Teacher agency and dialogic feedback: Using classroom data for practitioner inquiry

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Dialogic feedback afford teachers decision-making space to improve students' learning outcomes.
- Agency in teacher learning contexts centres on the affordance of intellectual space to think.
- Agency can be seen in relational positioning during dialogic feedback collaborations.
- Teachers can explore with repertoires of possibilities during dialogic feedback.
- Teachers can links between cultural, structural and material domains of their learning contexts.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Evidence based discourse has increasingly permeated Anglophone staffrooms and classrooms, fuelled by the impetus to 'raise standards' and bolster global competitiveness through improved teacher performance. 'Giving' feedback to teachers as part of this performance culture is a view of teacher professional development that undermines teacher agency and does not contribute to a robust conception of teacher learning. This engagement with teacher agency recognises the situatedness of teacher learning and transformative professional learning processes. This paper furnishes ecological examples of teacher agency derived from a qualitative study into teachers' feedback practices. It complements existing literature on agency as a collaborative concept.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade global competitiveness as measured by PISA (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013; May, Cowles, & Lamy, 2013) has resulted in Anglophone assessment regimes that strengthen teacher and school accountability (Naplan, Australia; National Standards, New Zealand; Race to the Top, Common Core State Standards and Teacher Evaluation Systems, USA; Every Child Matters, Help Children Achieve More, National Curriculum Assessment: Test Frameworks, UK) and placed increased pressure on school leaders and teachers to raise student achievement. The term "educational triage," first used by Gillborn and Youdell (2000, p.134) borrows from the lexicon of emergency medicine to describe schooling practises that correspond with the marketised, performance driven education sector (Youdell, 2004). It speaks to a discourse that pathologises schools and communities in the interests of economic rationalism. It implies that there is a ready solution that can be easily applied to "fix" schooling practices and teacher actions rather than acknowledging the complexity of change processes. As Kazepides (2012) notes

> Educational policy and practice today are more and more determined by the economic and political needs of society than by an ideal of human development and a vision of the good society. The main aim of the public schools does not appear to be

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the education of the young but their preparation so that they can serve the productive and reproductive needs of a competitive world. (Kazepides, 2012, p. 924.)

Recognising how this competitive discourse influences the climate of teacher learning in schools, we construct an argument that teachers should be agentically positioned as professional decision makers and collegial experts in the contexts of their own learning communities. Their expertise when couched within frameworks of dialogic peer coaching can positively influence other teachers (Smardon & Charteris, 2014). Moreover, much has been written about the nature of classroom practice that can make a difference to student achievement (Gore, Griffiths, & Ladwig, et al., 2004; Hattie, 2012; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Lingard et al., 2001; Muijs et al., 2014) and attempts have been made to track links between the black boxes of teacher learning and student learning (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). As Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) point out, all teacher professional learning (teacher inquiry included) needs to be about improving student outcomes and, as a process, this teacher learning varies from context to context.

Regardless of the difficulty in ascertaining links between the two on a large-scale level, there remains the necessity of formulating and forming on a small and local-scale practitioner inquiry, which aims to contribute to the improvement of student learning *in this context at this time.* (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p. 95, italics in original)

Teacher agency is fundamental to processes of teacher learning and schooling improvement. As Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2013) point out, where curricula demand that teachers exert a high degree of initiative and influence, teacher agency is an important element of teacher professionalism. Therefore, agency is a situated notion, reflecting "the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Teacher agency, theorised in relation to schooling activities, has been subject to little explicit research or theory development (Priestley et al., 2013). As a significant factor in the sustainability of professional development (PD) and learning initiatives, agentic practitioner inquiry can only be learner-initiated and engaged through learner curiosity and ownership (Smardon & Charteris, 2012).

We draw from Priestley et al.'s (2013) conceptual model of teacher agency to argue that dialogic feedback can be an important element of teacher agency in in-service teacher education contexts. Referencing against this model the study explores how teacher agency emerges from dialogic feedback practices. Through this form of dialogue teachers can turn what students say about their learning into evidence that informs their decision making. The model draws together three dimensions: influences of the past, for instance teachers' professional biographies; current influences and interactions in the present; and conceptions of and aspirations for the future (Priestley et al., 2013). Taken together, these dimensions provide a framework that we use to demonstrate how teachers forge agentic opportunities when they collaboratively explore classroom data and make decisions for their teaching practice.

Located in New Zealand classrooms, the research is based on a small scale qualitative study that emerged from a professional development project where teachers made sense of their own classroom data through dialogic feedback processes. We use the term discourse to both describe "language in use" and broader

frameworks of social reality (Gee, 2011, p. 205). Issues of agency and discursive positioning in the production of knowledge are central to understanding learning as a social and cultural practice (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). The article commences with an overview of dialogic feedback and transformative teacher learning and then addresses teacher agency as an important element of PD.

2. Dialogic feedback and transformative professional learning

Dialogic feedback is a term that has been used to describe the learning conversations that provide feedback for learners in classrooms (Askew & Lodge, 2000) and in pre-service teacher education contexts (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011; Yang & Carless, 2013; Price, Handley, O'Donovan, & Millar, 2013). The teachers in this study engaged in dialogic feedback within professional learning groups, located in each school. Dialogic feedback is a collaborative peer coaching practice that can support teachers to build leadership capacity as they inquire into practice with colleagues. As a co-constructivist model of teacher feedback (Askew & Lodge, 2000), this form of thinking together is based on a dialogic process where teachers take up authoritative positions activating their own learning and the learning of others (Charteris & Smardon, 2014).

There is extensive literature on the educational value of PD that involves teacher collaboration (Lambert, 2003; Lom & Sullenger, 2010; Helstad & Møller, 2013; Charteris & Smardon, 2014). The capacity to invite and explore multiple perspectives is an important element of a dynamic teacher professional learning community. Moate (2014, p. 298) describes the notion of "dialogic struggle" as a "pedagogic event" where teachers try out new ideas as an exploration of alternative ways of knowing. This talk forges important connections between pedagogic innovation, subject paradigms, institutional expectations and classroom realities (Moate, 2014). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) suggest that rather than being places where learners (teachers and students) passively receive knowledge by treating ambiguity as "an object of study worthy of consideration," teachers participate in social activism, transforming themselves into "finders and evaluators" (p. 35). 'Finder' and 'evaluator' positioning is only characteristic of approaches to teacher learning that are premised on inquiry. Contexts that evoke teacher inquiry contrast with schools that "peddle unambiguous 'knowledge' [that is] uncontestable" (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p. 35).

Kennedy (2005) differentiates between communities of inquiry and communities of practice, suggesting that the latter could lend itself to a technicist approach to teacher learning. In her review of nine PD models, Kennedy (2005) posits that a "transformative model" (p. 247) encompasses a range of practices and conditions that support professional autonomy. This is a structure of professional learning that fosters a generative teacher-centered approach. Central to a "transformative model" is an awareness of the power relationships that permeate schooling contexts. There is also an integration of practices that are characteristic of other teacher PD approaches. Furthermore, Kennedy locates this model as a poststructuralist approach that can provide an antidote to "the constricting nature of the standards, accountability and performance management agenda[s]" (p. 247). A transformative model relies on tensions, promoting engagement with real world paradoxes and inconsistencies. "[O]nly through the realisation and consideration of conflicting agendas and philosophies, can real debate be engaged in among the various stakeholders in education, which might lead to transformative practice" (p. 247).