

When Politics Trumps Science:

**Generalizations from a Career of Research on
Assessment, Decision Making and Public
Policy**

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Overview

- ❖ Describe the **focus** of my research career
- ❖ Talk about the **context** for the research
- ❖ Provide a set of **generalizations** based on research findings and research experiences
- ❖ Talk briefly about the **future** of assessment, decision making and public policy



Focus of Research

- ❖ Focus is on “at risk” students, struggling students, and students who are failing



Focus of the Work

- ❖ Enhancing the competence of individual students
- ❖ Building the capacity of systems to meet student's needs



Competence Enhancement



Examples of Research Questions Addressed by Jim and Colleagues

- ❖ How can we assess her skills and needs in a technically adequate manner?
- ❖ What treatments, interventions, or instructional approaches work best to enhance her competence?
- ❖ How can we intervene to change the system so that this individual and others like her improve? (prevention, school organization, home-school collaboration, effective instruction, school-wide discipline, etc.)



Examples of Research Questions Addressed by Jim and Colleagues

- ❖ How do we decide out of all the students struggling/failing in school the ones who are eligible for special services?
- ❖ How can we use assessment information to plan effective instructional programs?
- ❖ Do specific testing accommodations (e.g., reading the math test) alter the validity of a test?



Examples of Research Questions Addressed by Jim and Colleagues

- ❖ What are the consequences of high-stakes assessments?
- ❖ To what extent do technology-enhanced assessment systems improve progress monitoring?
- ❖ What should training and practice in Special Education and School Psychology look like?



Specific Projects

- ❖ Minnesota Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities
- ❖ Enrollment Options Studies (Charters, open enrollment)
- ❖ National School Psychology Network
- ❖ National Center on Educational Outcomes
- ❖ Efficacy of Technology-Enhanced Progress Monitoring Systems
- ❖ Consequences of Assessment Provisions of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- ❖ Consequences of NCLB for students and systems



THE CONTEXT

1971-2011



Context for the Research (1971-2011)

- ❖ The U.S. is the only nation with a dual educational mission:
 - ✓ Excellence
 - ✓ Equity



The U.S. View that School Improvement Requires:

- ❖ Articulation of high standards
- ❖ Rigorous assessment of progress toward standards
- ❖ Teacher and school accountability for student achievement as reflected in test scores



Context for the Research

(1971-2011)

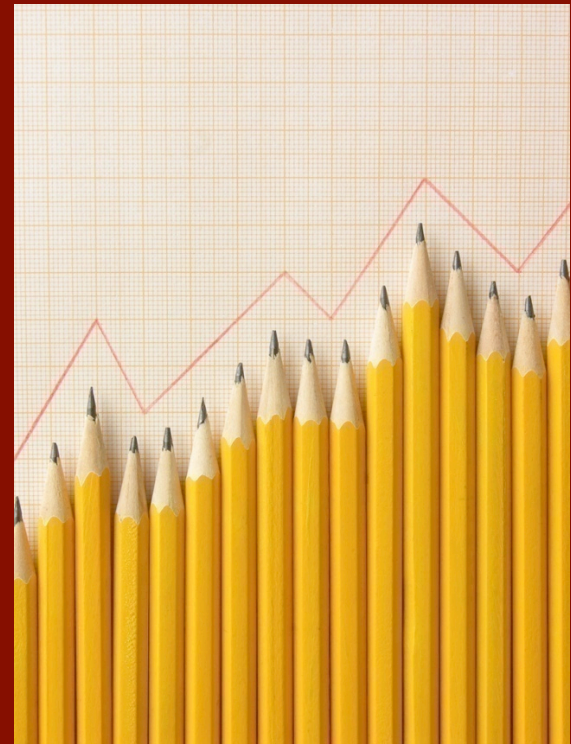


- ❖ Emerging federal role in education of students with disabilities
- ❖ Political pressure to desegregate schools and to narrow achievement gaps
- ❖ Increased testing of students
- ❖ Increased effort to document deviance
- ❖ Accompanying teacher resistance to use of tests
- ❖ Few well-developed mechanisms for dissemination of research findings



Increased Focus on Data-Driven Practices

- ❖ In business and industry
- ❖ In Education
 - ✓ The No Child Left Behind Act - The term “evidence-based” is used more than 100 times
 - ✓ There are four provisions - Two of these are “accountability” and “evidence-based interventions”



Major Changes in Research, Communication and Dissemination Tools

- ❖ E-mail
- ❖ Internet (Google Scholar, etc.)
- ❖ Online journals
- ❖ Webinars
- ❖ Blogs
- ❖ Personal Websites
- ❖ You Tube, face book, social networking systems.
- ❖ Wiki's and Wikipedia



CHANGES OVER TIME IN ASSESSMENT PRACTICES



Reschly and Ysseldyke: The “Paradigm Shift” in School Psychology



- ❖ from the correlational science of standardized testing, prediction, and placement
- ❖ to an experimental science of interventions designed to maximize learning guided by short-run empiricism – problem solving and response to intervention



The Paradigm Shift:

- ❖ from a search for pathology
- ❖ to enhancement of student competence and the capacity of systems to improve student competence



The Paradigm Shift:

- ❖ from a deficit perspective focusing on identification of weaknesses
- ❖ to a resilience perspective focusing on the strengths of the individual and on ways to modify the environment to remove barriers and increase the probability of success



The Paradigm Shift:

- ❖ from viewing disability as a defect
- ❖ to viewing disability as a dimension of human difference and categories of disability as socially constructed such that meaning is derived from society's response to individuals who deviate from cultural standards (Mertens, 1998, 2000)



**TOP 10
GENERALIZATIONS
FROM 40 YEARS OF
RESEARCH AND
EXPERIENCE**



1. Change is Difficult and More Political than Data-Based

- ❖ Much of what happens in assessment, is a function of history, tradition, bandwagon, cash validity, and testimonial evidence.
- ❖ Assessment practices are tough to change.
 - ✓ What works requires work—change is not a unilateral process but requires many parts coming together
 - ✓ Change involving extra work is difficult—there are not effective contingencies compelling and sustaining change.



1. (cont) Change is Difficult and More Political than Data-Based

- ❖ Unfortunately, too many of us have operated under the notion that data and evidence are good to the extent that they validate our own biases.





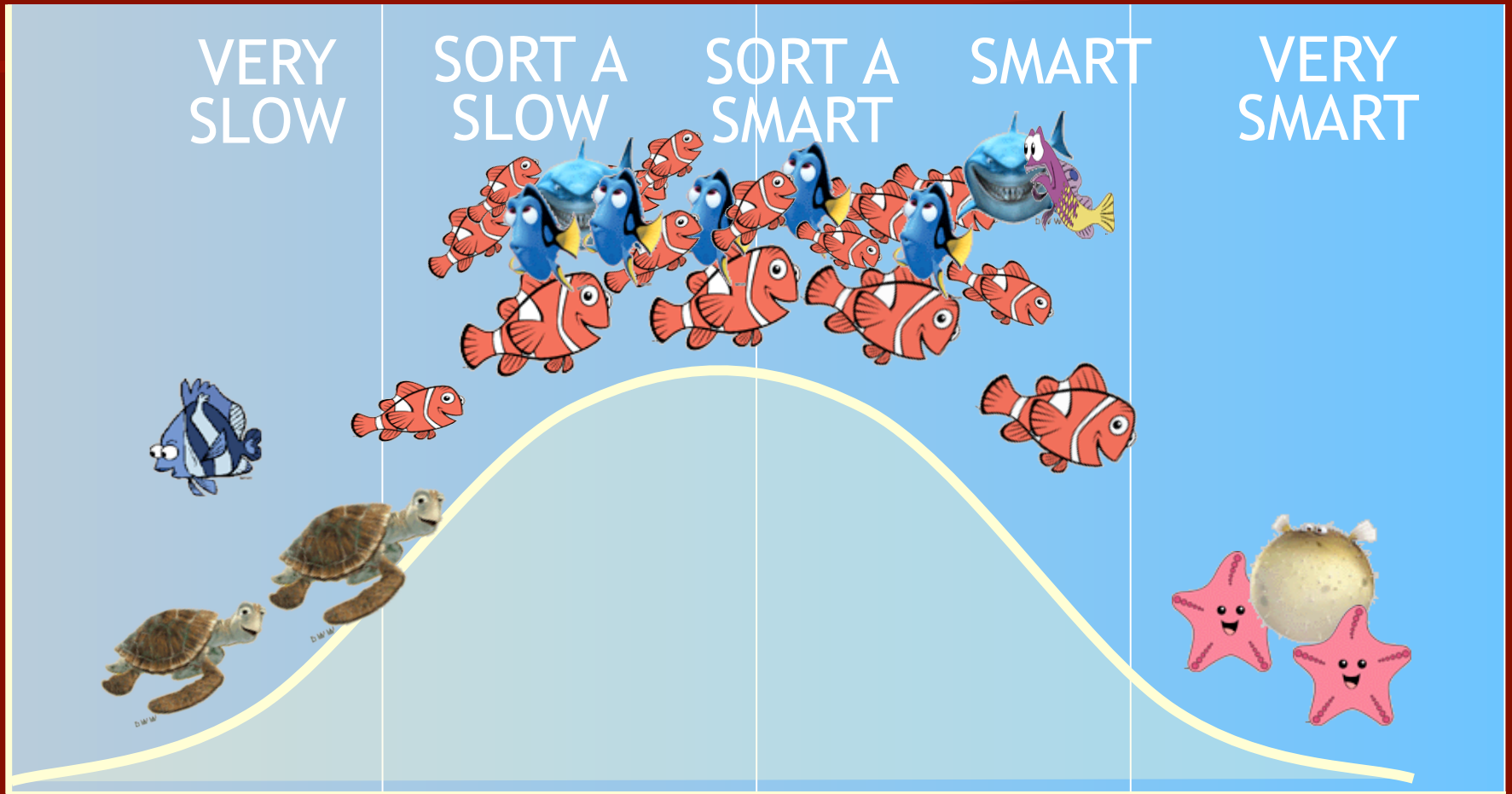
2. We Need to Move from Sifting and Sorting

to Multi-Tiered
Serving and
Supporting



Traditional: *The Fish*

Student Population



Student Smartness

Permission: Amelia Van Name Larson

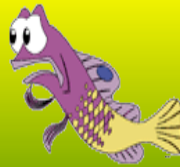


Serving the Fluid Needs of ALL Using a Multi-Tier System of Supports

HIGH RISK



MODERATE RISK



PROFICIENT/LOW RISK



A - ADVANCED

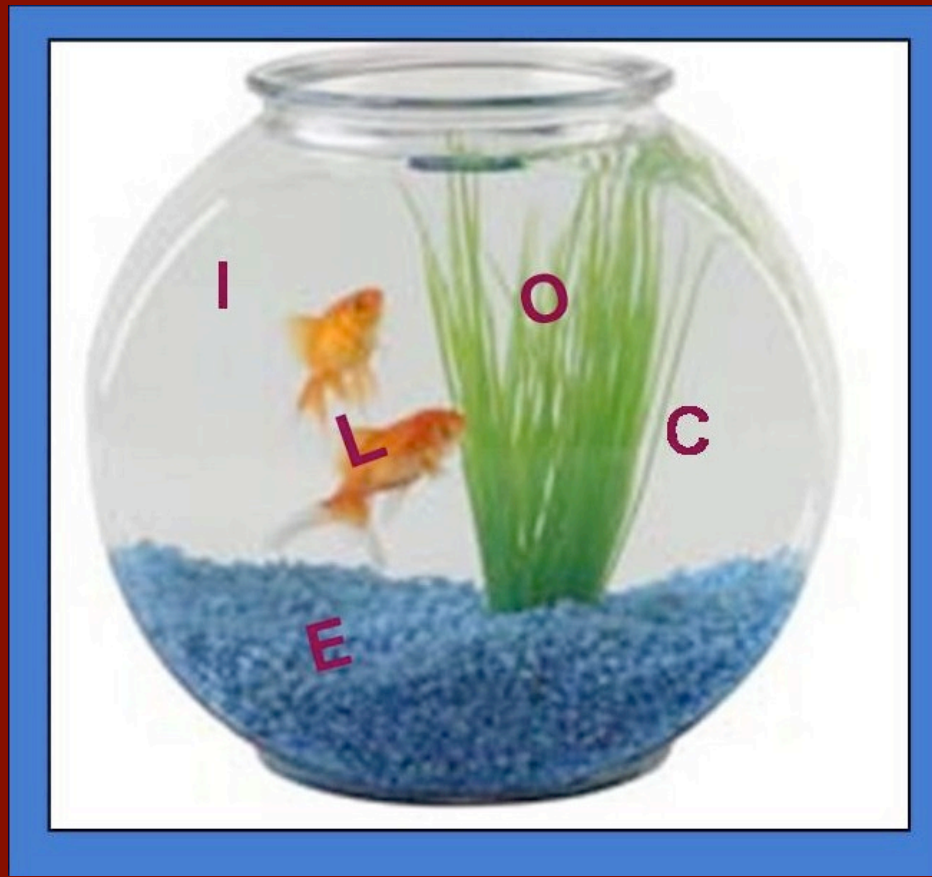


3. We Need To Shift Our Focus from Struggling Students to Making Sure All Students Struggle

- ❖ All students should be challenged
- ❖ Instruction should be matched to their level
- ❖ We should have all working at their ZPD



4. If the Water in the Aquarium is Dirty, it makes Little Sense to Spend Your Time Diagnosing Individual Fish



Permission: Amelia Van Name Larson





A Shift in Thinking

The central question is not:

*“What about the students is causing the performance discrepancy” **but***

*“What about the interaction of the **curriculum, instruction, and learners, and learning environment, and organization** should be altered so that students will learn?”*

*This **shift** alters everything else*



5. We Need to Keep our Focus on Assessment that Matters



- ❖ There are three kinds of assessments:
 - ✓ Assessments that matter but are technically inadequate
 - ✓ Assessments that are technically adequate and do not matter
 - ✓ Assessments that are technically adequate AND that matter



5. (cont.) We Need to Keep our Focus on Assessment that Matters



The fundamental purpose of assessment is gathering information that leads to improvement in student's competencies in relevant domains of behavior such as achievement, social behavior, and emotional regulation. If assessment practices do not do so, the assessments do not matter.



5. (cont.) We Need to Keep our Focus on Assessment that Matters

- ❖ Assessment that is related to and supports the development of effective interventions is worthwhile and clearly in the best interests of individuals, families, communities, schools, and society.



5. (cont.) We Need to Keep our Focus on Assessment that Matters

- ❖ There are two different approaches to Assessment and Accountability Practices:
 - ✓ Top-Down (Using results of large-scale assessments to make instructional decisions)
 - ✓ Bottom-Up (Aggregating data from continuous and periodic assessments to make accountability decisions)



IF We Fail to Make the Shift to Bottom-up WE will be Top-Down



6. Expectations Drive the Process of Making Assessment Decisions, and those Expectations are Far too Low



- ❖ Professionals hold stereotypes about who is disabled, and nearly all of these have unfortunate consequences (lead to misdiagnosis)
- ❖ Educators hold stereotypes about the kinds of students who can be successful, and these affect student results (stereotypic expectations)



7. We Spend Far too Much Time Making Predictions about Students' Lives, and Far too Little Time Making a Difference in Their Lives

- ❖ The current classification practice is problematic
- ❖ People have been making the eligibility determination process more and more sophisticated



7. (cont.) We Spend Far too Much Time Making Predictions about Students' Lives, and Far too Little Time Making a Difference in Their Lives



- ❖ We have invented new processes or abilities for students to be deficient in; new formulas when old ones did not result in eligibility for kids we thought should be eligible



8. The best place to start correcting learning problems is in the instructional process (NOT in remediating underlying deficits, disorders, or dysfunctions)



- ❖ Our focus needs to be on constructing successful learning environments
 - ✓ FAAB
 - ✓ EBASS



9. High Stakes Accountability Systems have Some Unintended Negative Consequences for Students with Disabilities and the Schools who Serve Them



- ❖ Burnout
- ❖ Cheating
- ❖ Referral
- ❖ Dropout
- ❖ Grade Retention



10. We need to address current issues in implementation of RTI

- ❖ Conceptual/definitional Confusion
- ❖ Documentation of effective instruction
- ❖ Intervention integrity (fidelity of treatment)
- ❖ Sustainability
- ❖ Teacher overload (expectations for addressing diversity)



Always Deliver More than You Promise



11. Too Much Information, Too Little Understanding



12. Collaboration and Multidisciplinary Efforts are Critical



THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE



1. Data-Based Decision-Making and Accountability will continue to be Cornerstones Training and Practice in Special Education and School Psychology

- ❖ The scientist-practitioner model
- ❖ The push for evidence-based instruction
 - ✓ Blueprint/NASP Standards/NASP Framework
 - ✓ Documentation of intervention integrity



2. There Will Be an Increased Focus on Collecting Data that Maximally Inform Instruction



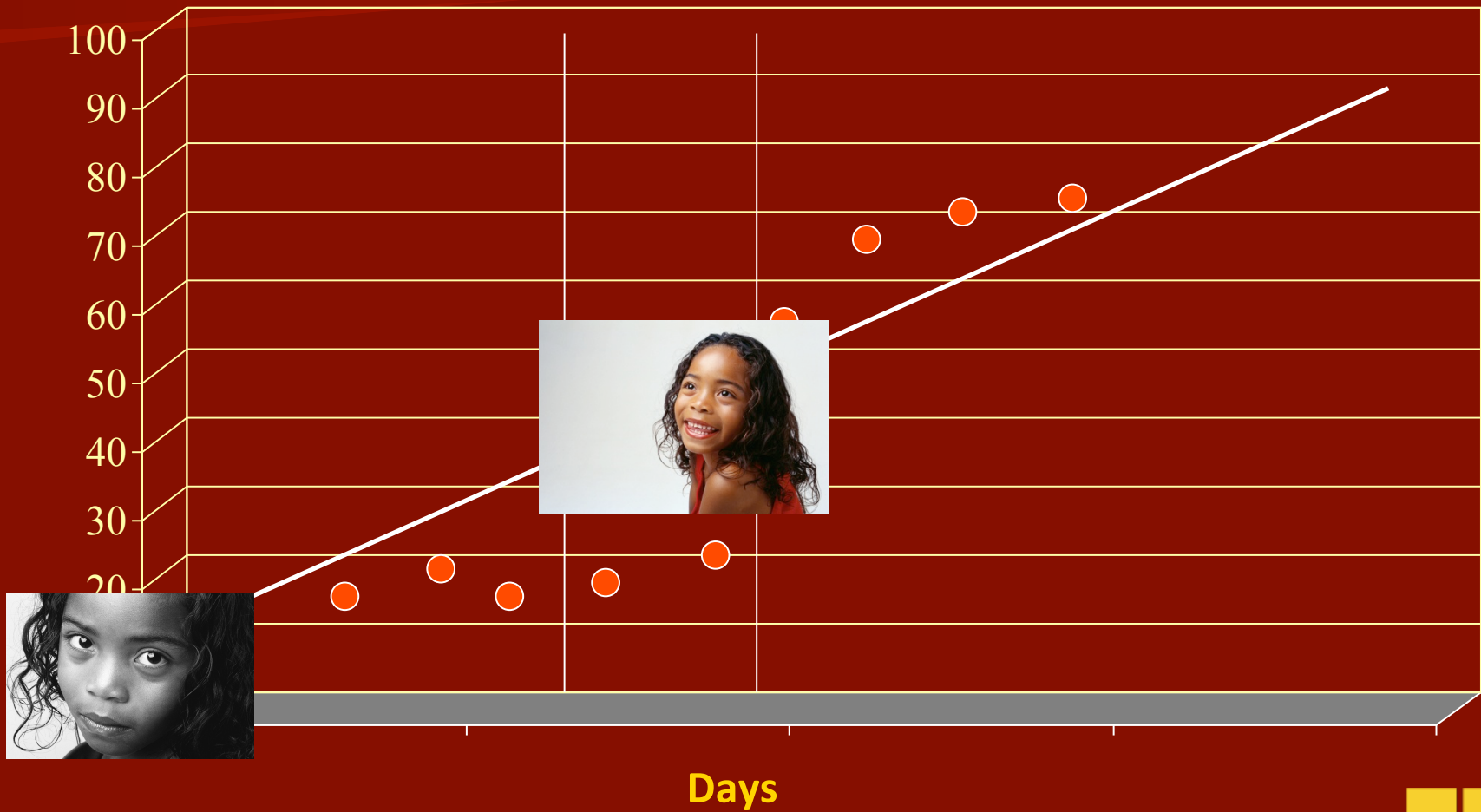
- ❖ Assessments *of learning* provide evidence of achievement for public reporting
- ❖ Assessments *for learning* serve to help students learn more



**3. There will be increased use of
Problem-solving Approaches and
Monitoring of Student Progress
Toward Terminal Goals**



Rate of Student Growth



5. Increased Attention to the Positive and Negative Consequences of Accountability Systems



6. Increased recognition of the importance of treatment integrity



7. Move Toward and Resistance to Common Core Standards



8. Increased Use of Technology-Enhanced Progress Monitoring Systems

- ❖ Continuous assessments
- ❖ Periodic/Benchmark assessments
- ❖ CAT as part of CCS



9. Increased Focus on Provision of MTSS



10. The Difficult Dilemma

- Achieving balance between desired excellence and desired equity in a resource scarce environment.



Concluding Comments

- ❖ The research has been accomplished by teams of researchers including highly talented colleagues and very capable graduate students
- ❖ I was provided opportunities to be in the right place at the right time
- ❖ There are no limits on what children can accomplish (it's time we raise our expectations and increase our efforts)

