



Statistics at Institute

Ben Spielberg

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Dear [REDACTED],

We have been impressed with Teach for America's commitment to data analysis at Institute. Few organizations use quantitative results so purposefully as a means for growth. Our data-driven approach is admirable and can help us understand our strengths and weaknesses, both as individual teachers and as an organization. We must, however, hold data that drives instructional decisions to the highest standards of accuracy and rigor, and we are concerned about the validity of the data gathered at Institute this summer. We believe the test format and administration logistics of the DRA and ISAT render many of these assessments inaccurate. We feel strongly that a reevaluation of how we collect and use this data will better serve our future students.

We have identified two main problems with ISAT implementation this summer. First, the option to remove untaught objectives from the end-of-summer assessment generates drastically different testing conditions. Studies have shown that student mentalities play a significant role in test performance. We might attribute ISAT improvement to new knowledge, but we could just as plausibly attribute improvement to the decreased test anxiety and time pressure that come with a shorter assessment specifically catered to taught objectives. Second, using the exact same questions on the diagnostic and the end-of-summer assessment creates an additional confound. Instead of testing whether students can apply the skills learned in their objectives, this procedure tests whether students can solve specific problems. Reusing questions can also decrease test anxiety and hence artificially boost student scores.

DRA logistics at Institute also led to two major validity problems. First, and most importantly, different teachers administered the diagnostic and the end-of-summer assessment for many students. Although we understand that summer school time constraints drove this decision, we learned during our initial DRA training session that the same person should administer the DRA both times for each student. Since grading style on the DRA varies, especially among inexperienced teachers, we have no way to determine whether changes in student scores are due to scoring inconsistencies between teachers or to real improvement. Second, every teacher recorded student responses when administering the first DRA, but some teachers let students write their own responses when administering the second DRA. While this measure again enabled us to complete more DRAs in the time allotted, we believe it also corrupted our data. Because student proficiencies with the spoken and written word do not necessarily align, changes in student performance may inaccurately reflect reading development.

We recommend a few alterations to substantially improve these tests' validity. Future summer school teachers could administer the final ISAT, for example, with the same number of questions and objectives but with different problems than the original. Unique essay prompts and new numbers on the end-of-summer tests would mitigate the majority of our concerns with the ISAT. Adjusting DRA logistics could prove more challenging because of time constraints. However, we believe administering the final DRA with the same teachers and the same response method to a subset of randomly chosen students would provide better data than testing all students with inconsistent procedures. Though we would not know every student's reading progress with this method, our data for the students we did test would have greater accuracy.

We value Teach for America's continuous efforts to improve, and we are proud members of this organization because student need and interest drive our decisions. We believe strengthening our data analysis would better serve our students. Not only would adjustments to the above procedures insulate Teach for America from critics, but they would also ensure we evaluate growth correctly and thus respond appropriately to our future students' needs.

We care deeply about Teach for America's mission and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our other ideas to improve test validity. Thank you very much for your time and consideration; we look forward to speaking with you more about these issues.

Sincerely,
Ben Spielberg, Bay Area 2010

