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The Power of the Clinical Interview

Project Description

The purpose of this project was to teach undergraduate elementary teacher education majors how to conduct clinical interviews as a tool for assessing student learning and planning instruction and to assess whether this project was effective in changing the preservice teachers' knowledge and beliefs about assessment and the role of assessment in teaching.

Methodology

Teacher candidates in the methods class were given a written survey with qualitative and quantitative items at the beginning and end of the semester probing for their understanding and beliefs about assessment and the role of assessment in teaching (See Appendix A). Quantitative data were compared pre and post using a T-test. Open-ended responses were analyzed for themes, pre and post, and the beliefs of individual teacher candidates were compared and contrasted before and after instruction.

Major Findings

Pretest information revealed that Buffalo State College teacher candidates entered this class with significant background information about assessment. Prior to instruction, almost all candidates agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) with the positive statements on the survey: "Assessment is useful in helping to plan units and lessons" (Question 7) and "It is reasonable to expect teachers to conduct one-on-one assessment" (Question 9). Most disagreed (2) or strongly disagreed (1) with the negative statements: "Assessment is most effective when done as a whole class" (Question 8) and "Assessment is the final step in effective instruction" (Question 10), although each of those negative statements did elicit significantly ($p=.03$ and $p=.07$ respectfully) more disagreement after instruction, indicating that instruction was effective in convincing these students that assessment can be conducted in formats other than whole-class and before the final step. Qualitative data also indicated that many teacher candidates had learned before the semester of the study that assessment and instruction needed to be integrated and that assessment could be formal or informal, formative or summative.

Post-test information did demonstrate that many candidates were able to deepen this understanding of the role of assessment in teaching and learning, and some candidates showed profound changes. These changes were evident in four emerging beliefs about the role of assessment in education:

- a) Assessment needs to focus on deep conceptual understanding or Big Ideas;
- b) Assessment before instruction is important for effective unit planning;

- c) Assessment provides information about how the teacher is doing as well as how the students are doing; and
- d) Student interviews can be an extremely valuable form of assessment.

Data to support each of these findings will be discussed briefly in the sections below.

New Understanding 1: Assessment needs to focus on conceptual understanding of Big Ideas

After instruction, many teacher candidates wrote about the importance of using assessment to determine whether students are coming to deeper understanding of key concepts by delving into student thinking. One candidate wrote, “When assessing during a unit, it is important to have big ideas and major understanding in mind. Assessing after each lesson allows a teacher to see exactly what is hard for the students to understand” (Q4, Fall, Candidate 5, Post-test). Candidates were able to write about the value of taking time to determine what the student is thinking, indicating an awareness of misconceptions in student thinking. For example, two candidates wrote: “Assessment tells you where to start or what misconceptions need to be considered” (Q 4, Fall, Candidate 5, Post-test) and “Assessment helps determine how the students understand a concept, or their misconceptions” (Q 4, Spring, Candidate 12, Post-test).

New Understanding 2: Assessment before instruction is important for effective unit planning

At the end of the semester, more candidates were able to articulate the value of careful assessment as a tool for unit planning. 39% of the candidates indicated more disagreement with the statement, “Assessment is the final step in effective instruction” at the end of the semester. They explained: “You are able to understand where the students are at before, during, and after the lesson; this will allow you to know what to plan for” (Q 4, Fall, Candidate 13 Post-test). This statement can be contrasted with the same candidate, prior to instruction, who wrote: “You can use the assessment as a grade; they will be graded on the understanding of what they were taught in the unit,” making it clear that the candidate has come to a new understanding about when assessment should take place and for what purpose. Other teacher candidates also described the critical need for assessment **prior to** planning instruction. “Knowing where students are before teaching a lesson or unit helps a teacher plan more accurately” (Q 4, Spring, Candidate 4 Post-test). “We should base our teaching on children’s prior knowledge and build upon it” (Q 4, Spring, Candidate 8, Post-test).

An example from one set of interviews demonstrates how student interviews can help focus instruction. For this project, the teacher candidates in the methods class were required to develop an interview protocol to use with a small group (3-8) of students prior to planning a unit that could be taught to the class. Within the unit plan, the candidates reported on the results of their interviews and how these results have shaped their unit planning. One candidate writing a unit on Ancient China found, “The students also seemed to lack understanding that Ancient China existed where the country of China

exists today. I got the impression that at least two of the students thought that China was actually named 'Ancient China' a long time ago. Their concepts of Ancient China and the (very) little they knew about China today were as two different countries." This helped her focus her unit on this major understanding.

New Understanding 3: Assessment provides information about how the teacher is doing as well as how the students are doing

At the beginning of the semester, teacher candidates wrote about the value of assessment in determining what the students have learned. At the end of the semester, candidates were able to articulate how assessment information could provide the teacher with feedback about what students still needed to learn and how successful the **teacher** has been during instruction. For example, one candidate, when asked at the beginning of the semester, "What is assessment?" wrote: "It is a process to verify what an individual knows." At the end of the semester, the same candidate answered this question by writing: "Assessment is a dual process, you are finding out if the students are understanding the information as well as if the teacher is teaching it well enough for them" (*Q 2, Spring, Candidate 6, Pre and Post-tests*). Other candidates echoed this understanding: "Assessments provide a 'reality check' for teachers to assess the effectiveness of their instruction" (*Q 2, Spring, Candidate 5, Post-test*); "Through reviewing the results of assessments, a good teacher can reflect on what students need and how their teaching can be improved" (*Q 3, Spring, Candidate 3, Post-test*); "Assessment should guide teaching – it is only then that a teacher can fully realize what, if any, changes need to be made to the curriculum/instruction" (*Q 3, Spring, Candidate 4, Post-test*).

New Understanding 4: Student interviews can be an extremely valuable form of assessment.

Prior to instruction, no teacher candidates used the term "interview" to describe a form of classroom assessment. A few talked about informal questioning, but none had a systematic way to describe the format for eliciting students' prior knowledge through thoughtfully constructed interviews. After instruction, almost all candidates listed interviews as an effective assessment tool. Some were passionate in their support of the value of student interviews. Candidates wrote:

- I think that an interview process like we used this semester is the most valid way to know the level of students' understanding (*Q 1, Fall, Candidate 8, Post-test*).
- The best, most valid way of finding out what students know or understand is interviewing them before and after a lesson or unit. Although this is time-consuming, it is the most valid because students' thoughts are stated in their own words from their knowledge (*Q 1, Fall, Candidate 12, Post-test*).
- By interviewing the students, they can express in their own words what they know or have learned. You can also check for understanding by the vocabulary they use and whether or not they make sense (*Q 1, Spring, Candidate 2, Post-test*).

- After my experiences this semester, I feel that student interviews provide the most complete picture of what students know (*Q 1, Spring, Candidate 4, Post-test*).
- Students can best explain what they know about a topic through well-planned interview questions about big ideas (*Q 1, Spring, Candidate 13, Post-test*).
- The teacher should let the students try to explain their thinking and understanding; the teacher should talk less and listen closely to what the students are saying (*Q 5, Fall, Candidate 3, Post-test*).

These four new understandings about assessment set these teacher candidates up for success in the classroom that is learner-centered. These candidates are ready to use clinical interviews to focus on student thinking, plan appropriate instruction, evaluate the success of their instruction, and make adjustments as needed.

Contributions to the Campus Community

As part of this project, I am putting together a training packet for faculty wishing to use clinical interviews in their teacher education classes. The packet includes videotapes of clinical interviews conducted by me and the teacher candidates on different topics with different age groups. It also includes a set of readings for the candidates and handouts that can be used to guide the Buffalo State College students through their experiences in designing and conducting interviews with children in the schools and using these interviews as a basis for curriculum design.

I plan to present my work at the Professional Development Schools annual conference September 29, 2006. One of my spring 2006 EDU 312 students will also be presenting her interview results at this conference. In addition, I plan on working with other EDU 312 faculty and invite them to use clinical interview research projects in their courses. Candidates with outstanding projects will be invited to present at Student Research and Creativity Day in the spring.

Professional Benefits/Results of Fellowship

An article about this research project has been accepted for publication in the STANYS Newsletter for publication in the fall of 2006. I am continuing to refine this project and plan to conduct a larger study, including clinical interviews of my students next year. An article about this larger study will be submitted for publication to a national journal.

APPENDIX A: Assessment Survey

Name _____

Professor's Name _____

Class _____ Semester and Year _____

For each question below, please write a complete explanation of your thoughts and opinions. More is better than less.

1. What is the best, most valid way of finding out what students know or understand?
2. What is assessment?
3. What is the relationship between teaching and assessment?
4. What is the role of assessing students' knowledge and understanding in lesson and unit planning?
5. What types of assessments can you think of? Describe the purpose of each and how it is used in teaching.
6. What is the teacher's role in assessing students?

For each statement below, please circle indicating whether you agree or disagree with the statement. Then write an explanation for your response.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

7. Assessment is useful in helping to plan lessons and units.
Please explain.

8.. Assessment is most effective when it is done as a whole class.
Please explain:

9. It is reasonable to expect teachers to conduct one-on-one assessment.
Please explain:

10. Assessment is the final step in effective instruction.
Please explain:

Thank you so much for your assistance with this project.