

Learning to Analyze Student Work: The Use of Protocols to Develop Teacher Candidates' Assessment Skills and Dispositions

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Introduction

The need for teachers to be able to discern, appreciate and address the diverse needs, capacities and interests of their students has never been greater. All too often, however, the multiple demands placed on classroom teachers leave little opportunity for thoughtful examination and analysis of students' learning and work. As teacher educators working in a five-year, field-based teacher certification program, we are keenly aware of the need to help preservice teachers both examine who students are and develop their capacity to listen to, understand, and assess children and their learning. To help our preservice teachers develop both their willingness and ability to describe and analyze student work, we use protocols in their undergraduate and graduate courses. This study looks at whether and how protocols support teacher candidates' ability to assess student work as well as whether and how the engagement in protocols influences teacher candidates' stance toward assessing children's work.

Research Design

Southern University (pseudonym), the general context for this study, redesigned its teacher preparation program in 1988, abandoning a traditional four-year program that culminated in a semester of student teaching for a five-year internship program leading to a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and certification in one of three levels (Early Childhood-Grade 4, Grades 4-8, Grades 8-12). As undergraduates, students focus on deepening their content understanding by majoring in an academic discipline. They also complete 11-14 hours of education courses that combine theoretical learning with fieldwork in professional development schools (PDSs). During the fifth year, candidates complete summer coursework at the university then begin a year-long internship at one of six PDSs. Clustered in cohorts of 8-12 per school, interns are individually paired with a mentor, a full-time classroom teacher who is primarily responsible for guiding and assessing the intern's learning to teach. In addition, a tenure-track university professor works closely with mentor teachers and interns at each of the PDSs.

The specific context for this study was an undergraduate education course that focuses on writing development and instruction. Teacher candidates first examine their own writing experiences by drafting their writing autobiography. They then become students and

writers of free verse poetry in a writing workshop format before becoming teachers of poetry, designing and teaching a six-lesson free verse unit at a nearby elementary school serving mostly low-income, Hispanic students. Finally, they read and discuss texts on the assessment of children's writing then assess their own children's writing through the use of protocols. All 9 of the teacher candidates agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collected

We videotaped three class sessions where the ATLAS protocol was used to help teacher candidates first describe poems that children wrote, determine what the children are working on, then consider implications for future work with those and other children. The protocol begins by placing a child's selected work in a place where everyone can see it so that participants can study the work in silence. Then in successive rounds, participants first describe what they see in the work without making judgments, generate questions that the work raises for them, speculate about what the student is working on, then discuss implications for teaching and learning.

In addition to videotaping these protocol sessions, we collected teacher candidates' oral feedback while debriefing each of the three protocol sessions. Furthermore, we collected teacher candidates' written work, including a final project where they analyzed children's poems and identified insights or questions they had about assessment.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the videotaped discourse of the three protocol sessions, we analyzed each session separately using inductive analysis (Erickson, 1986), segmenting each session into chunks that marked different phases of interaction. Then we looked at each segment in terms of exchanges between participants, paying attention to moves particular participants made, including who spoke and who responded. After identifying codes for participants' discourse, we then searched for common and divergent themes in the discourse across all three protocol sessions. In analyzing the written data, we used inductive analysis (Erickson, 1986) in order to identify emergent themes. Finally, we used teacher candidates' oral and written reflections on the protocol sessions to triangulate the data.

Findings

Teacher candidates varied in both their willingness to assess student work through protocols and their ability to engage in that assessment work.

The teacher candidates' participation in protocols and written comments suggest that the majority of the thirteen participants had begun to make a distinction between assessment and evaluation. They were willing to put aside initial assumptions that they brought to assessment of student work, mostly to evaluate rather than assess it, instead treating a piece of a student's work as an actual text in order to determine what meaning that student was making as she created it. For example, one student wrote, "I start with evaluation. I don't slow down to observe and see what's there first. This protocol makes you slow down." Another student explained during a protocol debriefing, "It was helpful to look [at student work] as a group. I struggle with assessment. I see things as 'he was

right, wrong or almost right.’ I didn’t take time to figure out how they understood that task.” Thus they were *willing* to interrupt their evaluative stance and approach student work as something to be observed and described rather than strictly judged. In this sense, the use of the ATLAS protocol seemed to support the teacher candidates in making that shift.

However, a small minority of the teacher candidates discussed how “silly” they felt in having to be so specific in their descriptions during the protocols and wondered whether such a step was necessary in examining student work. For example one candidate stated, “I feel like we could skip the describing part and go directly to the analysis.” Thus some of the students seemed to reject the assumption that description is an important component of assessment.

That said, one of our most significant findings is that protocols in and of themselves do not seem to help every teacher candidates describe and analyze student work. In our analysis of the data, we confronted the classic distinction between propositional knowledge or “knowing that” and procedural knowledge or “knowing how.” Teacher candidates talked and wrote about the need to slow down and look carefully, but several consistently struggled to describe what they noticed when observing student work. For example, during one of the protocol sessions, students first individually examined the following poem written by a first grade student (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in student’s original writing).

SWiMMiNG

SWiMMiNG I WiLL Never
QutiK I WiLL thri MY
BTU. IN JuNe aND JuLY
I Love SWiMMiNG.

In the first round of the protocol, the preservice teachers were asked to describe the work without judgment. However, many of their contributions in this round contained interpretations or judgments. For example, one student stated, “I see she doesn’t really punctuate where she wants to pause, like between ‘swimming’ and ‘I will never.’ I assume she wants a pause between the two.” This student seemed to feel confident making assumptions about the child’s intent. In addition, she focused on what she did *not* see in the child’s work rather than what was there to be observed.

While several of the participants’ comments during the first round were actual descriptions (e.g. “I see that she starts and ends the poem with ‘swimming’”; “I see that she talks a lot in the future, using the word ‘will.’”), they seemed unsure about how to actually describe what they noticed in the poem, suggesting that although the protocol called for them to describe, they lacked the requisite skills needed to engage in that task.

Implications

While previous assessment training for preservice teachers largely consisted of writing and scoring different forms of tests, increasingly teacher education programs are turning to the analysis of student work as a means of helping candidates examine student learning (Shepard et al, 2005). This study begins to shed light on what happens when preservice teachers use protocols to analyze student work. Because the candidates knew that they needed to describe the children's work but did not necessarily know how to do so, one implication from this study is that teacher educators must determine what distinct skills and dispositions are embedded in the task of description. Carini (2001), for example, defines description as "set[ting] aside familiar categories for classifying or generalizing," as allowing the work to be "fully present," so that it has "time to speak, to show itself." She further contends that "to describe is to value" (p. 164). Further elaboration of the skills required to describe and analyze student work may help teacher educators begin to think more systematically about how to help preservice teachers begin to develop these specific skills and dispositions.

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