Case 6.2: Misinterpreting Data

"I know you two are passionate about this stuff, so I wanted to ask for your help," Principal Beamer said. He had invited Ms. Herrera, the district equity director, and Mr. Davidson, a math teacher and his school's cultural liaison, to his office to talk through data Terrybeth School had collected about student participation in extracurricular activities.

Terrybeth's population was predominately white, but included a large number of students whose families had immigrated from Mexico or El Salvador two or three generations ago. Also attending Terrybeth were a growing number of Native American students, most of whom lived on a reservation on the outskirts of school boundary lines, but some of whom lived near the center of town.

Mr. Beamer handed both Ms. Herrera and Mr. Davidson a copy of a bar graph that compared the likelihood students would participate in at least one extracurricular activity by race. "As you can see," he said, "our Caucasian students are most likely to participate in at least one extracurricular. They're especially active in sports and academic clubs. Our Spanish kids are not far behind."

Before Mr. Beamer could continue, Ms. Herrera chimed in. "I know you didn't invite us here to talk about this, but I'm concerned about the language you're using to describe groups of students and the terminology on this chart. I know we've discussed this before, and I know this isn't your intention, but you're still using language that is inaccurate and, to be honest, archaic."

Mr. Beamer responded with a frustrated sigh: "Can we focus on what's important here?" Ms. Herrera made a mental note to circle back around to her concern. She knew it was never fruitful to push Mr. Beamer on something when he seemed upset or annoyed.

Then Mr. Beamer referred his guests to the chart depicting the likelihood of participation for "Native American Indians." "As you can see, *these* kids are notably *unlikely* to participate in sports, academic clubs, or any extracurriculars," he said.

Mr. Davidson asked, "How do you make sense of that disparity?"

Mr. Beamer reminded Mr. Davidson and Ms. Herrera that Terrybeth data also show that "these same students are far more likely to be suspended or expelled than the other kids." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Doesn't this prove what I've been saying, that these kids just don't value school, that they don't want to take advantage of all we're offering them? I really need your help figuring out how to convince the Native American Indian families to instill in their children the value of school."

"I don't see any indication of a *why* in what you've handed us," Ms. Herrera said. "Nothing here is evidence of *why* the disparity exists. Is it possible you're projecting your presumptions onto the data?"

Mr. Davidson added, "I agree. And I'm worried about how widespread those presumptions are in this school and the effect that might have on students."

"Look," Mr. Beamer responded, "I didn't invite you here to interrogate me or to make me out to be the problem. It's well-known that some families just don't value education. What I want to talk about is what we're going to do about *that*."

After the meeting Ms. Herrera and Mr. Davidson had a brief moment to chat before Mr. Davidson's next class. They shared their concerns about Mr. Beamer's biases and defensiveness and agreed to meet with one another soon to find some way to break through to him.

Questions

1. What are three possible explanations *other than* "those students don't value education" for why Native American students were less likely to participate in extracurriculars than other students at Terrybeth School? How might Mr. Beamer's biases contribute to this pattern, whether directly or indirectly?

2. Mr. Beamer suggests that the language he's using, and the language used on the bar graph, are not important. Do you agree with him? To what extent is it important to use contemporary, accurate terminology when referring to groups of people?

3. If you were Ms. Herrera or Mr. Davidson, how might you try to break through Mr. Beamer's defensiveness and understand the data differently?

4. Can you think of other examples of when data have been misinterpreted in a school setting in ways that could elevate inequity instead of helping to create the understandings necessary to eliminate inequity?

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