



The power of a basic assessment course in changing preservice teachers' conceptions of assessment

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ABSTRACT

This study explores preservice teachers' conceptions of assessment and examines whether and how they change during an e-learning basic assessment course. This was done by addressing the following questions: What characterizes preservice teachers' conceptions of assessment? And to what extent do preservice teachers' assessment conceptions change after participation in a basic assessment course? Data were collected at the beginning and the end of the course from 297 Israeli preservice teachers, using Brown's Teacher's Conceptions of Assessment Inventory (TCoA). Descriptive results revealed that most dominant were the conceptions of assessment as improving learning and teaching. Surprisingly, improvement and accountability were highly correlated in a positive way. The pre-post analysis of students' conceptions indicated that all improvement and some of the irrelevant conceptions significantly changed following the course. The implications for teacher preparation programs, which strive to create a conceptual change toward assessment, are discussed.

1. Introduction

Classroom assessment is affected by many factors, among which teachers' beliefs about assessment is one of the most important (Moiinvaziri, 2015). Teachers' beliefs about assessment affect how they implement, interpret and respond to evaluative practices (Brown & Gao, 2015). A fundamental premise of teacher education programs is to prepare preservice teachers for the changes and challenges of the 21st century. Training programs are expected to prepare them for a classroom that may be far different from the one they experienced in elementary and high school. Therefore, they should be prepared for innovative teaching and assessment approaches (Kayange & Msiska, 2016; Kim, Choi, Han, & So, 2012; UNESCO, 2016). Changing assessment paradigms, in particular recognition of the importance of formative assessment for learning practices, have generated great interest in assessment knowledge and perceptions in the teacher education phase (Brown, 2011).

Research over the last three decades has acknowledged the dominant role of teachers' conceptions. Teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, and curricula strongly influence how teachers teach and what student learn or achieve (Brown, 2009; Muis & Foy, 2010; Opre, 2015; Savasci-Acikalin, 2009). There have been a series of studies emphasizing the fundamental relationship between teachers' conceptions of assessment and improvement of learning and teaching (Black &

William, 1998; Popham, 2008). Other studies focused on investigating teachers' conceptions and beliefs toward assessment and their relationship to practice (Fives & Buehl, 2012; McMillan, 2001; Stiggins, 2004).

In the last quarter of the previous century, assessment reform movements shifted from teachers' overreliance on standardized tests to increasing formative appraisals of the learning qualities in light of the curriculum objectives and sociocultural theories of learning (Brown, 2008a; Shepard, 2006). Relatively little prior research has attended explicitly to the variety of possible factors that impact teachers' knowledge about assessment and their views or practices (Fulmer, Lee, & Tan, 2015).

The study of teachers' conceptions of assessment, specifically among preservice teachers, is even more important at times of educational reform (Vandeyar & Killen, 2003), and in an era of a rising awareness of the need of assessment-literate teachers. The term 'assessment literacy' refers to the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including its terminology and the development and use of assessment methodologies and techniques. According to Stiggins (1995), educators with assessment literacy know what they assess, why they assess, how to assess, what the possible problems with assessment are, and how to prevent them from occurring. They are also familiar with the possible negative consequences of poor, inaccurate assessment. Recently, the authors (2015) have reported that

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conceptions of assessment are significant factors for explaining teachers' assessment literacy. Teachers who are apt to view assessment as a tool for improving learning and teaching tended to demonstrate relatively high assessment literacy, while teachers who failed to see the relevance of assessment or who tended to perceive assessment as a tool mainly for accountability purposes, demonstrated a relatively low level of assessment literacy.

In recent years, several researchers have conceptually extended the discussion of assessment literacy to 'assessment identity', which refers to teachers' identity as professionals, their beliefs about assessment, disposition towards enacting assessment, and perceptions of their role as assessors (Adie, 2013; Looney, Cumming, van Der Kleij, & Harris, 2017; Xu & Brown, 2016).

According to Hill and Evers (2016), teacher preparation can lead to cognitive change and to an orientation shift towards teaching practices that use assessment to enhance learning. However, such changes are not always guaranteed, nor necessarily deep-seated (Campbell, 2013; Hill, Ell, & Evers, 2017; Winterbottom et al., 2008). Thus, exploring preservice teachers' conceptions of assessment may help in enhancing the design of teacher preparation programs by incorporating assessment courses. The aim of the current study is to examine the change in preservice teachers' conceptions of assessment using Brown's TCoAIII inventory during an e-learning student assessment course.

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

2.1. The nature of conceptions & conceptions of assessment

Conceptions are the beliefs, intentions, and norms underlying the actions that people take (Ajzen, 1991). In this paper, the term 'conception' is used as "more general mental structure[s], encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like" (Thompson, 1992, p. 130). That is, conceptions refer to the ideas, values, and attitudes people have regarding what something is and what it is for (Brown & Gao, 2015). Conceptions are formed gradually through experiences with a phenomenon during practitioners' life histories and careers, and, in the case of teachers, most likely from their experience as students (Pajares, 1992). Teachers' beliefs are complex, multifaceted and varied whereby different belief systems may function in different ways as filters, frames, or guides (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Conceptions of assessment, then, refer to the teacher's understanding of the nature and purpose of how students' learning is examined, tested, evaluated or assessed (Brown & Gao, 2015).

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides a powerful framework for positioning research into conceptions and practices (Brown, 2009). What people believe, what they intend, the amount of control they have, and the norms of their social environment, interact together and shape the behaviors, practices, or actions they perform (Brown, 2009). Consistent with this theory, research into teachers' conceptions of assessment has focused on the purposes or intentions assigned to assessment (e.g., Brown, 2004a; Brown, 2006) rather than on the type of assessment used (e.g., Hill, 2000; McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002).

Several recent studies have confirmed the relationship between conceptions of assessment and teaching practice (Brown & Gao, 2015). A survey conducted in New Zealand showed that endorsement of various purposes of assessment predicted different kinds of assessment practices applied by teachers (Brown, 2009). In this vein, Yan (2014) reported that teachers in Hong Kong possessed negative views of school-based assessment (SBA) requirements, yet those who believed that SBA would be useful were more likely to report their intention to use SBA in their classrooms. Furthermore, science teachers in Taiwan, who viewed assessment as improving learning, tended to view science learning as increased understanding rather than memorizing (Lin, Lee, & Tsai, 2014). In contrast, the more preservice teachers in China

endorsed the notion that assessment was about teaching for passing the tests, the more they thought assessment was irrelevant, not diagnostic and not formative (Chen & Brown, 2013). Finally, Christoforidou, Kyriakides, Antoniou, and Creemers (2014) reported that using formative assessment processes to differentiate instruction results is related to more profound learning outcomes for students.

Research on how teachers perceive the role of assessment in the learning process and their own role as assessors, is intriguing as it provides insights into the considerations they employ when making assessment-based decisions (Brown, 2003a). The different ideas that teachers had about intelligence, the process of teaching and learning, the nature of assessment tasks, and evaluation criteria, shaped their understanding and practices of assessment (Brown & Remesal, 2012). This is especially relevant in the present era when teachers are presented with ambivalent and often contradictory requirements. On the one hand, a culture of testing is being promoted; on the other hand, theories and practices related to formative assessment are being upheld (Black & William, 1998).

Generally, research into teacher conceptions of assessment has focused on the tensions between different functions and purposes, such as summary of achievement, improvement (learning and teaching), and school accountability (e.g. Berry, 2008; Black & William, 1998). While a relatively low-stakes, improvement-oriented policy and practice of assessment is implemented in New Zealand, in other countries (including Israel), a greater emphasis is placed on the use of assessment for accountability purposes (Deneen & Brown, 2011). For example, in Hong Kong, school-based assessment is used as part of the public examination system employed to evaluate students and the grades it yields are used as predictors of these of the latter (Berry, 2011). In other words, the official goals and processes for assessment seem to have a strong impact on teachers' beliefs about assessment.

Researchers have argued that teachers' beliefs affect their teaching practices more than teaching experience and socioeconomic context (Griffiths, Gore, & Ladwig, 2006). Thus, the nature and structure of teachers' beliefs about assessment will matter as to how and why assessment is implemented (Brown & Remesal, 2012). Yet, if teachers' beliefs are set aside, some superficial changes might take place, but the likelihood of profound long-lasting changes in classroom practices remains rather small (Remesal, 2011).

Many different purposes have been attached to assessment but four major conceptions have been emphasized by different scholars (e.g. a; Remesal, 2007) and were incorporated in Brown's model (Brown, 2003a, 2006, 2008b). Three of the conceptions may loosely be categorized as 'purposes' and one as 'anti-purpose' (Brown, 2008b):

- 1 *Assessment improves learning and teaching* (improvement concept). According to this concept, assessment is a tool for diagnosing students' learning problems. Therefore, teachers should use different methods for assessing students' learning in order to get a full idea of what they have learned and what their problems are (Moiinvaziri, 2015). This conception requires teachers to provide valid, reliable and accurate descriptions of students' performances (Brown, 2002). Likewise, teachers can use the assessment results for evaluating and improving their own practice (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003).
- 2 *Assessment makes students accountable for learning* (students' accountability concept). This concept implies that students are held individually accountable for their own learning through assessment (Brown, 2004a). Grading and scoring, criterion reference tests and awarding certificates are examples of this assessment in practice (Harris & Brown, 2008). Grading according to this conception does not consider what students have achieved and how much they have progressed on a learning continuum, but is only concerned with the students' position in relation to other students of the same age (Musial, Nieminen, Thomas, & Burke, 2009).
- 3 *Assessment demonstrates the quality of schools and teachers* (school

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