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ABSTRACT

High stakes testing presents a significant problem for the design of effective professional development. The absurdity of asking teachers and administrators to raise test scores constantly encourages teachers to teach to the test without regard for the intellectual development of students. This case study from Texas describes the reflective discussion group in which teachers in a high-stakes testing situation met monthly to focus on what student writing revealed about their teaching practices. Six elementary school teachers and the researcher held reflective meetings, and the content of the meetings was analyzed. The reflective conversation data are supported by interviews with the teachers. The discussions fell into three phases, discourse related to Barriers to Change, discourse focusing on Conditions for Change, and a final Discourse of Change in which teachers begin to think not only about their current teaching, but on what they could do in the future. The school experienced a dramatic increase in scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), jumping from a 44% pass rate to a pass rate of 68% and moving from low performing to acceptable. This change was attributed to schoolwide emphasis on literacy and using the TAAS to inform instructional practice rather than to dictate instruction. Teachers also credited the reflective conversations in helping them understand their roles as teachers and guides. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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The Reflective Discussion Group:

Focused discussion in a high-stakes environment

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The Reflective Discussion Group:
Focused discussion in a high-stakes environment

High-stakes testing, coupled with punitive enforcement of testing results on school communities by ranking and labeling schools based on single instrument test scores of students, presents a significant problem for the design of effective professional development. Teachers and administrators are placed in the uncomfortable position of being held accountable for that which they have no immediate control, student performance (Fenstermacher, 1986). The absurdity of asking teachers and administrators to constantly raise test scores runs counter to generally accepted statistical practices (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) and encourages teachers to "teach to the test" without regard for the intellectual development of students.

A grand experiment in high-stakes testing in combination with labeling schools and retaining children in grade, one that has gained a reputation as a national model for "get tough" educational practices, appears to be falling apart at the seams. According to Moore & Hanson (2001) the Chicago Public Schools have misreported test results in order to paint a more vigorous picture that actually exists in order to justify a top-down

authoritarian imposition of a skills based curriculum. Such failure was reasonably predicted based on a reasoned comparison of the New York experience in the 1980's and the current Chicago approach to testing and retention of students based on arbitrary cut-scores on tests (House, 1998).

High-stakes testing programs not only place a significant burden on students to perform well but on teachers as well. In a case study of one teacher's response to the demands of high stakes testing found the impact on one teacher and her students devastating, removing creativity and joy from the classroom (Passman, 2001). Passman (1999) found, however, that teachers engaged in focused, rule-governed reflective discussion were able to build a resilience to outside pressure allowing them to maintain a student-centered practice in the face of significant outside pressure. As teachers in this study responded to both in-service consulting provided through Chicago Students at the Center and focused reflection called the Reflective Practice Discussion Group, the participants' language mirrored stages of development across entire careers in teaching described by Knowles (1992). While not a precise match to Knowles categories,

Passman (1999) described categories of change that ranged from simply responding to outside pressure through blaming language to internalizing good teaching.

Texas is a state in which high-stakes testing is run-amok. The State has ensconced a set of standards, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), into law. The standards for elementary school alone fill several bookshelves. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is purported to assess progress in teaching the entrenched standards. Teachers cannot effectively teach the standards however because there are a) simply too many to teach and b) the pressure exerted on teachers due to measuring their performance based on the results of their students places external barriers on effective teaching.

This study grew out of a situation in which the Texas Education Agency (TEA) because of the results of the fourth grade TAAS writing test labeled one school district low performing. A partnership between the school, the regional Educational Service Center, and a university professor was forged in order to provide assistance in improving writing scores in the fourth grade in particular and the school in general. In this work the overarching theme of the partnership was "good teaching overcomes bad testing." We

introduced the T-I-P Writing Process (Teach writing strategies—Introduce writing conventions—and Practice, Practice, Practice) to the school in a district wide workshop. This workshop was followed up by six-months of intensive work in classrooms, modeling effective teaching of writing with students for teachers. Additionally, six teachers in the school participated in a moderated, focused, rule-governed reflective discussion after school.

As the project began to unfold I began to notice significant improvement in student writing; both the quality of the writing and the engagement of students in the act of writing. I wanted to understand more about the relationship between the classroom activity and the focused reflection on teacher attitudes and performance.

Methodology

In this paper I propose to describe aspects of the developing conversation that grew out of the reflective conversations held monthly after school. The six teacher participants and I examined student writing artifacts that were generated from classroom instruction. The reflective discussion group focused on what the student writing revealed about our own teaching. The conversation moved from a blaming discourse to a discourse of hope over the

course of the school year. Teachers reported that the reflective conversations were the critical difference in how they were able to change their own approach to teaching and learning.

Transcripts were made of audiotapes of the reflective meetings. Participating teachers were interviewed with an emphasis on their view of project participation. Field notes were made on a regular basis. Data were analyzed using qualitative methodologies including a narrative based open coding coupled with semiotic cluster analysis to make interpretative sense of the data.

Findings

The reflective conversation data is supported by interviews with teachers. Those interviews were held at the beginning of the year and again at the end of the year. The discourse in the interviews followed a similar pattern as the discourse of the reflective conversations. Knowles and Cole (Knowles & Cole, 1996) identified three stages in professional development: 1) Strategic development where the conversation is often focused on external needs and requirements; 2) Internalized adjustments in which teachers turn to the narrative of teaching; and, 3) Strategic redefinition, a stage where teachers begin to see that they

have power within the system to effect change. The reflective conversations followed similar patterns where first teachers engaged in conversations that pointed to the "Barriers to Change". This phase was followed by a period of time in which the participants were sharing narratives of changing practice that I called "Conditions for Change". Finally, teachers engaged in a "Discourse of Change", a discourse that focused not only on their current teaching but also on what they could accomplish in the future.

The Three Discourses

Barriers to Change

In the beginning teachers were concerned with pressure from what appeared to be external sources. The pressure came in various forms including direct and indirect sources. Direct sources included administrative mandates coupled with statewide expectations. Indirect sources included personal, cultural and moral evaluations of teaching and learning.

An example of external pressure is given voice when Roz¹ remarks:

You know so we don't have enough time to do a

¹ All names of participants are pseudonyms.

lot of time to do writing inside of Social Studies. We should. We should do more but time constraints, you just can't do it.

Roz is responding to pressure from both the state and her own administration in terms of time allocated to content areas during the course of the school day. Rather than understanding planning choices as a factor in good teaching, Roz assumes that planning is constrained by external requirements. The language Roz chooses is also related to the category error of mistaking curriculum coverage for actual learning.

Another example of an external Barrier to Change focuses on the TAAS test. Sylvia interrupted a discussion of planning and implementing an authentic writing program as that program impacts length of written text for fourth-grade. In her frustration she exclaimed,

Truly TAAS requires you to, if you are going to make that three or four{pages}, you've got to have that length. I mean that's just the way it is

Barriers to Change are not barriers in the sense that they interfere with change. Rather, they appear to be the first stage of a longer process of breaking away from

external constraints in an environment of safety and support. Without the safe context and without strong support from those in authority Barriers to Change are insurmountable. With support and safety they serve to set the stage for change. Perhaps Barriers is too harsh a word to use but it serves to remind us of just how strong an influence this form of exteriority can be if left unchecked.

Conditions for Change

Conditions for Change present a far different picture than its predecessor. Conditions for Change finds participants struggling to identify language that articulates the experience of changing practice. Conditions set the table for internalization, ownership if you will, of the changes in practice that come from making active changes in the classroom and then being able to focus on reflecting on those changes.

Celia expresses a concern for connecting writing practice to feedback. She is concerned that students need to know how to in a sense 'get it right.'

Uh Practice for feedback. And you practice writing for your whole life but if your doing it wrong and nobody's telling you look at

this what if we change this? Maybe this would make it better, if nobody's helping you, its never going to get any better because you don't know there's anything wrong

The distinguishing factor assigning this statement to Conditions is the fact that Celia is embracing the idea of student practice as an important part of writing while struggling with the idea of correctness of the writing. Celia welcomes writing practice and seeks collegial advice regarding the best way to achieve feedback for that writing. The conversation continues with more than one of her colleagues suggesting peer collaboration as one way to provide the required feedback. This short conversation focuses participants on change as they thrash about in unfamiliar waters.

Annie struggled with perfection in the classroom. She wanted each of her second-graders to be perfect. I was in her classroom one morning modeling a strategy for her students. During a subsequent interview she stated:

I was telling him {Passman} one day, I said why don't you help him-the first time that he came- because he can't write. And he said no cause he's involved he's writing, he may

be writing worse but he's writing, he's doing this and then when he got up in the author's chair, he just read, he said a story. I wasn't written well but at least he was getting involved. He had the writing process and the same thing with the dyslexic child I had where he only wrote like four sentences but he told a story that was two pages long.

Annie sensed change in both her students and in her own approach to teaching. Annie's sense of wonder and amazement jump out as she talks about the accomplishments of two of her struggling students. Her ability to reflect on what happened in her classroom began to give voice to the change.

Discourse of Change

I called the final aspect of changing language, Discourse of Change. Here participants found the language that articulated the changing practice they were all experiencing. Discourse is distinguished by an interiority of language, an internalized voice.

And one of the things that we didn't talk about this time that we talked about pretty much every time up 'till now was we always

heard questions whether or not first drafts,

or not. We didn't talk about that today.

Which I find really pretty interesting.

Annie internalizes the nature of the discussion by making comparisons to earlier conversations and noticing changes in the group language. Annie's language represents an interiority, a sense of ownership of change.

Implications and Conclusion

Implications for Professional Development

One-shot, quick-fix solutions to complex problems do not work (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). By providing ongoing support for purposeful change and connecting that ongoing support to focused, rule-governed conversations that allow teachers a safe and supportive environment in which to engage their own practice there is a reasonable chance that professional development efforts will be successful.

Lorenzo is a clear example of this kind of successful professional development. While conceived in response to external pressure from the state, our project focused on improving teaching and, by inference, student performance as well. We helped teachers create a safe context from

which they were able to examine their practice in meaningful and authentic ways. This led to some real excitement on the part of teachers, an excitement that rubbed off on their students.

I make no grandiose claims for professional development that conceives of the unit of change as one classroom and one teacher at a time. What appears to happen, however, is that when administrators support teachers, when that support is articulated and when that support is translated into meaningful in-classroom action and focused reflection, change—a purposeful and authentic change—will occur.

Implications for Student Performance

Finally, this paper addresses issues of student performance. The project began because the school had a 44% pass rate in 4th grade writing in the year 2000. The 2001 TAAS results jumped to a 68% pass rate, a level that moved the school out of low performing to acceptable. An interesting side note is that had the school included its final tally its special education students, an overall pass rate of over 71% would have been documented, which would enough to be recognized by the state.

Several factors led to this dramatic increase in scores. Along the lines of Susan Lenski's (Lenski, 1998)

findings identifying what high performing schools had in common on the Illinois Goals Achievement Program Test (IGAP), the school in this study emphasized literacy school wide, engaged in authentic teaching of writing by making assignments relevant to students beyond the classroom and writing for an audience beyond their teacher (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995; Newmann, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995), and using the TAAS test to inform instructional practice rather than dictating instruction. Additionally teachers attributed the introduction of the T-I-P Writing Process as helping them to revitalize their own teaching, a factor they insist rubbed off on their students. Finally, teachers acknowledged the impact of the reflective conversations on helping them to understand their role as mentors and guides to their students.

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