

6-30-2014

Impediments to Using or Sharing What Is “Known”

Winifred Nweke

Virginia Elliott

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gerjournal>

 Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nweke, Winifred and Elliott, Virginia (2014) "Impediments to Using or Sharing What Is “Known”," *Georgia Educational Researcher*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.20429/ger.2014.110106

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gerjournal/vol11/iss1/6>

This mixed methods research is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Educational Researcher by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Impediments to Using or Sharing What Is “Known”

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to investigate variables that impede the utilization of research findings in, or the transfer of learning from professional development workshops into, classroom best practices. Participants comprised 202 Georgia Master Teachers who attended Leadership Institutes. Participants were taught strategies for differentiating assessment. A 21-item online survey was used to collect data two months after the institute. Eighty-six teachers (42.6%) completed the survey. Fifty-five (64%) respondents had implemented, at least, one strategy. The strategies they found most useful were allowing students redo assignments for full credit, isolating and retesting specific standards rather than a whole set of standards and making students analyze their incorrect responses. Strategies that affected system-wide policies such as changing the grading system were most difficult to implement. Other impeding factors included lack of time to integrate new principles and strategies and lack of teacher buy-in.

Keywords

Research utilization, Transfer of Learning, Differentiated Assessment, Impediments, Professional Development effectiveness, authority to effect change

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Impediments to Using or Sharing What Is “Known”

Winifred C. Nweke
Georgia Professional Standards Commission*
Atlanta, GA

Virginia L. Elliott
Georgia Professional Standards Commission**
Atlanta, GA

Abstract: The purpose of this mixed methods study was to investigate variables that impede the utilization of research findings in, or the transfer of learning from professional development workshops into, classroom best practices. Participants comprised 202 Georgia Master Teachers who attended Leadership Institutes. Participants were taught strategies for differentiating assessment. A 21-item online survey was used to collect data two months after the institute. Eighty-six teachers (42.6%) completed the survey. Fifty-five (64%) respondents had implemented, at least, one strategy. The strategies they found most useful were allowing students redo assignments for full credit, isolating and retesting specific standards rather than a whole set of standards and making students analyze their incorrect responses. Strategies that affected system-wide policies such as changing the grading system were most difficult to implement. Other impeding factors included lack of time to integrate new principles and strategies and lack of teacher buy-in.

Keywords: Research utilization, Transfer of Learning, Differentiated Assessment, Impediments, Professional Development effectiveness, authority to effect change

* Now at Clayton State University, Morrow, GA

** Retired

Impediments to Using or Sharing What Is “Known”

The disconnect between research and practice in education is very nicely summarized by Berliner (2002) when he said that “practice is amazingly more complex than I first understood it to be, filled with variables not easily captured in one’s research.” He concluded that “policy and politicians have more power than researchers to change practice,” (2006). It is in recognition of this dilemma that the American Educational Research Association (AERA) made the utilization of research findings one of its goals. Apparently, similar concerns prevail in other fields such as nursing (Mathew- Maich, Ploeg, Jack, & Dobbins, 2010) and other countries such as Australia (McIntyre & Barrett, 1998), Canada (Lavoie-Tremblay, Anderson, Bonneville-Roussy, Drevniok & Lavigne, 2012) and Sweden (Florin, Ehrenberg, Wallin, & Gustavsson, 2012).

Policy makers and educational practitioners would not benefit from the wealth of educational research generated by researchers if educational research associations such as AERA do not make concerted effort to infuse research findings into practice. Despite the efforts of researchers, political and funding considerations still undergird many educational policies. (McIntyre & Barrett, Eds., 1998; Riordan, Dynarski, Kochanek, Best & Dawson, 2012). For similar concerns, federal funding agencies, such as Institute for Educational Sciences (IES), are also beginning to require that “knowledge utilization and dissemination be incorporated into the grant application” (Long, 2013). IES has funded Regional Education Laboratories (RELs) specifically to develop alliances with states, districts and jurisdictions around research agendas to see if research results can become more easily accepted and used by these stakeholders. (Riordan, Dynarski, Kochanek, Best & Dawson, 2012).

At local levels, research results and research-based strategies reach classroom teachers through professional development and through subject coaches and mentors. Teachers often

complain that many professional activities do not meet their needs because they are too general, too infrequent and not integrated into their actual practice (Olofsson & Lindberg, 2010). The need to engage in more frequent and targeted professional development and support has led to the development of professional learning communities (Hamos, Bergin & Maki, 2009), critical friends groups (National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), 2014) and use of teacher leaders (Stewart, 2012) who operate at building levels, on a more regular basis, to provide professional help in translating research findings into research-based strategies usable in the classroom. Professional organizations such as NEA at the national level and Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE), at the local level, organize professional development institutes/activities on targeted topics for their members. They sometimes target specifically teachers that have distinguished themselves through awards like Teacher of the Year, Georgia Master Teachers, Star Teachers, etc. PAGE sometimes organizes, in collaboration with Master Teacher unit of the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC), workshops on Coaching, Mentoring, Differentiated Instruction, Student Engagement and Differentiated Assessment. Unfortunately, some administrators are slow to embrace leadership activities or changes that emanate from outside the usual district-approved chain of command. It is not always clear how much of what teachers learn at such workshops they are not able or allowed to use in their classroom and why (Jones & Vreeman, 2000).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the variables, among a select group of teachers, that hinder the “use of research to improve education and serve the public good” as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) mission advocates. Specifically, this study examines the impact on participants’ classroom practice of a specific workshop on “Fair Isn’t

Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in Differentiated Classroom” conducted by Rick Wormeli (2006).

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Forced by mainstreaming and inclusion in the classroom, (Sands, Kozleski & French, 2000; Hall, 2013) educators have become conscious of the fact that even the “regular” students fall on a continuum of ability, educational and behavioral needs. This led to the evolution of differentiation of instruction movement (Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiated Instruction (DI) is based on the argument that the classroom exhibits great diversity in socio-economic status, motivation, race, gender, ability, readiness, to name a few. Proponents of DI maintain that all the needs associated with student diversity cannot be addressed by one lesson that does not reflect any cognizance of those differences (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Wormeli, 2006).

Studies of beginning teachers (Nweke, 1998; Afolabi, Nweke, Stewart & Stephens, 2002; Gould, 2004; Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006) continue to show that many novice teachers arrive on the first day of school unsure of or lacking confidence in how to manage the classroom, engage all the students at their varying levels of knowledge and preparedness and document what they have learned. The realization of this lack of readiness of novice teachers has been the rationale for many induction programs (Kelly, 2004; Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment, California Induction, 2008) and the current push for a clinical format in the preparation of new teachers (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010); National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC, 2010); Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2013)). This realization that novice teachers take some years to mature professionally (Schere, 2012; Stewart, 2012) has led to the institution of induction certificate and

attendant tiered certification in many states such as Arizona, California and the current push for one in Georgia through its Race to the Top grant (GaPSC, 2012).

Wormeli contends that a necessary follow-up to Differentiated Instruction is differentiation in the assessment of the learning that occurs. This idea requires a paradigm shift in classroom assessment. Standardization has always been the hallmark of classical testing, as it should be in norm-referenced testing. However, standardization has been carried over into criterion-referenced testing where comparison among students is neither important nor the objective of the assessment. In which case, students do not need to respond to exactly the same questions to determine how much of the objectives they have mastered. Similarly, even though parallel tests have generally been used and accepted in the field, differentiated assessment has raised concerns (Watzke, 2003; Varsavsky & Rayner, 2013) probably because at the classroom level the individual teacher may not have the expertise or diligence to ensure that replacement test is as psychometrically sound as the original. As Wormeli (2006) argues, it is not important what the medium is used for determining how well objectives are mastered or that it took two attempts, rather than one, for a student to demonstrate mastery.

Computer-assisted already provides ways students of varying abilities and levels of readiness can begin and follow different paths in showing how much of a set of standards they have mastered. Nevertheless, in high-stakes testing, states and school systems make minimal accommodations for students with disabilities only as required by law, but do not allow or encourage differentiations in assessments to accommodate other kinds of diversity. Some of these ideas for differentiating assessment are contrary to many teachers', districts' and state testing policies.

Change is not always easy or welcome in organizations. Kotter and Schlesinger suggest four reasons for resistance to change: self-interest, misunderstanding, low tolerance for change and also approaches for overcoming them (as cited in Puthran, 2008). One such approach is training. While Hall and Hord (2006) agree that training is an important principle for change, they point out the importance of administrative leadership and facilitation of the change process for it to be successful. In-service training for teachers is often provided through professional development workshops and conferences. However, attending professional development workshops, especially those not provided by the employing school system, may not always guarantee transfer of teacher's learning to the classroom. As Jones and Vreeman (2008) argue, teachers learn best from each other and not by attending conferences conducted by outside experts. Impediments to transfer of learning from workshops, conferences and research are numerous and are examined in this paper using a specific workshop on assessment practices provided to Georgia Master Teachers.

In Georgia, the Master Teacher designation is given to classroom teachers and instructional coaches who have been determined to have significant impact on the academic achievement of students or on teachers' professional practice, respectively (GA Code 20-2-205). The specific criteria for selecting Master Teachers vary from state to state but are generally based on some form of value-added assessment, professional teaching certificate and a minimum number of years of experience; three years in Georgia. The process of determining impact and selecting Master Teachers in Georgia is described elsewhere (Georgia Master Teacher, 2014).

Teacher Leadership institutes are professional development sessions, co-sponsored by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) or Georgia Association of Educators

(GAE) and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), conducted to enhance the professional practice of Master Teachers. In Georgia, and in many other states, one expectation of the Master Teacher program is to identify a critical mass of effective teachers who can mentor and coach other teachers and be portrayers of new best practices. This study examines factors that may impede Georgia Master Teachers from meeting this expectation.

Methodology

Participants

Two hundred and two (202) Master Teachers, who participated in the 2011 Leadership Institutes held in four Georgia locations on January 31, February 1, March 2 and March 3, 2011 were participants in this mixed-methods study. Participation in the institutes was based on first-come-first served basis for filling the available workshop slots. Thus, participants were neither randomly selected on the basis of cohort nor on the basis school district. The first Master Teacher cohort of 2006 and the most recent cohort of 2010, at the time of the data collection had the highest representation in the institutes of 29.9% and 31%, respectively. More than half (65.5%) of the workshop participants were middle grades teachers, followed by elementary school teachers (21.8%) and by high school (6.9%). This mirrors the lopsided distribution of Master Teachers among school levels. This is partly explained by the nature of assessment used at each of the school levels, the number of subjects teachers teach and would be evaluated on and, thus, the perceived ease/difficulty of the application process by prospective applicants.

Materials and Procedure

The 2011 institute comprised a six-hour workshop on “Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in a Differentiated Classroom.” The presenter was Rick Wormeli, the author of a book (2006) with same title as the workshop. Topics covered included allowing

students to redo assignments for full credit; not assigning a grade of zero on a 100-point scale unless a student can “recover” from it. The concern is where 0-60 points are considered a failing grade which is eventually convert to 0 on 4 or 5-point scale. Other topics included using a standards-based report card; using differentiated or alternative assignments; not allowing “extra credit” work and not combining grades for effort and grades for actual performance. The primary purpose of the workshop was for the improvement of teachers’ professional practice with regard to assessing student learning more validly and reliably as a next step from differentiated instruction.

Data were collected using a 21-item online survey on the Capitol Impact (2014) online registration and management software. The items were reviewed for content and clarity by Master Teacher personnel and a few Master Teachers. The instrument is not a typical survey instrument. The survey elicited information regarding whether participants learned any assessment or grading strategies they would like to implement in their classrooms or schools. It also elicited information on whether the participants had implemented what they learned and if they had not, why they had not. Finally, participants were asked to indicate which of the assessment and grading strategies or principles presented at the workshop participants found most useful, least useful, easily utilized, most difficult to apply and reasons they could not implement some. In other words, the survey was designed to elicit some reasons why new knowledge, or research findings may not readily influence or change classroom practices. Some of the items had an open-ended option in addition to the selected-response options. The survey was available for about two months after the institutes (March 7, through April 30, 2011). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analyzed using categorization of emerging themes.

Results and Discussion

Eighty-seven Master Teachers responded for a response rate of 43.1%. The participants comprised 77 teachers, 7 instructional coaches, 1 technology specialist and 2 unspecified educators. All the respondents (100%) indicated that they learned some assessment/grading strategy from the institute that they planned to use. However, by the time the survey closed, two months after the workshops, only 55 (63.2%) had been able to implement at least one strategy learned from the workshop. Participants found the following strategies or principles most useful: allowing students to redo assignments for full credit, not assigning a grade of zero unless students can “recover” from it, making students analyze why their response is incorrect, and isolating and retesting specific standards, rather administering a whole new test covering all the original standards

Regarding how they implemented the strategies they did, 72.4% shared what they learned with other teachers, 64.8% implemented strategies in their own classrooms. Only 32% shared their new learning with their administrators while 17% shared the strategies with a professional learning community. Emerging themes from open-ended questions and free comments explain why most participants did not bother to share what they learned with their administrators. Specifically, many Master Teachers complained that their principals and other administrators did not acknowledge them or their effectiveness and did not see or use them in teacher leadership roles. Very few participants reported sharing with colleagues in a PLC partly because PLCs were non-existent in their schools.

Participants also listed principles that they learned but could either not readily implement or could not implement at all. The most frequently named difficult-to-implement was changing the grading system. In most school systems, the grading system is system-wide policy which the

individual teachers cannot change on their own. Though they could make changes on whether or not to allow students redo assignment in their classroom, they did not have the authority to allow students redo system-wide or state-wide assessments. They also reported that they could not change the grade reporting system from, say, 90-100 being a letter grade of A or from 5-point letter grade scale to 4-point scale. Some Master Teachers said they could not implement the standards-based grading because it required time and expertise to develop the rubric, explain it to the administration and parents and have it adopted. In addition, some indicated that some changes needed to be implemented at the beginning, rather than in the middle, of a school year, which in this case ended 2-3 months after the workshop. Other impediments to applying new principles and strategies from the workshop included: system-wide policy, lack of teacher buy-in or resistance to change, lack of consistency with community expectations and system guidelines, lack of time to develop new rubrics or present new principles to colleagues/teams, and fear that some students would be glad to take a 60, rather than a zero, for the same letter grade of F, for not turning in an assignment.

Conclusion

This study highlights some impediments that researchers face disseminating their findings or teachers face in translating newly acquired knowledge or strategies into the classroom practice. This is especially true when the source of the knowledge or proposed change is from outside the chain of command in the school system or conflicts with an existing policy. Some of the impediments arise from legitimate concern. Some practices are based on well debated choices that have been implemented system-wide to ensure easier enforcement of quality control, comparability and defensibility. Such policies cannot and should not be changed on the whims of an individual teachers or outsiders. This suggests that strategies or proposed practices

that would have implications beyond individual teachers’ classrooms or violate established system-wide policies need to be channeled through the central decision making authorities like the Board of Education for proper vetting and subsequent implementation. Also, other factors of tradition, time and resistance to change, remain stumbling blocks to sharing and applying new knowledge in the classroom. Thus, while educational researchers should make concerted effort to make their results and findings available to practitioners, a better, or additional, target might be the policy makers, as the practitioner might lack the authority to effect necessary changes in practice. This is in line with Hall & Hord’s (2006) argument that administrative facilitation may be necessary to ensure knowledge or research utilization and supports the IES call and plans for better research utilization. More effort should also be made in helping teachers designated as teacher leaders to expand their focus from practice in just their own classrooms to facilitation of subject or grade level groups.

References

- Afolabi, C., Nweke, W. & Stewart, E., & Stephens, C. (2003). *A report of the Readiness of First-Year teachers in Georgia Public Schools*. Educator Workforce Research & Development Division, Georgia Professional Standards Commission, Atlanta.
- Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment: California Induction*. (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.btsa.ca.gov>
- Capitol Impact. (2014). Event Impact: Online Registration and Event Management [Software]. Available from <http://www.capitolimpact.com/event-impact/>
- Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, (2013). *CAEP accreditation standards and evidence: Aspirations for educator preparation*. Retrieved from <http://caepnet.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/commrpt.pdf>

Florin, J. Ehrenberg, A. Wallin, L. & Gustavsson, P. (2012). Educational support for research utilization and capability beliefs regarding evidence-based practice skills: A national survey of senior nursing students. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 68(4), 888–897.

doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2011.05792.x

Georgia Master Teacher. (2014). *Master Teacher Certification 2014*. Retrieved from

http://www.gamasterteachers.org/MT_application.aspx

Georgia Professional Standards Commission. (2012). *Tiered certification system for Georgia educators*. Retrieved from

http://www.gapsc.com/commission/media/downloads/2012_annual_conference/lunchsession.pdf

Gould, H. C. (2004). Can novice teachers differentiate? Yes, they can! *New Horizons for Learning*. Retrieved from

<http://home.avvanta.com/~building/strategies/differentiated/gould.htm>

Hall, J. (2013). *Mainstreaming in education*. Pasadena, CA: Salem Press Encyclopedia.

Hall, G. E. & Hord, S. M. (2006). *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Hamos, J. E., Bergin, K. B., Maki, D. P. (2009). Opening the Classroom Door: Professional Learning Communities in the Math and Science Partnership Program. *Science Educator*, 18(2), 14-24. (EJ864611)

Jones, C. & Vreeman, M. (2008). *Instructional coaches & classroom teachers: Sharing the road to success*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education Pub.

Kelly, L. M. (2004). Why induction matters. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(5), 438-448. doi: 10.1177/0022487104269653.

- Puthran, S. (2008). Resistance to change - Approaches of Kotter & Schlesinger. Retrieved from <http://www.managementaccountant.in/2008/04/resistence-to-change-approaches-of.html>
- Lavoie-Tremblay, M., Anderson, M., Bonneville-Roussy, A., Drevniok, U., & Lavigne, G. L. (2012). Nurse-executives' perceptions of the executive training for research application (EXTRA) program, *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*, 9(3), 186-192.
- Long, B. T. (2013). *IES Board addresses belt tightening and research utilization*. Retrieved from <http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/AERAHighlightsE-newsletter/AERAHighlightsJune2013/IESBoardAddressesBeltTighteningandResearchU/tabid/14959/Default.aspx> .
- Mathew- Maich, N., Ploeg, J., Jack, S. & Dobbins, M. (2010). *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*, 7(1), 25-35.
- McIntyre, J. & Barrett, M. (1998). VET [Vocational Education Training] research: Influencing policy & practice. *Proceedings of the National Conference of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA)*, Sydney, Australia, February 16-17. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED452418>
- National Association for Alternative certification. (2010). Quality indicators for nontraditional teacher preparation programs. Retrieved from http://www.alt-teachercert.org/quality_indicators.asp
- National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2010). *Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers. Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student learning*. Washington, D. C.: Author.

- National School Reform Faculty. (2014). Frequently asked questions. Retrieved from <http://www.nsrffharmony.org/faq.html>
- Neuharth-Pritchett, S. (2006). Research into practice: Meeting the needs of all children and beginning teacher development. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 20(4), 351-357. Retrieved from http://www.thefreelibrary.com/_/print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=148930788
- Nweke, W. (1998). *Beginning teacher survey-1998: Final report*. Georgia Professional Standards Commission, Atlanta, Georgia. Retrieved from <http://www.gapsc.com/Research/Data/1998%20Beginning%20Teacher%20Survey.pdf>.
- Olofsson, A. D. & Lindberg, J. O. (2010). *Online learning communities and teacher professional development: Methods for improved education delivery*. Hershey, PA : Information Science Reference.
- Riordan, J., Dynarski, M., Kochanek, J., Best, J. & Dawson, M. (2012). *Building a common research agenda across jurisdictions*. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED535661>
- Sands, D. J., Kozleski, E. & French, N. (2000). *Inclusive education for the twenty-first century*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.
- Stewart, T. (2012). Classroom teacher leadership: Service-learning for teacher sense of efficacy and servant leadership development. *School Leadership & Management*, 32(3), 233-259.
- Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Tomlinson, C. & McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating differentiated instruction & understanding by design: Connecting content and kids*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
-

- Varsavsky, C. & Rayner, G. (2013). Strategies that challenge: Exploring the use of differentiated assessment to challenge high-achieving students in large enrolment undergraduate cohorts. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(7), 789-802.
- Watzke, J. L. (2003). Longitudinal study of stages of beginning teacher development in a field-based teacher education program. *Teacher Educator*, 38(3), 209-229.
- Wormeli, R. (2006). *Fair isn't always equal: Assessing & grading in the differentiated classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.