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Authentic Professional Development and Assessment for Language Arts Teachers Capacity for Change

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HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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In recent years, No Child Left Behind (2002) punctuated the importance of the language arts; teachers and schools were held accountable for student achievement. This legislation continues to cause great anguish among those who believe teaching and learning are processes that cannot be evaluated by test scores alone. Adding to this dilemma is the fact that language arts teachers are expected to meet the academic and social needs of a growing student population from diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Sleeter, 2001). This information seems especially challenging when perusing state language arts curriculums, typically written by educators from the dominant, mainstream, middle-class, European American cultures. These educational outlines usually feature goals and objectives, materials and resources that frequently ignore languages and cultures of those from underrepresented groups. Ultimately, this way of proceeding inadvertently disempowers and marginalizes many students (Cummins, 1996; Nieto, 2000; Gunderson, 2009).

Therefore, it is no surprise that strong diversity education programs have become necessary elements for teacher professional growth and development (Sleeter, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2009). Unfortunately, there is little research on the assessment of language arts teachers who participate in these programs (Fitzgerald, 2003; Howard & Aleman, 2008). Specifically, a review of the literature on teacher assessment has emphasized authenticity (Haertel, 1990; Tellez, 1996) and “teacher capacity” (Grant, 2008). Portfolio assessments, in particular, are considered authentic, since they demonstrate “teacher capacity” to develop understandings of students and families, learn new pedagogical content knowledge, and cultivate an awareness of their own professional power. Portfolio assessments can include classroom observations by parents, administrators, researchers, and students, materials and resources created by the teacher, course evaluations, parent and teacher conference interviews, teacher self-evaluations, and any other information that might contribute to professional development.

Therefore, this chapter begins with brief descriptions of theoretical frameworks that support authentic teacher assessment as it relates to “teacher capacity.” Next, it summarizes language arts teacher preparation and in-service experiences that address teacher capacity as a means for authentic assessment. Then it presents representative findings from programs that appear to demonstrate language arts teacher capacity for development and change. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for authentic assessment of language arts teachers.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding Authentic Language Arts Teacher Assessment

Teacher Efficacy and Teacher Capacity When analyzing authentic teacher assessment, teacher efficacy is a key concept. Bandura (1994) proposes that self-efficacy beliefs are “concerned with people’s beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives” (p. 80). Beliefs of humans are largely seen as being agents of their development, and these self-efficacy beliefs have a powerful impact on their actions. These beliefs help “determine how people think, feel, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71) and consequently affect the results of the actions of the individuals. In the case of teaching, such beliefs influence teacher and student outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Similarly, teacher efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000) revolves around the idea of “teacher capacity” for knowledge development, reflection, action, and self-evaluation. Also, teacher beliefs in their own abilities to accomplish instructional goals are internal processes related to teacher self-efficacy (Wolters & Daugherty, 2007). The following statement in A Nation at Risk (U.S. Department of Education, National
Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), illuminates these ideas:

Teachers should have a good grasp of the ways in which different kinds of physical and social systems work; a feeling for data and what uses to which they can be put; an ability to help students see patterns where others see only confusion; an ability to foster genuine creativity...; and the ability to work with other people in work groups that decide for themselves how to get the job done. They must be able to learn all the time...Teachers will not come to school knowing all that they have to know, but knowing how to figure out what they need to know... (p. 25)

Effective professional development can change teachers’ understanding of the process of teaching and their expectations of success and therefore self-efficacy (Swackhamer, Koellner, Basile, & Kimbrough, 2009). Therefore, assessment of teacher efficacy should include teacher capacity for gaining self-knowledge, for community understanding, for gaining and implementing pedagogical content knowledge implementation, and awareness of professional power. It follows, then, that language arts teacher capacity will be demonstrated in the ability to learn about students’ languages and backgrounds, in the ability to create learning environments that appreciate differences, and in the ability to make connections with the school curriculum, all of which encourage academic and social achievement. The sociocultural perspective guides teachers toward the development of such capacities.

Sociocultural Perspective The sociocultural perspective on classroom teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Gutiérrez, 2002) embraces the idea that teachers and children construct meaning through social interactions across and within cultural settings. Students become literate within the cultures of home, school, and community as they and their teachers construct the classroom culture and define language and literacy. Teachers who are guided by this perspective must also be aware of the power issues involved in language arts teaching and learning, and critical race theory assists in this recognition.

Critical Race Theory Critical race theory or CRT (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Nebeker, 1998), analyzes power relationships in society with the following principles: (a) societal structure has made race invisible, due to the realities of White privilege; (b) experiential storytelling and listening to the voices of those who have been discriminated against as part of the social order are legitimate; (c) meaningful social change can only occur when there is a radical change in existing social structures; (d) civil rights legislation seems to be de jure rather than de facto, thus maintaining White supremacy (Jenson, 2005), and finally; (e) educators must take action by beginning to change the social structure of schools through culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Au, 2000). This type of teaching makes connections between a student’s home and community and the required curriculum and motivates students to see relationships that have meaning in their own lives (Schmidt & Ma, 2006; Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006).

Professional Development Programs for Today’s Language Arts Classrooms: Problems and Possibilities

Professional in-service courses provided by school districts and teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities that offer rich learning experiences, assist teachers in forging positive relationships with diverse groups of people (Lazar, 2004; Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006). However, those professional development programs require enough time for reflection, and support (Fullan, 2004; Howard & Aleman, 2008), so that teachers may adapt and implement new instructional practices. Such programs use “teacher capacity” to examine the need for change, to participate in a process for change, and to see the results of change. Teachers are often transformed and begin to see their own power as advocates for diverse groups of children (Schmidt et al., 2009). Their experiences encourage them to implement culturally responsive language arts in a curriculum that connects home, school and community for more meaningful teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Schmidt, 2005a). In these programs, teachers, administrators, and/or researchers may videotape, observe, and model teaching; teacher volunteers may be paid for their time after school and become participants in research.

Long-term in-service programs, and university course work seem the most productive in the development of teacher capacity (Nir & Bogler, 2008), since they actually assist language arts teachers in making culturally compatible and dynamic connections between home and school (Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993; Schmidt, 2005a, 2005b). However, lifelong emotions and attitudes of present and future teachers, regarding cultural, linguistic and economic diversity may deter the preparation process (Willis, 2000; Sleeter, 2008).

Language Arts In-Service Program Strategies In light of this information and previous research studies (Britzman, 1986; Banks, 1994; Osborne, 1996; Schmidt, 1998a; Schmidt et al., 2009), there is evidence that teacher self-knowledge is the first and foremost consideration when attempting to help teachers understand diverse groups of students. One model for developing self-knowledge is the ABC’s of Cultural Understanding and Communication (Schmidt, 1998b). It is a five-step process based on the adage “Know thyself and understand others.” A brief description follows:

1. Teachers write autobiographies starting with earliest memories. Sharing their stories is not mandatory.
2. Teachers interview several parents and community members away from the school setting and ask questions regarding how and what to teach their children.
3. Teachers compare and contrast similarities and differences with their own stories and their parents’ and children’s stories.
4. Teachers analyze differences and reflect on similarities and differences.
5. Teachers create plans for incorporating community and family funds of knowledge into the required curriculum.

Also, it is clear that in-service must include authentic experiences with diverse groups of people (Cochran-Smith, 2004). The following research-based strategies assist in the professional development of language arts teachers:

1. Interview and listen to parent stories (Edwards, 1999, 2004; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009).
2. Live in the school community and/or frequent local establishments, such as grocery stores, parks, eateries, and religious centers (Noordhoff & Kleinfield, 1993).
3. Invite classroom visitors from diverse backgrounds to contribute to the curriculum. First hand experiences with diverse populations stimulate perspective sharing (Schmidt, 2005b).
4. Write reflective journals about research articles and resources (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003).
5. Observe and analyze videotaped lessons in colleagues’ classrooms to assist in planning lessons and creating home/school/community connection activities, and discovering successful characteristics (Schmidt & Finkbeiner, 2006).
6. Support teachers with mentoring and modeling language arts lessons and units, so they will try new ideas and ways of proceeding (Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2006).
7. Create portfolio assessment criterion. Portfolios usually include samples of self-evaluation, a goal-setting process, academic products, teacher-created tests, standardized evaluation, observations, attitude surveys, interviews, and any other applicable anecdotal records (Tellez, 1996; Fitzgerald, 2003).

When these kinds of strategies are implemented, authentic language arts teacher assessment seems possible. However, when searching for authentic professional development and assessment in diverse settings, there were few long-term descriptive studies.

**Teacher Capacity and Language Arts In-Service Programs**

In the following section, brief descriptions of several programs are presented. The term “teacher capacity” is not stated in the programs, but teachers’ actions and words indicated positive changes. Teachers changed in their understandings of community connections, pedagogical content knowledge (student assessment included), and awareness of professional power. These published (Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Edwards, 1999; Paratore, 2001; Schmidt, 2005; Izzo & Schmidt, 2006; Schmidt et al. 2009; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009) and unpublished studies (Schmidt, 2006; Singh, 2007) were selected, because European American teachers were given long-term authentic opportunities to meet and work with diverse groups of students and families. As a result, they gained new information and insights for classroom implementation of the English language arts.

**Teacher Capacity: Understanding Self and Others**

The in-service program created by Trueba and his colleagues (1990) was guided by ethnographic principles and scholars. Teachers learned about Hmong cultural conflicts and struggles in schools and communities by meeting regularly with Hmong family members in a variety of comfortable community settings. They also shared their own life experiences and joyously discovered how to incorporate Hmong language and literature in their classrooms to support achievement in the English language arts.

Similarly, a 3-year ethnography (Singh, 2007) focused on in-service teacher assessment and provided evidence for culturally responsive teaching in a kindergarten classroom comprised of students from African American, Latino, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese backgrounds in an urban setting. This European American teacher personally connected with parents on a weekly basis to honor bilingualism and promote writing and speaking in English.

Other long-term projects have promoted intergenerational literacy. Teachers were taught how to work with families in urban and rural settings (Edwards, 1999; Paratore, 2001), and gained personal and professional knowledge. The findings demonstrated that parents improved their own English language arts while reading and writing with their children at home.

Finally, several long-term, in-service elementary and secondary professional development programs in urban and rural settings (Reyhner & Garcia, 1989; Moll et al., 1992; Schmidt, 2005, 2006; Izzo & Schmidt, 2006; Singh, 2007; Schmidt et al., 2009; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009) gave voice to several Native American, Hispanic, African American, Sudanese, and Vietnamese families. Teachers who visited homes and communities for family interviews as part of their in-service experiences, were provided information and opportunities for implementing diverse cultures and languages in the curriculum. The sharing of personal information blurred the boundaries between home and school and brought diverse visitors, games, stories, histories, and other artifacts into the classrooms and schools. The results included lively and meaningful learning of the English language arts. Rather than only talking about how to help parents learn to support their children academically, teachers used family and community knowledge and resources to make the curriculum more relevant.

The findings from this small group of studies were based on reported classroom observations, teacher and family interviews and anonymous surveys. The following representative teacher comments from study participants
indicate that their professional development yielded positive behaviors.

When I realized my parents couldn’t read, how could I expect them to read to their children. That is when I came to know the devastating power of teacher assumptions. (Edwards, 1999, p. 18)

I know that meetings in homes with my Sudanese parents show them that I respect them. I want them to know me and learn from them, so that I can better teach their children. This has to be one of my best years in teaching! (Schmidt et al., 2009, p. 245)

I was nervous at first...but once we began the interview, it seemed that Ms. Lopez was really enjoying talking about her family, her children, and her life. I learned more than I expected. (Moll et al., 2005, p. 78)

It’s a two-way street. Hispanic families can teach the schools...and schools can teach the families. We need both for our children. (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009, p. 56)

As a result of self-examination (Schmidt, 2005b; Schmidt et al., 2009) and confidence gained from practicing various interview processes, teachers became comfortable with parent/teacher relationships and could see the value in learning about and from the community. Secondary and elementary teachers stated the following in interviews and surveys.

Teacher Capacity: Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Includes Student Assessment) Previous research (Greene & Abt-Perkins, 2003; Schmidt & Ma, 2006) has analyzed culturally responsive language arts instruction and discovered specific characteristics in the planning of units of study: high expectations, use of community and family resources, cultural sensitivity, active teaching methods, teacher as facilitator, group and paired work, and student control of portions of lessons. Teacher assessment in culturally responsive ways is process oriented. Teachers maintain student portfolios that include samples of student work from the classroom and home, teacher notes regarding student class contributions and student focus and grade level information reflecting student gains on teacher created tests and standardized tests. Analyses of samples of teacher lesson plans, videotaped lessons, participant observations, and interviews demonstrated that when these characteristics were included, lessons seemed successful.

Teachers also changed priorities for student assessment. They created student portfolios, noted student focus of attention, analyzed student work, and compared weekly teacher created tests and annual standardized tests. Teachers became more attentive to individual student needs and ways to connect with student interests associated with academic and social achievement. Elementary and secondary teachers across several studies have expressed the following in these summary comments from participant observations and manuscripts:

When the parents were invited to help in the selection process for school materials and resources, they gained an understanding of the English language arts and could support their children’s learning. Teachers saw changes in the children and gradually the school refrained from automatically labeling Native American children in special education categories. (Reyhner & Garcia, 1989, p. 88)

My goals for my students were to develop the skills of sharing, cooperating, and participating in a diverse social group and express themselves through a variety of media including, but not limited to visual arts, creative dramatics, music, and dance I capitalized on the diversity among my students and the characters in the story to build appreciation among my students for different cultures, races, and gender. (Singh, 2007, p. 117)

High expectations…I heard people talking about it, but I didn’t know what it meant until I saw what my kids can do when they are interested in an activity. I never had students working in pairs. I was afraid of losing control. I was afraid that they’d just goof off and not learn anything. I like that they are reading and writing together and there is that ‘healthy hum’ as they share ideas. The results of the state exams were the best this year and I didn’t sweat it. 70% of the kids passed it easily and that is a record for this school. (Schmidt, 2005b p. 20)

Teacher Capacity: Awareness of Professional Power The teachers that children need to succeed are those who have the capacity to self-evaluate, learn new information, implement new ways of planning and assessment, and use their professional power (Cochran-Smith, 2004). And that professional power, gained from authentic in-service often stimulates the need to advocacy. The teachers in these studies gained a greater awareness of injustice and a noticeable passion for institutional change. For example,

I put in the note (for the principal), I said I want planning time so M [teacher for the Spanish-speaking children] and I can get together and she can tell me what she is doing so I can support during literacy. I also told her I won’t be teaching the Latinos social studies and science because that was done during literacy time. There is no time in the afternoon to do that, they have all these specials and they have math everyday, and if I am going to give them playtime, when I am supposed to do social studies and science? I have to implement those during literacy time. (Singh, 2007, p. 250)

The children aren’t getting what they need from this school. The school doesn’t understand the struggles of many families. Most of my parents work longer hours than I do and they can barely make it. I never really felt what they felt...
until I got to know them. Now, I need to help other teachers learn. (Schmidt et al., 2009, p. 245)

We call the principal or assistant principal into our grade level meetings. We ask questions and get answers; we get what we need for our kids right away. The administrators can support many of our new ideas and initiatives, because we keep them informed. (Izzo & Schmidt, 2006, p. 171)

As teachers we need to gain better understandings of diverse communities, so our classrooms and schools can capture community “funds of knowledge” and make learning relevant. Then we will begin to meet the academic and social needs of our students. (Moll et al., 2005, p. 81)

Recommendations for In-Service or Professional Development Programs that Build Teacher Capacity

Authentic assessment and the concept of “teacher capacity” (Grant, 2008) were promoted in the longitudinal studies of language arts teacher professional development presented in this chapter. So, where do we go from here?

Research suggests that professional development workshops are fruitless district expenses if they are not long term (Goodlad, 1998; Fullan, 2004). Obviously, we believe that there should be a national commitment to programs that give time and sustained support to language arts teachers as they implement curriculum in classrooms with students from diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Time is essential in allowing teachers to explore self-knowledge, learn to appreciate diversity, study communication opportunities, and create risk-free classroom environments that explicitly promote meaningful support for the English language arts.

Mixed Methods Language Arts Teacher Assessment Based on Teacher Capacity

To begin remedying existing assessment procedures in language arts classrooms mixed methods appears to be the reasonable and authentic way to proceed (Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006; Grant 2008). Questions such as, “Do teachers have the capacity to learn? What evidence is there that they have changed and developed as professionals?” should guide assessment. We also propose that,

1. States consider required in-service coursework throughout the school year...coursework that includes the strategies used in this chapter (Raymond, 1994; Eisenman, Hill, Bailey, & Dickinson, 2003).
2. Teacher professional organizations or teacher education programs could be paid to provide administrator approved coursework (Guskey, 2000).
3. No matter what the program, administrator support is a necessity (Mullen & Brad, 2006; Singh, 2007; Yendol-Hoppey, Jacobs, & Dana, 2009).
4. Administrators should not be the sole evaluators of teachers...other teachers, professors, parents, students, and community members should be allowed to assess (Zeichner & Hoefn, 1996; Guskey, 2000; Foote, 2009).
5. Self-evaluation and goal setting by a teacher encourages professional growth (Broemmel, Swaggerty, & McIntosh, 2009; Dobson, 2009; Sleeter, 2009).
6. Teacher assessment of student progress needs to be individualized and valid (Colvin, Flannery, Sugai, & Monegan, 2009).

In conclusion, the children from diverse linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds are fast becoming the majority in our nation’s schools. Therefore, we believe that infusing their talents through excellent educational opportunities should be a priority. Moreover, it is time for those who control society to support teachers who make the commitment to teach the English language arts to diverse groups of students. These teachers need time, knowledge, and resources for authentic professional development. And as they deepen their understandings of community connections, pedagogical content knowledge, and professional power, they should be authentically assessed for the positive changes they make for the students and families in their schools.

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