

## Chapter 33

# Making Sense of Data– Informed Decision Making in Educational Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

*Educational change is a constant reality that is faced by school leaders today. These leaders are held more accountable than ever before for decisions being made. This chapter discusses the strengths in the continuous school improvement approach that develops both leadership and organisational capabilities such as collaboration, communication, and organisational trust within schools and school systems as they continue to deal with the ongoing onslaught of change and complexity present today. In these complex, ever-changing school contexts, leaders have to make multiple decisions on a daily basis. This chapter focuses on making sense of ‘how’ and ‘why’ data-informed decision-making continues its rising ascent and significance in educational leadership contexts within schools today. Through the accurate use of educational data within schools, a number of these decisions, can through collaborative decision-making processes assist school leaders and teachers in delivering better educational opportunities and outcomes for students.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of formal schooling, there has been a presence of a variety of school data-sets collected to inform teachers, school leaders and school systems on student learning improvements. Today, internationally data-informed decision-making holds centre-stage in the discourse around school improvement (Schildkamp, Poortman, Ebbeler & Pieters, 2019). When discussing school improvement, research indicates that school data is an important factor that is used (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & LeMahieu, 2015; Robinson, 2017) to make educational decisions. One of the main reasons for this growing dependence on data has been the ever-changing educational contexts that most schools operate within. The complexity

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found within schools is higher and requires adaptive leadership strategies to deal with the frequency of change that occurs within them.

However, for many school leaders and teachers the task of making sense of various school data sets and pieces of evidence being used is quite daunting. Some have considered the use of data-informed decision-making as both neo-liberal and an accountability-based process (Ball, 2003; 2015; Grek, 2009; Hardy & Lewis, 2017; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lambert, Wright, Currie & Pascoe, 2015; Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Ranson, 2003). Ball (2015) discusses his notion of neoliberalism and its influence on the common person suggesting that, “As neoliberal subjects we are constantly incited to invest in ourselves, work on ourselves and improve ourselves – drive up our numbers, our performance, our outputs – both in our personal lives and our work lives” (p.299). This notion suggests that continuous school improvement and accountability processes through data-informed decision-making gets perceived as top-down and bureaucratic (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Ozga, 2009) where the rhetoric of being governed by numbers within schools (Ozga, 2008) has become a strong discourse.

Rosano, Gates, Zaretsky, Santoro, Kurilko and Brigg (Rosano et.al, 2016) suggest that, all ten recognised types of school accountability are a major factor in school improvement where school accountability is a significant element which leads to ‘positive change’ within schools (p.139). According to Rosano et.al (2016, p. 139), these accountabilities include: political, legal, bureaucratic, professional, market accountabilities, parent, student, fiscal, personal accountabilities and, lastly, public accountability. Hoy and Miskel (2013) suggest that, “Accountability in education is the acknowledgment of the school’s responsibility for a thorough and efficient education for their students” (p. 474). In other words, accountability provides the scaffolding for improvement to thrive and exists in order for schools to continue to remain focused on their own school improvement journey, amidst a number of potent environmental forces that can potentially influence them and at times move them off-course .

This chapter discusses the strength of a data-informed decision-making approach that is being taken within continuous school improvement approaches in place today where the focus is on developing both horizontal and vertical levels of leadership as well as organisational capabilities such as collaboration, communication and organisational trust (Fernandes, 2019b). This is a common trend within schools and school systems across developed nations such as UK, USA, Netherlands, Australia and Canada as they continue to deal with the ongoing onslaught of change and complexity present in schools today. In these complex, ever-changing school contexts, leaders have to make multiple decisions on a daily basis. (Jenlink, 2015). Through the accurate use of educational data within schools, a number of these decisions through collaborative decision-making processes assist school leaders and teachers in delivering better educational opportunities and outcomes for students.

What is school data? Lai and Schildkamp (2013) suggest that school data is information collected and organised to represent certain aspects of schools being studied. School data can be quantitative and qualitative data-sets; ideographic and nomothetic data-sets; normative and descriptive data-sets; and subjective and objective data-sets collected within and for schools. School data includes relevant information about school stakeholders such as students, staff, parents, community, partner schools and networks connected directly to the school. These data-sets are grouped into four broad categories: demographic data, student learning data, perception data and school processes data (Bernhardt, 2003); and, is used to build stronger and deeper continuous school improvement connections across the school.

This chapter unpacks the importance of collaborative data-informed decision-making occurring within school contexts today. It discusses how these data-informed decision-making processes have assisted schools in using their knowledge, strategies, relationships and processes to provide educational

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