

Co-constructors of data, co-constructors of meaning: Teacher professional development in an age of accountability

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Received 15 September 2006; received in revised form 21 February 2007; accepted 2 April 2007

Abstract

This research examines how engaging teachers in collaboratively constructing situated assessments enhances teacher professional development, fosters meaningful shifts to practice, and supports productive conceptions of accountability. We conducted case studies of six teachers engaged as partners in investigating new approaches to assessing and fostering literacy. Findings suggested that supporting teachers to generate, interpret, and act upon assessment data within instructional change cycles assisted them in monitoring student performance, grounding instructional decisions in data, and enacting changes to practice. We also document how collaboratively constructing assessments with teachers supported conceptions of accountability considered meaningful by individuals adopting differing socio-political perspectives.

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Keywords: Professional development; Teacher collaboration; Self-regulated learning; Professional practice; Reflective teaching; Accountability; Monitoring; Assessment; Literacy

1. Introduction

In this article, we report findings from a professional development study undertaken within a larger integrative research program designed to advance understanding about teacher and student learning (Butler, Schnellert, & Cartier, 2005; Butler, Cartier, Schnellert, & Gagnon, 2006). Two main objectives drove our research when this project was conceived. These were, first, to develop high-quality, situated, and formative literacy assessments that teachers would find useful in shaping practice, and, second, to investigate how engaging teachers in

collaboratively constructing, scoring, and interpreting data might feed into cycles of reflective inquiry, thereby supporting teachers' professional development. Consistent with these original foci, the bulk of this article presents an in-depth, cross-case analysis of the extent to which engaging six teachers in constructing situated literacy assessments fueled their engagement in cycles of inquiry, generated meaningful and sustained shifts in practice, and fostered student learning.

At the same time, this article examines political and social forces that shape a project focused on literacy assessment. Over the past 3 years, our project has been remolded as it has been affected by political and social agendas, particularly the growing attention focused on literacy outcomes for adolescent learners (Rogers et al., 2006; Snow &

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Biancarosa, 2003; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004), coupled with the expectation that districts, schools, and teachers should be accountable for outcomes experienced by students (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Earl, 1999; Fitz, 2003; Nuthall, 1999; Shepard, 2000). As interest in our project grew, cutting across teachers, administrators, district personnel, and the Ministry of Education in our Canadian Province, we recognized the opportunity to reframe thinking about “accountability” for literacy outcomes within a multi-level collaborative enterprise. We therefore added a third objective to our research, namely to examine whether situated literacy assessments can provide both formative assessments useful for guiding instruction and summative data useful for defining, monitoring, and accounting for desirable outcomes at multiple levels. Thus, while our research focused most centrally on tracing six teachers’ engagement as partners in investigating new approaches to assessing and fostering adolescent literacy, we also examined the conceptions of accountability that emerged across levels as our project unfolded.

In the sections to follow, we start by situating our two main research foci in literature focused on teacher professional development as spurred through data-driven cycles of collaborative inquiry. We then broaden our introduction to consider socio-political pressures on teacher professional development, and indeed teaching practice, that are having an impact not only in Canada, but also in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK. Building from these discussions, remaining sections articulate our methodology, summarize findings, and offer conclusions and implications.

2. Reconceptualizing teacher professional development

Research into teacher professional development has shifted significantly as teaching and learning have been reconceptualized over the last 50 years (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dewey, 1963; Eisner, 2002; Schon, 1983, 1991; Shulman, 1986, 2004; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987). For example, when considering the nature of teaching (and what teachers have to learn), conceptions have moved from process–product perspectives that focus on teaching as a technical transmission activity to conceptions of teaching as requiring contextualized decision making (Ball, 1995; Borko & Putnam,

1998; Butler, Novak Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, Beckingham, 2004; Eisner, 2002; Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whitty, 2000; Palincsar, 1999; Palincsar, Magnussen, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998). This shift has led to a focus on how teachers’ knowledge and beliefs mediate their behavior in classrooms (Borko, 2004; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Cochran-Smith, & Fries, 2005; Shulman, 1986), and to research focused on teachers’ cognition, knowledge use, and beliefs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999). In this study, we built from emerging conceptions of teaching and learning to investigate teachers’ reflective, contextualized decision making as they attempted to make changes in practice and then monitor and account for outcomes associated with the changes they made.

Another trend in recent research on teacher professional development has been the development of collaborative models designed to engage teachers jointly in inquiry-based, longitudinal, and critical examinations of practice (Carpenter, Fennema, & Franke, 1996; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Gersten, 1995; Henry et al., 1999; Loughran, 2002; Luna et al., 2004; Morrell, 2004; Robertson, 2000). These initiatives extend professional development activities from formal settings (e.g., workshops) into authentic communities of practice within or across schools wherein individuals work together to situate emerging knowledge and beliefs. Consistent with these trends, we investigated processes associated with teacher professional development when teachers are engaged in collaborative, self-reflective cycles of inquiry within authentic communities of practice. We investigated the individual and common ways in which participating teachers engaged reflectively in cycles of goal setting, planning, teaching, and monitoring, and how involving them in creating, interpreting and using assessment data enhanced their engagement in cycles of inquiry.

3. Our professional development model

In this research study, university researchers and classroom teachers engaged collaboratively in instructional change cycles (see Fig. 1) wherein they collected and interpreted assessment data, set instructional goals, co-constructed instructional strategies, enacted new practices, monitored outcomes, and decided on further action (Butler, Schnellert et al., 2005). Responding to calls for situated “assessments for learning” designed to

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