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Discussant to

Lorna Earl's Paper

Data, Data Everywhere (And We Don't Know What To Do):

Using Data for Wise Decisions in Education

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Empirical Issues in Canadian Education Conference

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Lorna Earl's paper makes a strong case based on the premise that data collection in education is here to stay and that the challenge for educators, researchers, government and media is to make effective use of that data.

Her claim that the public is hungry for information about education is difficult to dispute. The problem, of course, is that what often passes for information to the public is misinformation, based on either facile analysis or manipulation of data, that tends to damage the public perception of schools and the quality of education available to students.

Education expenditures as well as the issues of educational achievement and success are controversial topics that make fodder for highly politicized debate. It

is therefore imperative that data collected is interpreted and communicated carefully and wisely.

Inadequate government funding allocations for research in education, as compared to health, is of major concern as it makes it more likely that data can be misused and abused for partisan purposes, witness, for example, the Fraser Institute's school rankings that help promote its privatization agenda.

Furthermore, the use of these limited research funds is currently weighted heavily in favour of data collection. In comparison, the interpretation and dissemination of data as well as the training of teachers to use and interpret data, to help inform teaching practise, tend to receive insignificant funding.

Regardless of the level of funding available for educational research, there is undoubtedly a need for a better balance in spending. More resources are required to interpret and disseminate accurate information and to ensure that the appropriate cautions and explanations are provided to reduce possibilities of abuse. Parents, governments and media need help in understanding what the data means and what it does not mean.

The education community can not afford to set aside fundamental questions that are often dismissed or avoided because of their complexity or the diverse and often irreconcilable views they elicit. However, by avoiding these questions we

foster contradictory and unrealistic expectations of the public education system and the schools our children attend.

Some examples follow: Do we measure what we value or do we limit measurement to that which can most easily be done? Do we value what we measure and do we use that information to best advantage? Do we really value what we claim to value but don't measure?

Perhaps we should start by discussing how we define educational achievement or school success. Shouldn't measurement of achievement be comprehensive, inclusive, and based on a shared definition of what Canadians mean by educational achievement and/or school success? If not, why not?

For example, if we truly believe in life-long learning and education for life, active citizenship, quality family life, empathy for others and ethics, how, and at what stages, should we measure achievement or success in those terms? Can we hope to achieve consensus on these questions? Can we afford not to?

Are we not currently defining educational success or achievement by default, by reducing it to what can easily be measured through test scores on basic subjects, or by simply judging it by whether or not a student leaving school is able to enter university or obtain and retain a job, preferably a high paying one? And, if that is all we value and report as education achievement or school success, are we not

perverting the broad purpose of education that has traditionally been accepted world-wide and throughout history?

Lorna Earl's paper also raises a number of cautions that are essential to the effective use of education data. She emphasizes the importance of ethics in the use of data including the need to identify sound and unsound data, as well as our obligation to provide a clear and explicit purpose for the use of the data being collected. She also refers to the increased stress and tension that teachers and principals, in particular, are subject to as they try to cope with the interpretation of data and make sense of results. Is it therefore surprising that they often attach a considerable degree of skepticism or cynicism to the value and usefulness of such tests?

These are legitimate issues that require attention. They add weight to Ms. Earl's statement that, in the dissemination process, it is essential for those preparing reports to make it "very hard for the data to be misunderstood or misinterpreted" by anticipating all possible misunderstandings and avoiding them.

In conclusion, I believe that Dr. Earl's "Data, Data Everywhere (And We Don't Know What to Do): Using Data For Wise Decisions in Education", combined with her speech on the Friday evening of the Conference, are important contributions to the multi-stakeholder debate that is essential to developing a shared and

coherent articulation of what data should be collected and how it should be used. In fact, the content of her speech should be incorporated into the paper itself.

Ultimately, the major objectives of data collection must be to provide good information and to help inform teaching practice. Clarity of purpose, comprehensive analysis, time for training and resources to assist teachers in interpreting and using data effectively, as well as clear and unambiguous explanations to the public at-large and government decision-makers, are essential elements of an integrated and coherent process that is currently lacking. To help achieve that objective, it would be useful to enlist the expertise of specialists in communications so as to avoid jargon and to convey accurate information in a manner that is relevant and engaging to the diverse range of audiences that have an interest in education.

The jury is still out on the value of the Empirical Issues in Canadian Education, November 2001 Conference. It was, undoubtedly, a valuable and enriching experience for those involved. Its ultimate success, however, will depend on the follow-up including the resolve and capacity of the participants and their colleagues, to lobby for needed resources and to find ways of using the data collected to help inform wise decision-making for the benefit of public education and student learning in all schools across Canada.