

Words, Words, Words: Formative Assessment in a Secondary English/Language Arts Context

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POLONIUS. What do you read, my lord? / HAMLET. Words, words, words. –William Shakespeare's Hamlet (2.2.191-92)

Background

Formative assessment (FA) is:

- ◆ A term describing teachers' use of evaluative skills and strategies at the classroom level to improve student learning
- ◆ Gaining attention due to educational accountability efforts
- ◆ Most often studied in science and math in K-12 education
- ◆ An area in need of more empirical research in subjective fields, like English/language arts (ELA), especially at the secondary level

Study Purpose

To learn about how secondary ELA teachers talk about instructional and assessment practices that fall under the aegis of FA.

Methods

Qualitative: One focus group and five individual semi-structured interviews.

Study Setting

A concurrent enrollment program associated with a private university in the northeastern United States.

Study Participants

Five teachers that serve as instructors for the program and three administrators responsible for supervision, training, and aligning the program with the university.

Why this group?

These teachers are expert practitioners that frequently reflect on, discuss, and revise and refine their pedagogy through ongoing program training, in-school professional development, and classroom implementation.

Findings: Defining FA

- ◆ The term "formative assessment" is not part of the training for this program; teachers were unsure of where they heard or learned of the concept
- ◆ FA was described as an ongoing process by half of the participants; the other half described it as an event (e.g., a quiz)
- ◆ If participants were familiar with the term, they tended to relate it to "summative assessment"
- ◆ Each of the eight participants gave a considerably different definition of what "formative assessment" meant to them

"Your formative assessment as a teacher is what's happening along the way; the summative is when they decide what you're made of." (Administrator)

"I think that a formative assessment should be based specifically on the abilities of the students with which you are working." (Teacher)

"Anyone who's taught English long enough knows that you can't define every little aspect of writing." (Teacher)

"We talk about it as like a toolbox of strategies that will help [students] become better critical readers, critical thinkers, and hopefully critical writers." (Administrator)

Findings: Instructional and assessment practices to improve student learning

◆ Instructional practices included:

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| ✓ Specific instructional strategies | ✓ Purposeful student groupings |
| ✓ Ongoing practices (e.g., scaffolding, reflection) | ✓ Making instructional changes (i.e., evaluating and adjusting instruction) |
| ✓ Student-focused practices (e.g., increasing students' independence, addressing students' needs) | |

◆ Assessment practices included:

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| ✓ Informal/ongoing assessments of students' work (e.g., checks for understanding) | ✓ Formal assessments of students' work (e.g., rubrics) |
| ✓ Informal/ongoing student-driven assessments (e.g., peer and self-assessment) | ✓ Giving feedback to students on their work (written and oral) |

Findings: Issues that affect teaching and assessing students' learning

- ◆ School-related factors (e.g., class size, number of class preps, other teacher responsibilities, funding)
- ◆ Increased data tracking and reporting (e.g., standardized testing, benchmark assessments, frequent grade reporting)
- ◆ Student-related factors (e.g., range of skills/ability levels, students' personal backgrounds)
- ◆ Other factors (e.g., parental expectations and involvement, political climate)

"I don't think it's actually the teachers *don't* want to do more inquiry-based learning; I think there are *constraints* on what they're able to do in the classroom." (Administrator)

"The standardized testing... isn't the only driving force, but it's also challenging because it is still a really important part of how our school and how we as individual teachers are evaluated." (Teacher)

Conclusions

- ◆ FA practices are context- and content-specific, but there may be overlap in what is considered FA in science, math, and ELA
- ◆ FA in ELA seems to focus more on the individual student than in science/math
- ◆ These teachers' FA practices are impacted through training and their own experiences with students to determine "what works"
- ◆ Participants' varied definitions of FA align with research on the topic, which stresses the need for consistent terminology

Implications for Evaluation

Those evaluating FA should consider the context in which the practices are taking place, and consult with stakeholders to determine how FA is used and discussed.

Selected References

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