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Examination of Teacher Self-Assessment

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Teacher expertise includes more than scientific/technical knowledge; it also includes social/experiential understandings garnered in classroom settings. It is generally conceded that much of a teacher's expertise—some would say most—comes from real classroom experiences. However, although experience is a necessary condition for teacher expertise, it is not a sufficient one (Lampert & Clark, 1990). If experience is to heighten a teacher's expertise and understanding, it must be reflected on, analyzed, and used to improve practice. It is the constant cycle of experience, reflection, and improvement that marks a teacher's growth and development; teachers do learn by doing, but only if they also reflect upon, critique, and base future actions on knowledge gained from past actions.

There is a growing recognition of this reality. Tom (1980) describes the effective teacher as one who " is able to conceive of his teaching in purposeful terms, analyze a particular teaching problem, choose a teaching approach that seems appropriate to the problem, attempt the approach, judge the results in relation to the original purpose, and reconsider either the teaching or the original purpose" (p. 94). Green (1984) calls on teachers to examine unchallenged processes, practices, and expectations and to question meaning and reflect on experience in order to broaden their understanding and practice in the classroom. Schon (1987) points out that practitioners must reflect both in action and on action in order to understand, critique, and modify their teaching. House, Mathison, and McTaggart (1989) describe a teacher's "intentional causation" as the product of a teacher developing a personal set of cause-and-effect relationships about teaching through experience and reflection. All of these theorists advocate that teachers become constructors of their own knowledge and expertise through thinking about and self-assessing their own practice and beliefs. As Gademer (1976) points out, reflection is a powerful method for bringing to consciousness our tacit, unquestioned assumptions and beliefs, and engaging in this process of self-examination permits us to understand and hence transform our actions. However, it is also true that in spite of recommendations to encourage teacher thinking and self-assessment as important paths to developing knowledge, we still have scant understanding of the knowledge and beliefs that guide teachers' practice, how these originate, and how their growth is

appropriately fostered (Calderhead & Robson, 1991).

The purpose of this article is to describe features and contingencies of the teacher self-assessment process as it operates in classrooms and to identify gaps in current knowledge about this process. Our aim is to indicate important characteristics of teacher self-assessment that can inform and guide further study. It should be noted that when we refer to teacher self-assessment, we mean the process that is based in (1) a teacher's reflection on classroom actions, beliefs, and outcomes; (2) a resulting self-critique of one's practice; and (3), if appropriate, a change in teacher understanding or future practice. Our definition links teacher self-assessment to concepts such as the "the reflective practitioner," "personal theorizing," "connoisseurship and criticism," "teacher research," "reflection in or on action," "self-understanding," and "analysis of practice." All these concepts, including teacher self-assessment, involve the process of teachers learning from experience through carrying on a dialogue individually, and sometimes collectively, about the meaning, appropriateness, and outcome of that experience.

Characteristics of teacher self-assessment

Teacher self-assessment is characterized by the features shown in table 1.

Table 1. Seven characteristics of teacher self-assessment.

1. The teacher is knowingly in control of the self-assessment process; the teacher initiates reflection, carries it through, and reaches a decision or plan of action. The process is a conscious act.
2. Self-assessment is provoked by many factors, but two main ones are dissonance in the environment and personal curiosity about beliefs and outcomes. These two factors include problematic and personal self-assessment interests.
3. The use of either personal or problematically motivated self-assessments will rely upon standards or performance expectations set by the teacher. These standards will define the expectations against which practice, beliefs, and outcomes will be judged.
4. Differences are expected when the self-assessment activities of experienced and novice teachers are compared.
5. To carry out reflection and to produce improved practice, the teacher must be willing to assume responsibility for causing and/or being able to alter the practice, belief, or outcome being self-assessed.
6. The teacher will begin reflection by recalling pertinent information and integrating it with the teacher's personal practical knowledge about pupils and the classroom.
7. The product of self-assessment is a conscious decision or judgment about self, self-practice, or self-beliefs.

The teacher is knowingly in control of the self-assessment process. If self-assessment is to produce understanding and improvement in teacher practice, it must be a conscious act consisting of purposeful inquiry and problem resolution. The nature of purposeful teacher inquiry has been conceived in many ways. Primary among them is inquiry as an intuitive, tacit process (Polanyi, 1958; Louden, 1992). For example,

Schon identifies two ways teachers reflect on practice (1983, 1987, 1988). The first is called reflection *in* action, and is defined as on-the-spot experimenting during which the teacher reflects on actions that are in progress, lets these actions "talk back to" him or her, and invents and implements an on-the-spot solution. Reflection occurs during the action, and changes are made while the action is ongoing. Teachers' intuitive decisions while conducting instruction or calling on pupils during class discussion exemplify Schon's reflection in action. Schon's second type of reflection is called reflection on action and is a post hoc reflection and reconsideration of an action, belief, or outcome based on one's recollection of its salient features. Reflection on action is divorced in time from the action or outcome that spawned it, and consequently, is likely to provoke more "thoughtful" thinking and deliberation than reflection in action.

While much of the response to Schon's work has been concentrated on teachers' reflection in action, our emphasis in teacher self-assessment is upon reflection *on* action. We adopt this perspective for a number of reasons. First, reflection in action is often unconscious, tacit, and subject to routinization. In each of these circumstances, analysis of action as an identifiable process is diminished because the tacit, reflexive (not reflective), habitual nature of such action short circuits conscious reflection. Second, one can question the concept of reflection in action itself. Teachers caught up in the demands of teaching 20 to 30 pupils are not in a good position to reflect upon a large number of classroom actions this must respond to classroom events more on the basis of instinct and routine than conscious reflection (Calderhead, 1987; Gilliss, 1988). Moreover, Schon's notion of reflection in the "action present" is not altogether clear, and most examples of reflection in action call for the teacher to remove him or herself from the action, even momentarily, to reflect about it (Court, 1988). Thus, even reflection in action seems to require that the teacher consciously, apart from the action, engage in the process of reflection on action. Third, there is a danger in becoming too engrossed in reflection in action, since it encourages the development of idiosyncratic practitioners whose primary way of operating in the classroom is to invent solutions to problems that seem, at least to them, to be unique. Uniqueness carried to extremes is a barrier to development and sharing of teaching knowledge and more systematic teacher development (Gilliss, 1988). Finally, in light of the prior reasons, it seems logical to assume that those issues teachers reflect upon *after* the action is completed are ones that are most important to them or ones that stand out most vividly in the daily landscape of classroom actions and events.

For these reasons, we focus teacher self-assessment activities on the conscious act of a teacher's engaging in purposeful inquiry and reflection on action that already has taken place. We do not impose a time limit for a teacher's reflection on action, but would expect that the time devoted to reflection and the time between the action and the reflection will be influenced by the nature of the area reflected on, the purposes of reflection, and the experience of the teacher.

Self-assessment is provoked by many factors, but two main ones are dissonance in the environment and personal curiosity about practice. Louden (1992) calls these two factors problematic interests, respectively. Self-assessments in dissonant or

problematic situations are concerned with the resolution of classroom problems or "surprises." Self-assessment in situations characterized by a personal or curiosity need are concerned with obtaining personal understanding or a retrospective "summing up" of classroom outcomes. These two factors take into account teachers' inner and outer experiences in classrooms (Elbaz, 1981).

Of these two prods to self-assessment, dissonance has been the more widely discussed. Thus, a classroom surprise, problem, unexpected result or reaction, doubt, expectation that proves false, or some other perplexity in a directly experienced situation can provoke conscious, purposeful teacher inquiry. Classroom examples of such dissonance might be the difference between expected and actual pupil performance, the floundering of a classroom routine or lesson, the out-of-character pupil behavior, personal conflicts among pupils, or the introduction of a new instructional method or curriculum.

That dissonance is a potent prod to reflection and inquiry has been noted by many researchers including Dewey (1933), Schon (1983), Kagan (1992), and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990). As long as classroom action and interaction follow normal, predictable patterns and pathways, the practitioner can devote his or her time and attention to "living" in the ongoing action. When a "surprise" occurs in the action, the teacher is prodded to think about the reason for and response to the "surprise." In one sense, the need for conscious decisions about practice become necessary only when events cross a teacher's threshold of tolerable deviations (Calderhead, 1987). Thus, a teacher must perceive an event as dissonant or disjunctive if it is to spur reflection, and to some extent, such events will be defined within the context of the teacher's expectations of pupils, knowledge of classroom realities, personal beliefs and expectations, and experience.

In addition to dissonance, personal or professional curiosity can also lead to teacher reflection and self-assessment. While dissonant occurrences tend to be narrow, situation-specific events which provoke narrow, situation-specific reflection, analysis, and self-assessment, personal curiosity is more likely to provoke general efforts to make meaning out of patterns of classroom events or actions. Dissonance produces new strategies and actions; personal curiosity produces personal understanding, belief, and "summings up." Thus, personal curiosity does not lurch from dissonance to dissonance, but rather tends to be based upon uncertainty, which leads to reflection and consideration of general issues which represent important (to the teacher) classroom themes. When a teacher reconsiders basic beliefs about teaching, recognizes classroom realities, or retrospectively self-assesses his or her influence on pupils at the end of the school year, he or she is not prompted by any single dissonance or disjuncture, but rather relies on broader themes, events, and expectations that are self-assessed to provide general insights and understandings of personal successes and failures. We have found numerous instances in which teachers either examined and altered basic beliefs or retrospectively self-assessed their successes with pupils near the end of the school year, more to satisfy personal needs and provide personal meaning or "summing up," than to alter a particular dissonant situation (Kidder, 1989; Hayden, 1988; Bullough, 1989). These personal self-assessments were more in the form of

general questions such as "Are my classroom goals being met?"; "Did I teach my students much this year?"; and "Is my original belief that all pupils can be motivated viable?"

The use of either personal or problematically motivated self-assessments will rely upon standards or performance expectations set by the teacher. These standards will, in essence, define the expectations against which teaching effectiveness is judged (Kagan, 1992). They will be the yardstick that guides both the identification of areas of teacher self-assessment and the basis for judging one's success in these areas. The source of these standards or performance expectations vary. Sometimes they are norm-reference to what colleagues are doing or achieving. Sometimes they are based upon a teacher's personal beliefs or expectations about pupils, instruction, and classroom activities. Sometimes they are imposed from without, as when pressure is exerted on a teacher by a principal to improve standarized test scores. Regardless of the source, it is these standards that identify what actions are dissonant and what personal understandings and "summing ups" are most important. We hypothesize that there might be a difference between the standards and types of evidence used in self-assessing problematically motivated situations as opposed to personally motivated situations (Millies, 1992; Louden, 1992). Self-assessments prodded by problematic situations will be based upon a dissonance or disjuncture between the classroom events and one's expectation or mental image of how these events should have transpired. In this case, the process of self-assessment will rely heavily on replay and rehearsal (Louden, 1992) of classroom events, reconstructing or mentally reenacting the events, reflecting on and interpreting their meaning, and mentally rehearsing alternative actions or strategies. Conversely, self-assessments prodded by personally motivated situations are more likely to be based on uncertainty regarding one's beliefs, general practice, or effectiveness. In carrying out reflection on such topics, the teacher may rely heavily on introspection, considering personal thoughts and feelings about an issue, more than immediate, narrow, and experientially linked replay and rehearsal of problematic situations.

In this regard, *differences might be expected when the self assessment activities of experienced and novice teachers are compared.* For example, novice teachers lack the perspective that comes from experience, and consequently are in the position of struggling to understand what they have never before experienced. They lack the conceptual structures or schema to make sense out of what they experience in the classroom, so their learning must come from doing, reflecting, and altering practice. Furthermore, they enter the classroom with a set of beliefs and expectations about pupils, instruction, and management that are essentially untested. Since most classroom activities will be new to the novice and he or she will lack the perspective to order them in terms of importance or consequence, it is likely that considerable dissonance and need for personal meaning-making will arise and, of necessity, prod self-assessment in the first year of teaching. Conversely, most experienced teachers have the perspective, experience, and coping strategies to structure their environments so as to diminish or insulate themselves from many of the disjunctures that first-year teachers encounter (Bullough, 1989; Sizer, 1984; Berliner, 1986; Shulman, 1986).

To carry out reflection and to produce improved practice, the teacher must be willing to assume responsibility for causing and/or being able to alter the practice or expectation of concern. The previously discussed aspects of the self-assessment process could apply to any reflective situation. However, the requirement that a teacher accept some personal responsibility for influencing or rectifying the areas and issues reflected on, sets self-assessment apart from reflection in general. Self assessment, as the name implies, is concerned with assessment of oneself, one's actions, beliefs, and effects. Thus, there must be some perceived self-responsibility for or self-investment in the events or issues that initiated self-assessment.

At the beginning of the reflection process, the teacher will make some tentative decision about the factors underlying the situation or belief being reflected upon. If these underlying factors are believed to be outside of the teacher's control or influence, the self-assessment process likely will cease, since the teacher will have decided that he or she did or can do nothing to create or alter matters. Basically, the teacher will disown the problem or issue by attributing it to factors outside of his or her control. Without a sense of ownership or responsibility, there is no self-assessment. It would be interesting to identify the areas teachers are willing to assume some responsibility for and the ones they are not, as well as how factors such as experience or beliefs about pupils and teaching influence this willingness. For example, there may be some areas in which it is difficult for teachers to disown responsibility for their action (e.g., grading, writing recommendations, discipling pupils) and others where the locus of responsibility is less clear (e.g., pupil achievement, interest, and attention).

Of particular interest in this process is the teacher's sense of teaching efficacy (Ashton & Webb, 1986), that is, the teacher's belief in the extent to which (1) teaching in general and (2) the teacher personally are capable of influencing pupil learning. These beliefs can affect teachers' decisions to perceive problems as either meliorable or as lying outside their domain of influence. These two dimensions of self-efficacy also suggest differences in the ways teachers might be aided in assuming more responsibility for their practice.

For example, if a teacher has a low sense of general teaching efficacy, that is, believes that teaching can only marginally affect student learning, the teacher is likely to disown responsibility for poor student performance with comments such as "These students just can't get it,"; "It's beyond these students,"; or "You can't teach students with these characteristics that material." Altering this perception and provoking the teacher to reflect and self-assess in this situation might require showing the teacher situations in which similar pupils are learning similar things. If, on the other hand, a teacher has a low sense of personal teaching efficacy, that is, believes that he or she lacks the personal knowledge and skills necessary for successfully teaching a topic or particular group of pupils, the teacher is likely to assume personal responsibility for the situation but make defeatist statements such as "I felt I didn't know how to respond to their inattention," or "I wish I had known how to carry on a lively discussion during the class." In this case, improving practice would require helping the teacher overcome perceived personal inadequacies through acquiring needed teaching skills.

Teachers' implicit beliefs about teaching efficacy and other factors influence the

ways they think about their practice (Bandura, 1983; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Pape, 1992). However, two considerations regarding these beliefs need to be remembered. First, a teacher's high or low sense of teaching efficacy may bear no resemblance to whether the teacher is an effective or ineffective teacher in an objective sense. Beliefs may condition practice, but the beliefs may be myopic, biased, or subjective. Second, the theories that teachers construct or the beliefs they adopt may well be constructed and adopted to protect themselves and their sense of efficacy. If this is the case, theories and beliefs may obstruct efforts to have teachers reflect on and assess their practice.

The teacher will begin reflection by recalling pertinent information and integrating it with the teacher's personal, practical knowledge about pupils and the classroom. The teacher will reflect on observations made during practice by reviewing events, reactions, and situational features that were occurring proximal to some noted dissonance or that bear on the personal belief or outcome being examined. This information typically will be supplemented by prior knowledge and experience (e.g., personal practical knowledge) that the teacher has accumulated about the pupils and classroom environment (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992). This prior or "practical" knowledge provides the perspective through which the teacher constructs particular inferences or interpretations about the classroom events or beliefs being reflected upon. Sometimes these two sources of information may be supplemented by the collection of additional, post-occurrence information.

Although there has been some work done on the nature of teacher thinking and thoughts, this work tends to focus on teachers' thoughts while planning instruction, while carrying out interactive instruction, and on teachers' theories and beliefs (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992). Specific attention to teacher reflection and recall of the conditions surrounding disjunctive classroom events has not been much examined. Bromme (1987), for example, has shown that at the end of a lesson teachers had a poor recall of the achievement or difficulties of individual pupils, but an excellent recall for pupils' understandings in general and for events that had "strategic" significance during instruction. Louden (1992) suggests that the nature of the issue teachers reflect upon, problematical versus personal, affects the nature of evidence considered. Many works (Jagla, 1992; Eisner, 1978; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) indicate that teachers rely heavily on their "intuition" when reflecting on and interpreting classroom experiences. We know little about teachers' recollections of specific teaching situations and the factors teachers attend to in subsequently reframing these for reflection, although we do know that experienced teachers have more general schema within which to place experiences than do novice teachers (Berliner, 1986; Calderhead, 1987). Nor do we know the degree of detail teachers use to frame their recollections (e.g., the kids were "restless" versus "Four students in the back of the room started fooling while I was working at the board, and the disruption spread to all the students except those in the first row"). The process of reflection, the evidence considered, and the respective roles of intuition, recall, and practical knowledge are not well known, and represent the least understood factor in teacher self-assessment.

The product of teacher self-assessment is a conscious decision or judgment about self, self-practice, or self-beliefs. Self-assessment produces a judgment or decision about the teacher's own actions or beliefs. Statements such as the following indicate self-assessment: "My hard work paid off in student learning"; "I'm disgusted with myself for letting this problem go on this long"; "How dumb I am; I should have broken the rules and given him more help"; "For the first time I felt I had accomplished something meaningful with my low reading group"; and "I knew that next time I would not give them the choice of lab partners." Other examples of self-assessments related more to personal beliefs are: "I thought all students would be motivated, but found I was wrong"; "I believed parents would be interested and supportive of my efforts to educate their children, but that has not been my experience. Now I understand how alone a teacher is." As noted above, it is not difficult to find examples of self-assessment, but it is difficult to obtain insight into the information gathering and analytic processes that preceded the self-assessments.

The search for self-assessment can extend beyond teacher statements such as the above. It can also be based upon evidence of new ideas, understandings, and practices as exemplified by teachers over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). That is, if self-assessment is meaningful to teachers, it must go beyond the articulation stage exemplified above. It must be reflected in teachers action in practice. This is, after all, the ultimate end of self-assessment.

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