"An honest attempt to evaluate how much learning has gone on":

Teachers' Evaluative Thinking through Formative Assessment in Secondary English/Language Arts

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What exactly is meant by "formative assessment" (FA)?

Defining a Complex Construct

Formative assessment (FA) is a term "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged."

(Black & Wiliam, 1998, pp. 7-8)

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What exactly is meant by "formative assessment" (FA)?

Operationalizing a Complex Construct

Components of FA in K-12 Professional Development:

a) Teachers setting and making explicit clear learning goals

b) Use of questioning and feedback from teachers and students

c) Data collection, analysis, and use;

d) Teacher revision/modification of instruction;

e) Development of student academic autonomy;

f) Evaluation to determine if a gap between the learning goals and current student performance exists

(Tolley, 2012)

Studying FA in K-12 Education

Examining a Complex Construct

- Math and science

  - Linear and objective

  - Quantifiable results, empirical evidence

- English/language arts

  - Amorphous, organic, and subjective

  - Individualized results, anecdotal evidence

Assessing FA in Secondary English/Language Arts (ELA)

Examining a Complex Construct in a Particular Context

Research Questions:

1. What assessment practices do secondary ELA teachers use?

2. How do secondary ELA teachers determine what assessment practices to use and when to use them?

3. What are secondary ELA teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the assessment practices that they use?

4. How do secondary ELA teachers determine the effectiveness of their assessment practices?

Assessing FA in Secondary English/Language Arts (ELA)

Examining a Complex Construct in a Particular Context

Methods

- Sequential explanatory mixed methods
  - Experience sampling method, using the English/Language Arts Teachers' Experiences (ELATE) checklist (created for this study)—focus on questioning, discussion, and feedback practices
  - Semi-structured interview protocol

Assessing FA in Secondary English/Language Arts (ELA)

Examining a Complex Construct in a Particular Context

Participants

- Seven teachers in New York State, teaching the same concurrent enrollment course to 12th graders
- 10-27 years teaching experience ($M = 18.14$)
- Six participated in interviews

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

- Through the use of FA:
  - Teachers' evaluative thinking is a component
  - Teachers analyze the results of informal and formal assessment data
  - Teachers use these analyses to guide instructional decision making

(Nelson & Eddy, 2008)

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

Factors Affecting Teachers' Assessment Practice Selection

- Purpose of assessment

- Intertwining roles of assessment and instruction

- Teachers' own knowledge and experience

- The classroom context

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

"What [assessment] means to me is an honest attempt to evaluate how much learning has gone on."

"[A]ssessment […] should never be hard and fast, it should never be […] definitive for the sake of being definitive."

"[A]ssessment, I think in the beginning, is — as much your, your gut instinct as to who you're talking to. You know, who your learners are […] So I think assessment is — it's never one-size-fits-all."

(Helen, interview dated June 26, 2015)

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

Factors Affecting Teachers' Perceptions of Effectiveness of Assessment Practices

- Knowledge of students
- Students' understanding of content
- Student performance levels
- Potential benefits to students

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

"I think all teachers probably, even before the first paper comes in you, you — you're figuring, you know, based on classroom performance and discussion and all that, you're kind of getting an idea of […] who's going to be the better writers, who's going to have more to say, and all of that sort of thing. […] I think you just do a lot of, um, evaluating — I think you're evaluating all of the time."

(Helen, interview dated June 26, 2015)

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

"I think the true way for a teacher to assess herself, but also keep it aligned with student assessment, is, you know, by that magic date in October when you have to make all your predictions, let me choose two of my highest, two of my middle, two of my lowest. That will be my study for the year, is track their work, um, how their work has informed my teaching, and to see if by the end of the year, any— anything I've learned from assessing their work, you know, has helped me do things to then help those students achieve more on their levels. I feel like that would be the best way for a teacher to assess herself and her students."

(Charlotte, interview dated June 29, 2015)

Secondary ELA Teachers' Evaluative Thinking

Valuing, Decision-Making, and Action in Context

"[A]ssessment's main function is, you know, kind of in that individual level of each kid, how well they're understanding, but more holistically. If I have a lot of students in a given class who aren't getting a particular concept, well then, that's telling me that perhaps that's a concept I need to revisit, that something went wrong in my delivery, or in my setup, or in my scaffolding, you know, whatever it is, and that's something I need to revisit."

(Krystal, interview dated July 9, 2015)

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Potential Implications for Future Study

Shifting the Contextual Lens

- Studying different teachers' practices in various regions, grade levels, content areas

- Adapting instruments to suit context in which participants and students are situated

- Examining expert vs. novice teachers' approaches

Potential Implications for Program Evaluation
Informing Evaluative Approaches

- FA and its involvement of evaluative skills and strategies to improve student learning is akin to program evaluators offering recommendations for improvement (Ayala & Brandon, 2008)

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Potential Implications for Program Evaluation

Informing Evaluative Approaches

- Continued study of FA helps understand improvements in practice (Christie, 2012)

- Creation, development, use, and revision of appropriate, context- and content-specific instruments beneficial to educational evaluation

Selected References

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