CHAPTER 1

# A New Relationship with Student Data



## Introduction to Our Case Site: Rosa Parks Elementary

Outside it was a lovely evening, but the warmth of autumn twilight went unnoticed inside the aging brick building that housed Rosa Parks Elementary. Principal Mary Lansdowne and her dedicated staff, already fatigued from a long day of teaching, were poring over the state test results and shaking their heads. News had already spread that the school had not fared well. The data were particularly disappointing because this year they had pushed—really pushed—to avoid the scores they were now facing. Overall, Principal Lansdowne had a dedicated, caring, and knowledgeable team. Yet despite what they considered their best effort, the reading scores of their third, fourth, and fifth graders had stayed low. Their English language learners' (ELLs) scores were actually lower than the previous year's scores. "I don't understand," said a third-grade teacher, her frustration visible. "I know my kids. They know how to read and they're good learners. What is happening here?"

Principal Lansdowne understood why her teachers were frustrated. The staff at Rosa Parks Elementary had become skilled at evaluating student data and had implemented initiatives to promote data-driven instruction. They gathered for data meetings to carefully analyze annual state test results. Three times a year, substitute teachers were brought into the building so that teachers could individually assess each child's reading skills. To the teachers and to Principal Lansdowne, too, the assessment process felt comprehensive. It followed a procedure that made sense to them: Each student read passages

while the teacher marked errors; at the end of passages students were asked comprehension questions. If a student did well, he or she would move to a harder text; if a student really struggled, he or she moved to an easier passage. This would continue until the reading level of the student was identified. The reading levels were used to group the students and help them choose their "just right" books in classroom libraries for independent reading. On top of that, there were regular grade-level meetings where teachers discussed the students whose performances were most worrisome. Apart from all this careful work done during the school year, this past summer they spent hours juggling schedules to ensure that the lowest-performing students received additional support, including an intricately crafted tutoring schedule.

However, it was not just their "low" students who faltered on the state tests. Students who had been identified as reading at or above grade level also performed quite poorly. As she looked again at the disappointing numbers, Principal Lansdowne couldn't help but wrestle with the idea that Rosa Parks Elementary was being set up to fail by the accountability system. Almost half of its students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and she was enrolling a growing number of immigrant students every year, many with very limited English skills. It seemed unfair that the school was held responsible for the results of students who had barely spent a year at the school, or for students whose lives were so difficult it was impressive that they even managed to make it through the day. Yet Principal Lansdowne worried that, despite the children's personal hardships at any given time, they would end up unprepared for life in the real world if they could not reach proficiency on a standardized test. She often told her teachers, "Mastery is mastery. If a child knows how to ride a bike, he should be able to ride when it is raining, or when he has a cold, or when he is on an unfamiliar road. The same is true of reading."



## The Climate of Assessment

On many levels, the scenario at Rosa Parks Elementary is one that's emerging in thousands of schools throughout developed countries—the changing demographics of the population, assessments to monitor student progress, and systems to discuss student data, all as part of an (mandatory) accountability system driven by student assessment. And the outcome at Rosa Parks Elementary—disappointing results on the standards-based assessment—is also a common result. We are at a time when unprecedented amounts of data

are gathered on children's skills and achievement, especially around literacy and especially in elementary schools. While collecting information on student performance is intended to cast light on instructional needs, all too often data are collected and scores are recorded for compliance reasons without actually benefiting teachers or students. To be sure, test results can be confusing, even discouraging; teachers, families, and students can lose sight of the possibility of improvement and success when repeatedly faced with low scores.

In order to promote their students' reading achievement, the looming and daunting challenge for educators is to ensure they have a comprehensive assessment approach that includes action steps to link assessment results to the day-to-day instruction in classrooms. This challenge is critical for schools like Rosa Parks Elementary because literacy assessments, when properly used and understood, can be the difference between a child receiving the help he or she needs or continuing to struggle as a reader. Assessment data can also be the difference between a classroom receiving standard, generic reading instruction or a curriculum modified to suit the specific strengths and weaknesses of the particular group of students. When implemented effectively, literacy assessments can in fact *reduce* anxiety and uncertainty for schools, teachers, and students. For example, they can guide lesson planning for a whole class, as well as inform a strategic plan of intervention for those who need extra help. It is possible to use literacy assessments to make better schools, better teachers, and better readers. The goal of this book is to lead the way.



## A New Relationship with Data

In this book, we embark on a journey toward a new relationship with student data, as a means of promoting literacy achievement through instructional practice. Addressing the key challenge of establishing strong links between literacy assessments—including those collected for accountability purposes—and classroom practice is a critical next step toward school and student improvement in the field today. We bring to this challenge our lens as researchers who began our careers as an educational psychologist and teacher, respectively. Our work is focused primarily on literacy development, particularly for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We have spent many years working with schools like Rosa Parks Elementary, and even more time focused on individual students who struggle with reading, all while wrestling with issues of technique and the analysis of assessment results. We understand that instructional time is a precious, limited resource, particularly

for a teacher with many students who face difficulties in reading; all time spent assessing students is time that is funneled away from teaching. We understand that the goal of reading instruction is not to produce a particular score, but to promote a love of text and a strong foundation in using print to learn and communicate. We also know that effective reading instruction is not easily accomplished. Good instruction is the result of professional expertise and planning, nearly always with limited resources. It would be impossible for publishers to create a program that is suited to the specific needs of your learners, so data are needed as the guidepost for creating a learning environment that is student centered.

In a new relationship with data, it is not enough to simply determine whether a child is "proficient" (i.e., at grade level) in reading. In elementary schools, and especially in the early grades, we also need assessments to give us indicators of potential risk before hidden weaknesses manifest as reading problems (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Scarborough, 2002). For those who are struggling, we need assessments to provide us with diagnostic information—that is, reasons why the students are struggling. In sum, we need to craft a developmental approach to assessment: a system to monitor students in key subskills of reading in order to identify risks, follow progress over time, and identify breakdowns when they occur.

A developmental approach to assessment is the foundation for genuinely differentiated instruction (Connor, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Lipson & Wixson, 2003). In fact, a guiding principle of this book is that different assessments serve different functions. From a developmental perspective—one that focuses on the child—the purposes of assessment range from screening to progress monitoring to diagnosis (Sattler, 2008; Thorndike & Thorndike-Christ, 2009). From an accountability perspective—one that focuses on a group or system or institution—the purpose of assessment is primarily to assess performance against a set of standards, expectations, or benchmarks (Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2005). However, there is no single best test or assessment strategy. Rather, we need to put our efforts into selecting multiple measures and interpreting their results in appropriate ways to promote student success. It is how assessments are used—and with whom and how the results are interpreted and applied—that can be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate. When used in accurate and ethical ways, nearly any assessment can help us learn about our students as readers and inform our instructional approach (McKenna & Stahl, 2009). For that reason, and given today's climate, as shown in Figure 1.1, we are better served to integrate the accountability and developmental perspective than to focus on a particular assessment approach.

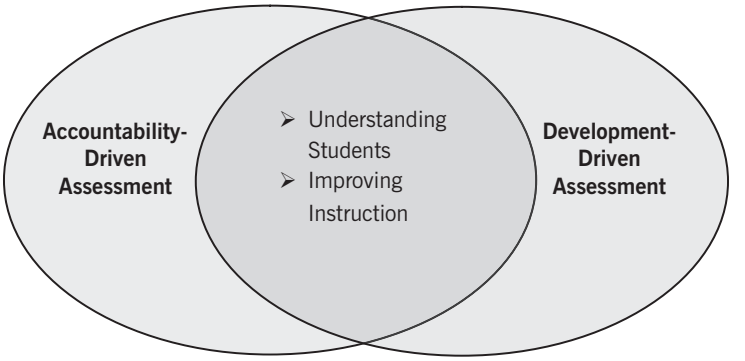


**FIGURE 1.1.** Integrating assessment approaches.

Therefore, instead of focusing on any particular test, or a particular skill, our goal is to build, interpret, and plan action steps around a comprehensive literacy assessment battery. The idea is to efficiently uncover students' needs, then to use that information to adapt and differentiate curricula and teaching with the systems and resources already in place, whenever possible. What we offer here is a process that can be used by any educator concerned with student reading performance—whether a district leader, principal, literacy specialist, or teacher—to build a comprehensive literacy assessment battery, interpret scores, and then connect to best practices for instruction.



## Meet Our Rosa Parks Elementary Profile Students

In order to understand the intersection of the developmental and accountability perspectives, and how we might make strong links between the two in the name of informing instruction, we introduce you to four students at Rosa Parks Elementary whom we will discuss in subsequent chapters. They are presented in the order they appear in the book:

- **Carter** is a fourth grader who reads aloud with fluency and ease. He had been considered a good reader until he scored in the lowest category of performance on the state test at the end of third grade. While his teachers from the primary grades describe him as an eager participant, in fourth grade he is seen to be disengaged with novel study. His grades on story test are low, even though he is reading texts that are within his level according to assessments. Carter has become increasingly disruptive during class, and shows little motivation to participate.

- **Max** is a second grader; his reading skills are progressing but are below grade level. Although gaining some accuracy, his decoding remains laborious and his comprehension low. In first grade, Max was very eager to learn to read and interact with books; however, as the year went on he became much less interested in literacy time. Reading is now a source of stress for Max and he is constantly negotiating with his teacher, reading specialist, and parents for less time doing literacy activities.
- **Marcia**, a fifth grader, is an average reader with good fluency. Marcia is a Hispanic student who was born in the United States and has been enrolled in the same district since kindergarten; she is no longer designated as an ELL. Marcia is doing a poor job with (1) homework assignments, (2) answering text-based questions, and (3) participating in content-based discussions in the classroom. Her teacher knows that Marcia loves writing and generating stories—they are often displayed in the classroom—and he doesn't think that Marcia's performance of late is related to lack of effort or motivation.
- **Kim** is a first grader who learned to read before kindergarten and is the most advanced reader in her cohort. In her classroom, the majority of her peers are at, or slightly below grade level. In her spare time, Kim reads chapter book series, such as *Captain Underpants* and *Amber Brown*. During reading class, Kim gets frustrated and bored, sometimes blurting out answers, other times withdrawing and not participating. She has developed a reputation for being "bossy," and spends lunch and recess alone. At home she frequently asks to stay home from school, claiming that it's boring and easy.

These four students demonstrate complex needs, and each poses a unique challenge to his or her teacher. We will examine each more closely: Carter in Chapter 2, Max in Chapter 4, Marcia in Chapter 5, and Kim in Chapter 6. Then, in Chapter 7 we revisit each student in the context of a data-driven instructional model at Rosa Parks Elementary. Even as we explore these individuals, it is important to remember that it is not possible for most general education teachers to create a unique program for all of their students. Moreover, evidence suggests that robust instruction tends to benefit all students (Snow & Juel, 2005). In order to balance meeting the needs of individual students like Carter, Max, Marcia, and Kim with the demands of an entire classroom of students with profiles like those at Rosa Parks Elementary, we suggest, backed by strong evidence, a tiered approach to instruction.

## A Tiered Approach to (Differentiated) Instruction: Starting with the Core

Modifying materials to make them accessible to our diverse group of learners is often referred to as "differentiation." True differentiation, however, is not a one-shot deal that is accomplished in a center or via an assignment, nor should it be relegated to educators affiliated with our Special Education or English as a Second Language (ESL) departments. Instead, we must find ways across the school and across the school day to make learning work for our students. In so doing, we want to ask ourselves if our assessment system, processes for understanding student data, and instructional practices are serving the greatest possible percentage of our students in the regular classroom.

Within a tiered instructional model—often referred to as response to intervention (RTI)—students participate in assessments on an ongoing basis and these data are used to inform instructional design and delivery (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; National Center on Response to Intervention, n.d.; Lipson & Wixson, 2010). The model is particularly valuable because when implemented effectively daily instruction is strengthened, and students whose assessment results show risk receive supplemental, targeted instruction to improve their skills. Frequent follow-up assessments are used to monitor their progress; following up with students informs appropriate adjustments (or "midcourse corrections") to the intensity and approach of the intervention. Ultimately, this process also identifies students with special needs or learning disabilities, because these students often do not show improvement even when given the best possible instruction for their needs. In describing the use of this RTI model at scale, we focus on first using data to identify and understand the needs of the collective over the individual. Only once a strong and well-targeted *instructional core* (often referred to as Tier 1) is in place, can we begin to build interventions that will serve as truly supplemental and supportive instruction.

In our work with schools like Rosa Parks Elementary, we have found that it is common for specific classrooms or an entire school to display distinct patterns of strength and weakness, just as individual students have their own relatively strong and weak skills. After all, children do not grow up in isolation, but as part of families living in specific neighborhoods and communities. Research shows that cultural and linguistic groups often cluster in certain neighborhoods and schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005), and there are common child-rearing practices that influence the skills that children bring with them to preschool or kindergarten (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hart & Risley, 1995;

Raikes et al., 2006). There are also certain practices and programs in place at schools that often highlight some skills over others, also resulting in specific strengths and weaknesses. The implication for schools, like Rosa Parks Elementary, is that even the best program of instruction will need to be adapted to suit the student population.

For these reasons, in our approach to data-driven literacy instruction using a tiered model, we focus on the collective before the individual. By accounting for collective, as well as individual needs, we can craft truly responsive instruction. The much less preferable alternative is relying on stand-alone tutoring sessions or supplemental programs as the strategies to catch up our low students.

When the RTI, or tiered, model is implemented well, there are two important positive consequences:

1. Assessment is closely linked to instruction across tiers. That is, assessment data informs decisions about daily instructional content and supports (*instructional core*, or *Tier 1*), to identify those learners who are in need of intensive interventions, and to further determine which students continue to struggle in the face of supplemental supports and are in need of further assessment and intervention to address their significant difficulties.
2. An emphasis is placed on *school contexts* and the quality of instruction. The focus is not just on individual children in need of targeted instruction, but on the appropriateness of instruction for meeting students' needs. This creates opportunities for conversations about school-level prevention models to meet the needs of diverse populations of learners. This is especially important for schools with high numbers of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Given the strong, three-way link between linguistic and cultural diversity, appropriate opportunities to learn, and student success, applying a tiered model shows real potential for designing tailored and effective learning environments.



### *Snapshot: The Practical Value of Starting with the Instructional Core*

Have you ever looked at the results of an assessment and felt completely overwhelmed by students' needs? This has certainly happened to us, as well as to many of the teachers and schools we've worked with. One year, Sky was teaching third grade at a school on the brink of being penalized by the state, if not

closed, for low assessment scores. As she looked at her class list of 21 students at the beginning of the year, only two were considered "proficient" readers according to the state test they had taken in the spring of second grade. Creating targeted intervention for 19 students was beyond her capacity for planning and not realistic within the time limitations of the school day. (After all, there are other subject areas that require time, instruction, and planning.) Not knowing where to start or what to do, she spent the rest of the year triaging her efforts from student to student, exhausting herself but never feeling as though she was really meeting their needs. Despite the best intentions, Sky did not have a clear strategy, and the result was instruction that was fragmented rather than cohesive. In the model we describe, assessments are used initially to identify the needs of the overall group of students. Thus, the first step is tweaking the *instructional core*, rather than planning small-group or individual lessons. If you are a teacher, this will include all the students in your classroom; if you are an instructional leader or literacy coach, or even an ESL specialist, this will begin with the entire school population. Only after systematic changes to the instructional core, and only when students' difficulties are clearly individual difficulties rather than a classroomwide issue, do we move to supplemental, targeted supports.

In Sky's case, this approach to tiered instruction would have helped her to make sure that the reading lessons were targeted to meet students' needs. No matter what, they would have received direct instruction that was learner focused, rather than guided by a teacher's manual or the latest professional development session. After all, a guiding assumption of this model is that with a strong and effective instructional core, no more than 20% of students should need specialized intervention. If you or your school has a larger number of students identified at risk, you are best served to first put significant time, attention, and energy into the instructional core.



## Setting Off on the Journey

Assessment is the cornerstone of the RTI (or tiered) instruction model because it is through ongoing assessment that we are able to identify students' needs. Sometimes students' needs are obvious, but in many situations these needs can be hidden during the normal interactions of school and would be difficult to uncover without assessments (further discussed in subsequent chapters).

As a reminder, assessment scores do not represent the end goal of reading, merely a tool in the lifelong process of becoming a reader. That is, we do not teach reading so that a child can demonstrate a specific level of fluency, or be

considered "proficient" on a state test, or even to do well on a college entrance exam. We want our students to love reading, to enjoy the private time spent alone with books, and then to be able to interact with others around the ideas they find embedded in the pages. At its best, reading connects us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and our possibilities—even helps us to improve our lives—yet we also need the skills to approach printed words with a critical eye.

However, the challenge of helping children develop strong literacy skills is complex and organic. Every year, every group and each student brings special reading challenges. While it would likely be impossible to craft an individualized approach for every one of our students, we can create learner-centered instruction by beginning with the collective, then accounting for the specific needs of certain students.

This book is organized into three parts. In Part I, we discuss all that is needed to make certain we truly understand our students as readers (see Chapter 2). This means crafting a comprehensive literacy assessment battery that will not only help us understand where our students' currently stand, but also the risks they might face as they encounter increasingly difficult, academically oriented texts throughout their schooling. Specifically, we explore in depth *how* to create and/or modify a literacy assessment system that provides valid information useful for planning appropriate instruction for the population of interest. A fundamental basis for this plan is balancing the needs of the group with the needs of struggling students (see Chapter 3). Do not worry—this system is not meant to be about an increase in testing; rather it is about ensuring the system in place is comprehensive and capitalizes on information at hand, all the while minimizing redundant sources of information. After all, we, as authors, have each worked in settings where *too much* assessment data are collected.

In Part II, we discuss how to interpret and analyze the results in order to identify instructional needs and effectively monitor progress for special populations. This includes students who are struggling (see Chapter 4) and ELLs (see Chapter 5).

The third and final section of the book is about action steps: how to take the information identified from assessments and apply them to instruction. This does not involve scrapping the current program, or throwing the teacher's edition of the core curriculum out the window. It involves thinking carefully about how time is allocated within the literacy block, and what areas are prioritized for instruction. This can be accomplished within our current curricula and programs; indeed, even textbook publishers encourage schools and teachers to use materials as a foundation that should be modified for particular

students. Here, we begin by understanding how to shape the general practices and instructional routines used with all students in a school or classroom (see Chapter 6), and how these can be better adapted to meet specific needs. We then conclude with two chapters: one focused on the nuts and bolts of schoolwide models of data-driven instruction—what systems absolutely need to be in place at the school level (see Chapter 7), and one focused on the challenges, key steps, and rewards of effectively leading schoolwide change to improve reading achievement (see Chapter 8).

In the words of Lao-Tzu, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." The next step is to turn to Chapter 2, where we begin by discussing the many different skills that go into what we call "literacy," and how we can begin to understand our students, such as Carter, Max, Marcia, and Kim, both collectively within their school population and individually as readers.





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