

[REL Mid-Atlantic Webinar](#)
Data Inquiry for School Improvement: Root Cause Analysis
Q&A with Roni Silverstein
November 5, 2014

Root cause analysis is a powerful method schools use to analyze data to solve problems; it aims to identify and correct the root causes of problems or events, rather than simply addressing their symptoms. Veteran practitioner, Roni Silverstein, presented the value of this process and practical ways to use it in your school or district. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for Roni Silverstein following the webinar. The [webinar recording](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) are also available.

Questions

- 1. Root causes could go much deeper than instructional practices or level of knowledge about specific curriculum or teaching strategies. Root causes could be fundamental differences in expectations of students, beliefs in students' capacities, etc. How can we deal with those?**

There's a lot of really great literature about looking at equitable practices and the importance of expectations. As a leader, you could offer professional development and show staff how low expectations can affect outcomes profoundly. Look at the literature with your leadership team or have everyone read a great book on the subject. As an example, I bought copies of *Mindset* for my entire staff last summer and gave them a list of questions to think about. Then during pre-service, we did all sorts of exciting workshops focusing on *Mindset*. We set goals to motivate students by using inspirational stories about successful people who had to struggle and persevere and to explore constructive, positive feedback in the classroom to help students improve and give them opportunities to fix their work.

One thing I did in a former school is to make teacher observation and evaluation revolve around the issues of high expectations and equitable practices. So we offered staff development in that area and discussed what some of the signs would be that this was happening in the classroom. Then I looked for those signs during my formal and informal teacher observations.

Other things you could do are to have teachers who need help observe other teachers or to redo grouping for struggling students so they go to another teacher for their reading group and then come back to their homeroom. This provides additional interesting data, because if a student performs better in another setting, the team can talk about why that is happening.

- 2. What types of data could we collect to reveal those low expectations and biases?**

It's hard to get at it through survey or public discussion because people tend to respond in socially desirable ways. So you might have to rely on individual conversations and observations to see if those biases exist. Sometimes people let their guard down and say something that's very revealing.

3. What do you do when you determine a root cause that's not popular with staff or is poorly received?

Actually, that hasn't ever happened to me. I think that educators tend to want to do the best they can for students and want to focus on fixing things, so they are excited to work to improve things.

4. How much time does the root cause analysis process take?

It depends on the situation of course, but it might take several hours to come up with questions and several more hours to determine answers and work on the inter-relationship diagram. Then you need some time to write the school improvement plan.

5. How do you decide on the right thing to do?

When you go through the process and use the inter-relationship diagram and see that everything is pointing to A and B as causes, that's the right thing to work on. But nothing is certain, so it may be necessary to revisit the process during the year, review individual student data, and fine-tune your improvement plan.