

Teacher Perceptions of Classroom Assessment: A focus group interview

Yuankun Yao: University of Central Missouri

This study used a focus group interview to examine teacher perceptions of classroom assessment. The interview took place in a school where the researcher had visited and observed classes taught by the majority of the teachers interviewed for the study. The majority of the interviewees seemed to embrace the notion of assessment for learning. However, when discussing the challenges and the usefulness of assessment, the interviewees seemed to revert back to the traditional notion of assessment. Implications of the study for teacher education programs are provided.

As more educators embrace the notion of assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Gavriel, 2013), there has been growing attention paid to how teachers use assessment in the classroom (Frey & Schmitt, 2010; Missett, Brunner, Callahan, Moon, & Azano, 2014). For instance, Frey and Schmitt surveyed 140 3rd -12th grade teachers in 22 school districts in a Midwestern state. The study found that while performance assessments and formative assessments were widely used, they were not as often used as traditional paper pencil tests, and more often used after instruction was completed.

While it is important to know how teachers implement assessment activities in the classroom, it is equally important to understand the rationale and perceptions of the teachers who use the assessment strategies. As Greenstein (2010) and Stiggins (2010) suggested, teachers need to develop a solid understanding of classroom assessment so that they can develop a balanced approach to assessment for learning and assessment for learning.

Literature Review

Although classroom assessment comprises both summative and formative assessment,

formative assessment has attracted most of the attention in recent years (Black & Wiliam, 1998; McMillan, 2010; Stiggins, 2010). McMillan (2010) suggested that traditional paper pencil testing is mostly used as summative assessment, unlike most classroom assessment activities that can serve formative purposes. At the same time, some scholars pointed out that traditional paper pencil tests can also be used as formative assessments to facilitate student learning (Dempster & Perkins, 1993; Guskey, 2003).

There has been considerable confusion as to the exact meaning or implication of formative assessment. As Wiliam (2010) suggested, the term formative does not apply to an assessment or even the purpose of an assessment, “but rather to the function that it actually serves” (p. 31). An assessment is not truly formative until the “information from the assessment is ... actually used to improve the performance of the system in some way” (p. 31). According to Pat-El, Tillema, Segers, & Vedder (2013), a true assessment for learning should allow the teacher to track student progress and help students recognize areas for improvement.

Teacher perceptions and their practices in classroom assessment may not be totally aligned. Buyukkarci (2014) studied the assessment

beliefs and practices of language teachers in primary schools in Turkey. While the teachers held positive views of formative assessment and feedback, they did not use formative assessments on a regular basis or in an effective way. Karp and Woods (2008) found that preservice teachers' use of alternative/authentic assessments as well as traditional assessments affected their beliefs about assessment. While some preservice teachers accommodated new information about authentic assessment, others either resisted or assimilated their new knowledge into existing belief structures.

Thomas (2012) studied teachers in Pakistan in terms of their beliefs about classroom assessment. The study saw the need for more professional development activities inside schools to expose teachers to contemporary approaches of assessment. Sandvoll (2014) highlighted the importance for teachers to align their espoused theories with their teaching practice:

Fundamental improvements to the quality of teaching and learning are more likely if teachers have an understanding of the link between espoused theories of action, and can assess whether their espoused theories are congruent, or incongruent, with their actual practice. (para. 11)

Purpose of Study

This study investigated the perceptions that teachers have regarding classroom assessment. In particular, the researchers tried to examine teachers' understanding of classroom assessment, their perceived relationships between assessment and instruction, what they enjoyed and felt challenged about classroom assessment, and their perceived benefits of classroom assessments.

Method of Study

The study used a focus group approach to obtain the perceptions of the teachers. This

approach was chosen because it has the potential for participants to interact and generate ideas beyond what each individual can contribute (Carey & Asbury, 2012).

Focus Group Interview

Focus groups “capitalize on the interaction among the group members to enhance the collection of deep, strongly held beliefs and perspectives” (Carey & Asbury, 2012. p. 17). Farnsworth and Boon (2010) pointed out that focus group is a “deceptively simple methodology” (p. 605). It involves group processes that are “unstable and unpredictable” (p. 606). “Tracing the group’s dynamics and interactions helps bring to light what is often unspoken but apprehended by participants and researchers alike” (p. 611). This makes the work of the facilitator crucial. “With appropriate guidance from the group facilitator, the group setting can enhance candor and spontaneity”, said Carey and Asbury (p. 17).

The Interviewees

There were six teachers involved in the study, three of them female and the other three male. All of them were Caucasians. Except for the most senior member of the team, most of the teachers on the team were around 30 years of age. The teachers were targeted for the study because they were in the department where the researcher had observed several classes.

The Interview Process

The instructor contacted both the instructors and the school principal and obtained permission to interview the instructors as a group. The researcher offered free drinks, the only tangible incentive for the teachers, before the interview started. During the interview the researcher acted as a facilitator, posing questions and adding prompting follow-up questions, encouraging the

faculty members to elaborate on certain points and offer additional comments.

The focus group interview went smoothly in the researcher's eyes. The teachers were initially a little reserved despite the fact that the researcher had already got acquainted with most of the people in the group as a result of classroom visits. They seemed more relaxed when they heard the introduction and learned about the interview questions at the start of the interview. As the conversations went on, there were heated discussions and at some point even jokes were made during the focus group. While most of the time the views seemed to be shared by the majority of the interviewees, occasionally some clearly different opinions were exchanged at the interview.

Results

Immediately after the interview, the researcher summarized the group's responses to the interview questions, and sent the summary to the teachers to verify if the summary truthfully reflected what was talked about during the interview. The researcher also asked the team to clarify their answers to the last two interview questions that were asked during the focus group interview. In response to the researcher's requests, the six teachers held an additional group meeting, this time with the researcher being absent, to come up with their responses. The group confirmed the summaries that the researcher prepared, and clarified their responses and provided additional thoughts on the last two questions. The following represents a summary of the responses that the teachers provided to six interview questions that were posed during that focus group interview, and additional responses that the teachers provided one week later.

What is Assessment?

The researcher first asked the teachers who participated in the focus group what the word

assessment conjured up in their mind. The participants were told not to use any textbook definition. Most of the participants described assessment as an effort by instructors to check the status of student learning. They mentioned bell work, oral queries, classroom activities, quizzes, tests, and projects. During this discussion, the most senior member of the participants offered a different view. To this teacher assessment was just testing, which was what she learned in the assessment class during her college years, when the focus of the class was on how to construct test questions. At that moment of the interview, the researcher asked if the participants felt the concept of assessment had shifted in recent years. Several teachers agreed that the term assessment now had taken on a broader scope and would manifest itself in various forms, with test being only one of them.

During the discussion of what constitutes assessment, some interesting discussion occurred around the topic of homework assignments. One instructor contended that a take home assignment was not an assessment. He reasoned that a take home assignment made it impossible for the teacher to tell who actually did the work. As a result, the assignment functioned as an opportunity for students to practice certain skills, making it more of a learning activity instead of an assessment activity. At that point, another interviewee indicated that he would partially agree and partially disagree. He said that a homework assignment not only provided an opportunity for students to practice what they had learned in class, but also enabled the instructor to check how well students could apply their learning during this practice. Several teachers in the group concurred with this view.

Relationship between Assessment and Instruction

The second interview was whether the teachers felt that assessment and instruction were two separate processes. Several teachers responded quickly by saying that the two were

often intertwined or simultaneous. They reasoned that assessment would support instruction only if the two occur around the same time. One teacher explained that if a formative assessment showed that his students still lacked the understanding, he would use an additional example to illustrate a concept or a process. This adjustment in instruction should follow an assessment activity immediately in order to make the assessment worthwhile.

Before the interview, the researcher had observed classes taught by four teachers in this six member focus group and noticed a high degree of similarity in how they structured their lessons. Each class started with a five minute bell work session, then proceeded with an introduction of the objectives for the lesson, a PowerPoint presentation of new concepts or theories, a demonstration of how the instructor would apply a math concept or skill to solve a problem, a guided practice with the whole class, a small group practice activity, and ended with a brief closure talk followed by an exit ticket activity. Throughout each lesson a teacher also made pauses to query either the whole class or specific students to answer specific questions. The researcher asked them what parts of the aforementioned classroom process were assessment activities and what parts were instructional activities. After a brief moment of deliberation, the participants responded that assessment took place all along in this process. It happened when the students performed the bell work. It happened when the instructor demonstrated a new process. It happened when the instructor queried the students as a whole group, or individually. It also happened when the students did the various guided class activities, exit slip activities, and the independent homework assignments.

The interviewees suggested that they assessed students in multiple ways, including querying students individually or as a whole group, and walking near the students to check their progress

as a group or as they work individually. Although the most senior member of the team defined assessment as traditional testing, she did mention that she had her own ways of checking student understanding other than regular tests. When she saw student eyes “were rolling from side to side”, she knew that they were having difficulty with the lesson.

Enjoyable Aspect of Assessment

The next question the researcher asked was the aspect of classroom assessment that the teachers enjoyed the most. One teacher said he liked giving students assignments that were project based, because these assessments provided an opportunity for students to apply their learning and solve real world problems. He believed students also enjoyed completing such projects. This view seemed to be shared by several other teachers in the group.

A second aspect of assessment that seemed to the liking of teachers interviewed was group activities that students were asked to participate in during class. The teacher who mentioned this type of assessment said that he enjoyed watching the interactions among the students during those activities. He reasoned that the interactions allowed the students to explain, to ponder, to assess, and to learn from each other. In such assessment activities his students were often actively engaged.

The senior member of the team joined the conversation this time by proclaiming that her most enjoyable moment was testing time. She joked that at those times she would have nothing to do, whereas the students had to do all the work. Sensing a moment of silence in the group, the teacher added that she enjoyed that moment because that was when students could reveal to her what they had learned. At this remark the other two female members of the group, including the team leader, joined her force and said that testing was indeed an enjoyable time since it was

a moment to celebrate what each of them had accomplished in the year as a teacher. They felt that this was a time for teachers to reflect on what they had done in the year and be proud of what their students had achieved.

Most Challenging Aspect of Assessment

When asked what aspect of assessment presents the biggest challenge for them, the group gave a surprisingly unanimous and straightforward answer: designing test questions. They believed it was not easy for teachers to write or choose effective test questions, especially questions that were used for district common assessments. At the time of the focus group, the researcher interpreted this answer as the difficulty in designing high quality assessment items for the regular classroom, which the researcher felt would take substantial time and effort on the part of the teachers. As a result, no follow-up of this response was attempted during the focus group interview. However, later on the researcher realized that some clarifications were needed in case that the reasons behind this perceived challenge were more complicated than what the researcher had anticipated.

After the focus group interview, the researcher contacted the group leader who was the head of the math department to see if her team could elaborate on why they felt writing test questions for the common assessment represented a major challenge. According to the response the researcher received, one of the difficulties the teachers had in designing test questions was due to the mixed abilities in each class:

It is difficult to find questions that all levels of students would be able to successfully answer. Some questions are typically too hard for some, but way too easy for others.

A second factor that made the design of test questions difficult for the teachers was the

challenge in matching a test question with “the standard that it is supposed to cover at the DOK level that is expected”. Some of the topics that the assessment was supposed to cover were not taught until the common assessments are over. In this case scheduling the assessments seemed to be a big issue for the teachers.

Usefulness of Assessment

The last interview question was for the teachers to comment on the usefulness of their classroom assessments. The participants said that the assessments gave them the tool to monitor student progress in learning. As one of them said, an assessment was an “autopsy”. Very often the teachers used assessment items that they anticipated their students to have issues with in the daily bell work activities to check if they experienced such challenges. At the same time, the classroom assessments enabled the teachers to know if they did an adequate job teaching the material. They felt their efforts were rewarded when students performed well on an assessment.

The interviewees also felt that an assessment represented a transitional stage in the teaching and learning process. It marked the end of one learning session, and the beginning of the next session. As the team leader said as a representative for the group in their response to the researcher’s request for clarifications:

An assessment is an end product, and we move on after that, although we reteach as necessary. An assessment also helps us start thinking ahead on what we would do differently the next time we teach that concept.

Conclusions and Discussions

This study used a focus group interview to investigate the perceptions of a group of teachers regarding classroom assessments. What follows is a summary of the findings, a discussion of the

potential limitations of the study, and a list of implications for future study.

Summary of Findings

In spite of some differences among the group members, most participants in the focus group study interpreted assessment as a process that provides teachers with an option to check student learning. They believed that assessment and instruction need to take place around the same time in order for the assessment results to inform instruction. They valued project based assessments that provided opportunities for students to solve real word problems. They also liked group assessment activities where students get the chance to interact with and learn from each other.

At the same time that the interviewees embraced the notion of assessment for learning, they also reverted back to the notion of assessment of learning when they talked about what they liked about assessment, where they found challenges, and whether they found assessment to be useful. They liked the time for summative test, which represented a time for them to celebrate their own achievement. They felt assessment was useful as an end product, after which they moved on. Their challenge came from the need to select assessment items that fit the different levels of students, and the need to design assessments over topics that may be difficult to cover before the assessment time.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

Most of the responses from the focus group support the notion of classroom assessment of learning and classroom assessment for learning. The different ways that the team members defined assessment reflected the evolvement of the term over the years, and the fact that the majority of

teachers are now in support of the more liberal definition of the term assessment. This conception of the term is important since it is the basis for teachers to use assessment to support learning, or to practice assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2010). This notion is consistent with the fact that some of the teachers enjoyed giving students assessment activities that are project based, or group based. Project based assessments make it possible for students to push their learning to a higher level by requiring them to apply their knowledge and skills to solve real world problems. Group based activities make it possible for the students to interact and learn from each other. All those benefits would be impossible to perceive if the teachers stick to the traditional view of assessment that equates assessment with traditional testing.

While the majority of the teachers in the focus group embraced the current notion of assessment, and expressed their satisfaction when their students got the opportunity to participate in those assessment activities that supported student learning, it is interesting to note that their biggest challenges with assessment were exclusively with tests or traditional forms of assessment, in other words, assessment of learning. To a large extent, this reflects the pressure that many educators face today from high stakes testing through district common assessments. In a way, common assessments in the core areas are districts' effort to prepare students for high stakes testing that comes later in the school year. McMillan (2010) considers this kind of assessment as benchmark assessments. According to McMillan, although they share certain characteristics of formative assessments, benchmark assessments represent "formal, structured tests that typically do not provide the level of detail needed for appropriate instructional correctives" (p. 3).

The view of assessment as an end product suggested that the teachers interviewed reverted back to the notion of assessment of learning, instead of the more contemporary notion of

assessment for learning or assessment as learning, which the interviewees seemed to embrace earlier in the interview. An assessment that supports learning does not necessarily occur as an end product. Instead, it needs to occur prior to learning, in the midst of learning, as well as after learning. It also needs to be ongoing and sometimes reciprocal in order for the results to be useful. The perceived challenges may also reflect a perception of some teachers that there was no need for them to devote more energy to assessment for learning. To the contrary, it is no easy task to use assessment to support learning.

As Greenstein (2010) pointed out, teachers and teacher candidates need support in developing effective formative assessment skills, through professional development activities and teacher education programs. In particular, teacher education programs play an important role in ensuring that prospective teachers have a coherent view of classroom assessment, and a full understanding of the implications of assessment for learning.

Implications for Future Study

Although the interview questions posed at the focus group were focused on a range of topics related to teacher perceptions of classroom assessment, the researcher deliberately avoided asking questions that could be too sensitive for the teachers to generate an honest answer. The schedule of the teachers also prevented the researcher from asking additional questions in the focus group. Future research could focus on additional areas of teacher perceptions regarding classroom assessment.

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development. His main research interest is educational assessment.

Author's Note

Dr. Yuankun Yao is a professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Central Missouri, teaching educational assessment and curriculum