from Bill’s success at tables to Mary’s absences from PE. The major change, however, is that today’s parents are far more sophisticated in their knowledge of what data seems to be important. To help teachers handle these queries it is hard to imagine a better resource than a new book by Emeritus Professor Tony Shaddock. Not only does he know his topic thoroughly, but he also expresses the issues so that busy teachers can share his knowledge.

In 11 bite-size chapters, augmented with two very practical appendices, the author explains the importance of effective data collection, the teamwork that enhances data gathering and usage, different types of data and how to extract information for each, and then reminds his readers that the findings need to be reported and that in itself is a multi-faceted process depending on whom you are reporting to. By the way, the author explains that *data* was traditionally viewed as a plural word but now is usually accepted as a singular one, so we can avoid awkward sentences that start off with “The data were shown to be...”.

As you make your way through the book you become acquainted with the staff of a fictional school, and you can compare your learnings with

their action research approach. This adds a further level of reality to the lessons learned. If you are (understandably) nervous about taking on such a project as mastering data collection and usage, the first appendix will help you with its detailed step-by-step procedures; if you are worried about bias in your analysis of qualitative data, appendix 2 offers one approach to reducing such bias; if you have breezed through the book on first picking it up (as well you might because of its very readable style) you will be able to relocate any points you want to check by accessing the sensible index, where you will find lots of information without being buried in trivia.

There are countless useful messages throughout the book (including the forward by John Hattie) but perhaps the most consoling one is that it is not the *collection* of data that matters; it is the *interpretation* of this data. Since teachers have multiple ways of collecting data, this message is well worth remembering – let’s not forget the richness of each pupil’s story! They are more than just a NAPLAN score.

Dennis Sleigh
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A Survival Guide to Parenting Teens
– talking to your kids about sexting, drinking, drugs and other things that freak you out
 Joani Geltman
 Amacom Books
 ISBN 9780814433669
 \$US16.00 (<http://www.amacombooks.org>)

If you are caught in a house fire, the last thing you need is a 288-page handbook on how to put out fires. I might have said the same about a book on raising teenagers – especially if you are supposed to read it just as your son has announced that the police at the door are probably there about his recent experiment with drugs. However, such a judgement would be rash – this is exactly the book you need. Not because it tells you how to get rid of police officers, but because it was written to be a first aid book for teenage crises – and with teenagers, many events are crises, aren’t they?

Joani Geltman, a well qualified and very experienced social worker in the US has drawn on her clinical experience to identify 80 issues

that arise in the life of many young people today. She admits that many of these problems are well-known to parents from their own teenage years, but she has also included issues that are just as new to parents as they are to their offspring: computers, mobile phones, texting and sexting, cyberbullying and cybersex, Facebook and other social networks. She deals with them all in a very thorough but very readable manner.

Her approach to each topic is identical, offering readers a straightforward and practical route that will enable them to identify the essence of each problem, learn why it is a problem, and then discover a solution. This three step process – here’s the problem, why it’s a problem, here’s the solution – all occurs within two or three pages. I found that the second step was particularly useful because it usually viewed the problem from both sides, that of the parent and that of the teenager. Not every solution will appeal to every reader, but there is more than enough sound common sense (which, sadly, is not so common in our dealings with young people) to warrant exploring the book.

The topics are grouped under 10 self-explanatory headings, such as ‘Keeping my teen motivated and engaged in school’, ‘Drinking and drugs’, ‘Understanding and dealing with my teen’s sex life’, and ‘My parenting style’. The title of each issue is clearly outlined and if you want further help to locate a topic, there is a very useful six-page index.

The book is produced as an e-book and the author has clearly understood that reading this type of text requires a particular presentation to prevent the reader becoming exhausted. I would say that this is a good example of just how to write an e-book.

Years ago I came across a similar style of book that listed 100 behavioural problems for primary students. I found it useful to photocopy the List of Contents from that book and give it to my teachers so that if they were faced with aberrant behaviour, they could consult the list and see if the issue was addressed. Parents might like to do the same here – if only to discover that their teenagers (thankfully) don’t seem to be as bad as some others!

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