

Data-Driven Neoliberalism and Campbell's Law

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In the first sentence of chapter 1 of *Creating a Data-Driven Organization: Practical advice from the Trenches*, author Carl Anderson describes *data-drivenness* as "building tools, abilities, and, most crucially, a *culture* that acts on data" (2015). On a personal level I cringe whenever I hear the term *data-driven*, because during the ten year superintendency of Patrick K. Murphy at Arlington Public Schools, where I work as a teacher, I read and heard that term more times than I can count. The case can be made that Dr. Murphy was selected by the school board at the time precisely because of his commitment to being data-driven. His resume lists that in his previous position as assistant superintendent he had "[i]mplemented data-driven strategic plan with school board and superintendent to examine student academic and operational goals and outcomes" (2016, November).

At first blush, the idea that the decisions that guide us in our school system as we strive to serve our community should be grounded in the concrete, verifiable reality of "data" seems perfectly sound. I believe in science and the scientific method, and the notion that discussions of important issues such as climate change, sustainability, or the wearing of face masks during a pandemic should be rooted in shared "facts" as expressed through data appeals to me deeply. So I was at first troubled by my growing revulsion to the term data-driven the more that I heard it in our annual faculty meetings, evaluation procedures, and professional development workshops. I was not yet ready to state a clear objection, but I was at the stage described by Dr. James Brusseau in his textbook, *Business Ethics*, where the use of the term data-driven as I was experiencing it did not

"pass the smell test" (n.d., p. 8). On an intuitive level I sensed that it was linked with the problem of dehumanization as described by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (200, p. 44). By being turned into data, we were at the same time being robbed of our humanity. It did not help that the term seemed to be thrown about as a promotional buzzword without any critical analysis by big corporate tech companies (Accenture, n.d.). It is only with the opportunity to write this paper that I can begin to clarify my intuition and move beyond my sense of smell.

Though hidden from common view since its beginnings, neoliberalism has been the almosted unquestioned ruling ideology in most of the world we live in since it gained ideological hegemony in the 1980s. In his article, *Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems*, author George Monbiot develops the link between neoliberalism and data-driven. While never using the term, he describes a paradox of neoliberalism being "that universal competition relies upon universal quantification and comparison. The result is that workers, job-seekers and public services of every kind are subject to a pettifogging, stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, designed to identify the winners and punish the losers." In the following paragraph he states that while neoliberalism "was not conceived as a self-serving racket", it rapidly became one (Monbiot, G., 2016, April 16).

I experienced the evils of this self-serving racket first hand. It became clear to me over time that the primary function of the focus on data-driven decision making within Arlington Public Schools was to reduce labor costs and discipline workers. While this is egregious anywhere, it is particularly so in an organization like a school system whose

very purpose is to serve human needs. It is an affront to the respect for and human dignity of school system employees as human beings. It is also demotivating and demoralizing to "care workers" who need both intrinsic motivation and morale to be effective,

Even by its own nefarious aims, data-driven decision making as practiced within a publicly accountable organization like a school system also contains a built-in conflict of interest that undermines its effectiveness. This conflict is beautifully captured in an adage developed by psychologist and social scientist Donald T. Campbell, Campbell's Law, which states that "[t]he more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor (Wikipedia contributors. (2021, July 28).

School superintendents, particularly in communities with elected school boards, are public figures accountable to the public they serve. They are also political figures, who need to convince the public that they are indeed serving the community that elected the school board that hired them. For a superintendent to focus on data-driven indicators as the primary measure by which he wishes to be judged, he creates tremendous pressure throughout the system to make sure that those indicators tell the story that he wants them to tell.

As I both watched and was compelled to participate in the gathering of this data, I came to feel more and more that the desired reality had been reversed - the data was not serving us, our students, or our community, we were instead serving the data. The conflict of interest stems from the same institution being both the producer and the

evaluator of the data which is ment to guide its actions and determine its effectiveness.

The corruption pressures inherent in this situation abound, as described nicely by Frederick Hess in a blog post for Education Reforms titled *Education Reforms Should Obey Campbell's Law*. Hess lists several examples of the corruption pressures of misused data, from the airline industry to Soviet factory plans. He ends by saying that in designing measurement accountability systems, care must be given to "ensuring that they don't break the law. Campbell's law, that is" (2018, June 12).

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