

Who are the Voices? Reflective Conversations within Assessment

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Abstract

At a time when students are immersed in social media, gaming, texting, and overall screen time, how do teachers engage their students in reflective conversations? Reflective conversations allow for students to reflect on their learning and growth and can be implemented across all grade bands. In this study, teachers invited first through fifth grade students to engage in face-to-face dialogue about their own learning through reflective conversations. Following each conversation, both students and teachers reflected on the experience. Overall, reflective conversations had a positive impact for students and teachers. Responses from teachers reflected student feelings of empowerment, responsibility, and ownership in the learning and assessment process. Students felt this experience enabled them to have a “voice” during the reflective conversation to articulate what they learned. Today, students may not engage in intentional and thoughtful conversations with peers or adults due to the increased number of screen-time hours, reflective conversation is essential to promote reflective, critical thinking.

Key words: reflective conversations, dialogue, reflection, assessment, goal setting, and critical thinking

1. Introduction

At a time when students are immersed in social media, gaming, texting, and overall screen time, how do teachers engage their students in reflective conversations? Purposeful assessments that measure student learning and connections are integral in measuring student outcomes and promoting student reflection. Using multiple types of assessments in the classroom allows for teachers to gauge student learning and understanding (Damico, 2005; Paris, Calfee, Filby, Hiebert, Pearson, Valencia, & Wolf, 1992; Reilly, 2007; Wilson, Martens, & Arya, 2005). One example of a formative assessment is student self-reflection that promotes student ownership of their learning (Johnston, 2005; McMillan & Hearn, 2008). When students understand the expectations of the assessment and the role they play, they become more assessment capable which means that the students are aware of their current level of understanding and able to monitor their own progress (Frey, Fisher, & Hattie, 2018; Opitz & Ford, 2006). Reflective conversations that allow for students to reflect on their learning and growth can be implemented across all grade bands. In this study, teachers invited first through fifth grade students to engage in face-to-face dialogue about their own learning through reflective conversations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teachers and Students Engage in Reflective Practice

Reflection is an integral part of assessment. Kovacs and Corrie (2017) found that reflection can “[help] practitioners become sensitive to, and take steps to resolve, any discrepancies between their espoused theories...and their theories-in-use” (p.5). Teachers also need to engage in reflective practice to help with assessment. When developing learning activities and assessments, teachers need to be introspective and reflect on the purpose of the assessment to ensure alignment with the learning objectives (Cobb, 2003; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Farr, 2000; Koskinen, Valencia, & Place, 1994; Kovacs & Corrie, 2017; McTighe, 2018; Moore & Whitefield, 2008).

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This practice is known as reflection-on-action. For example, if teachers do not provide students systematic guidance to learn how to reflect, students will just look at the mechanics of their writing for correctness rather than using metacognition that is promoted in the reflective process (Lam, 2016).

Whereas, if students are actively engaged in the assessment process, they have a higher stake in the results than if they did not participate (Johnston, 2005; McMillan & Hearn, 2008). When students establish learning goals, identify assessment criteria, self-evaluate, and reflect on their learning, they demonstrate an improvement of their performance and their motivation increases (Courtney & Abodeeb, 1999; Damico, 2005; Frey, Fisher, & Hattie, 2018; McMillan & Hearn, 2008). Frey, Fisher, and Hattie (2018) asserted that a student who had the ability and opportunity to think thoughtfully about their performance showed a significant increase in the efficiency of their learning.

Furthermore, Johnston (2005) found that resilience and reciprocity can be byproducts of students practicing reflective thinking. Resilience can be found in reflective students who believe that they have the ability to succeed. Reciprocity is the collaboration between students and the teacher to reflect on the assessment (Johnston, 2005). Moreover, Courtney and Abodeeb (1999), claimed that when students have time to practice and refine their reflective skills, students “think about what they know, what they want to know, how they know, and what specific goals and strategies are needed to increase their proficiency” (p. 709).

One component of student reflective practice is the opportunity to self-assess. Self-assessment is a category within reflection that allows for students to engage in reflective practice by enabling students to monitor and evaluate the quality of their thinking and behavior during instruction and identifying strategies that improve their understanding and skills (McMillan & Hearn, 2008).

2.2 Reflective Conversations Encourage Collaborative Conversations

Collaborative conversations need to be explicitly utilized throughout instruction. Reflective dialogue among colleagues promotes conversations and provides collaborative feedback (Dearman & Alber, 2005; Gut, Wan, Beam, & Burgess, 2016; Maher & Jacob, 2006; Many & Many, 2014; Rarieya, 2005; Schön, 1983). Just as collaborative conversations can take place among colleagues, the researchers of this study believe that the same reflective dialogue and feedback can take place between teachers and students. Like Minke and Anderson (2003), we agree that reflective conversations aim to include both teachers and students as active participants in assessment. The use of formative assessments coupled with reflective conversations enable students to work toward understanding while helping teachers understand what needs to be retaught or modified to reach a higher level of understanding (Johnston & Costello, 2005; McTighe, 2018; Reilly, 2007; Roskos & Neuman, 2012).

This research study examined how teachers guide conversations around student learning through formative reflective practices.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study was part of a graduate level course embedded as a field component. Graduate students served as teachers in a tutoring program. Participants included thirteen school-age children, ranging from first to fifth grade, and thirteen teachers from the Midwest.

Reflective conversation is the term used for the conferences between teacher and student. On the reflective survey, students were encouraged to share candid thoughts and comments about their experience through the use of an open-ended survey. Students were asked to respond to the following prompts: (a) comment on the reason they liked leading the reflective conversation, (b) state any changes they would make if they could participate in another student lead reflective conversation, and (c) what they learned or enjoyed.

Teachers responded to three open-ended prompts and responded in paragraph form. The first prompt asked teachers to describe the assessment technique and introduce any benefits or drawbacks that they noticed during the reflective conversations. In this prompt, teachers also commented about their personal feelings toward the assessment. The second prompt asked teachers to elaborate on how the pieces were selected for the reflective conversation and what roles the students and teachers played during the dialogue. In this section, many teachers included anecdotal evidence. The final prompt had teachers examine the learning outcomes from the reflective conversation. Teachers reflected in this section about the overall conversation and the student learning that took place.

Several steps were used to analyze the data. First, the research team followed Erickson's (1986) coding process to identify initial common themes. Researchers completed a second reading of the data sources where the recurring themes and codes were verified, using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open-coding method. The following themes emerged from the coded data: student-teacher alignment of reflections; students grow as learners with choice and engagement; the benefits and drawbacks of reflective conversations to help create a better, well-rounded assessment; and the teacher's role during the reflective conversations help provide feedback for reflection-on-action.

4. Findings

Ten students reported they would not change anything if they had an opportunity to conduct another reflective conversation while three students (a first, third, and fifth grader) expressed doubt they would participate again. Of the three students, two did not elaborate on their responses while the third grader wrote, "I would say not because I am too shy."

4.1 Student-Teacher Alignment of Reflections

The coding revealed a connection between student and teacher reflections. For example, the teacher mentioned that, "In general, the student has a great deal of self-confidence in whatever she does—except for writing. After having listened to her and seeing how proud she was of the writing she had done this semester, an improvement of her attitude about writing is obvious." The first grader was excited to show everything she learned and how she used the magnets to spell out her words. Another teacher remarked that her student took control of the conversation and selected the activities that were shared.

4.2 Students Grow as Learners with Choice and Engagement

All student responses reflected feelings of empowerment, responsibility and ownership in the learning and assessment process. Students felt this experience enabled them to have a "voice" during the reflective conversation to articulate what they learned. Overall, all students reported a positive response to participating in assessing their own learning. An example from a primary-level student response included, "something I liked was the words I read because I could read all of the words." Another primary-level student commented that "the thing I liked best about leading was I got to talk about how much better I'm doing in school."

Teacher survey results showed student choice, growth, and engagement in the reflective conversations. Eleven out of the thirteen teachers commented student choice of the activities they selected to discuss during the reflective conversation. Some of the students chose activities that were fun for them or something they were proud of, but others chose activities that were challenging for them. For example, one teacher wrote that she was "impressed with the activities [the student] shared. The funny thing is, phonics is her area of great weakness, but she chose phonics activities anyways." Every teacher spoke about student engagement as a positive in the reflective conversation. Student growth was found in eight reflections made by the teachers.

One teacher commented: "My student was very shy at the beginning, but towards the middle when he was explaining his project, his eyes lit up, and he became very involved with his presentation of his project. My student has made so much improvement from the beginning of the year. I just can't believe it. He now loves to write and read. When he first came, he did not even know his alphabet and now he is able to read small books. He knows his ABC's and loves to write stories using phonetic spelling patterns. He has grown immensely over the year."

4.3 Benefits and Drawbacks of the Reflective Conversations

The teachers considered the benefits and drawbacks that accompanied the reflective conversation structure. Twelve of the thirteen teachers found benefits, ranging from students being able to express themselves to learning how to be reflective of what they have learned in the sessions. The drawbacks were more specific to the students that the teacher taught. One teacher wrote, "the younger students do not understand the concept of 'the work that best represents their improvement.' When students are unable to put the words together to explain themselves, then the conversation becomes confusing and unclear. The younger students often provide brief, simplistic descriptions and explanations of the activities." Eight teachers mentioned student comfort and willingness to participate in the reflective conversation as a drawback. They noted the drawback was that reflective conversations are not beneficial for every student. For example, one teacher stated, "It would work better for students in third or fourth grade because my student clammed up and wasn't able to express himself very well at the beginning. He improved by the end."

4.4 Teacher Role as a Reflective Facilitator

Ten of the teachers encouraged students to take the lead during the reflective conversation. Teachers commented about how they asked open-ended questions to have students articulate their reasons for choosing materials and their growth and learning. This allowed for the students to lead while the teacher guided conversations about their learning.

5. Discussion & Limitations

Based on the analysis of the data collected, reflective conversations had a positive impact for students and teachers. Students felt a sense of accomplishment, comfort, and confidence when they were able to choose materials and show what they learned in their reflective conversation. The teachers also commented on their role. The majority of the teachers guided the dialogue with open-ended questions. This allowed for the students to showcase their own abilities.

Although the teachers found many benefits, they noted the drawbacks were related to student disposition. Based on the teachers' comments, the students who were shy or young were hesitant to participate. Another contributing factor may be the structure of the conversation. The data did not reveal this assertion, and therefore warrants further research. Since eight teachers mentioned student comfort and willingness to participate, further research is needed.

6. Implications and Conclusion

This study revealed many benefits to reflective conversations. They can be used in a traditional classroom setting as revealed in the research (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000; Countryman & Schroeder, 1996; McMillan & Hearn, 2008). The reflective conversations allow for students to be more reflective about their own learning. Students become active partners in the reflective process of their learning when they are invited into the conversation. Students can improve their confidence and self-efficacy when the focus is on their own learning. Therefore, this reflective conversation may translate into higher achievement in the classroom. This assertion warrants further examination.

At a time when students may not engage in intentional and thoughtful conversations with peers or adults due to the increased number of screen-time hours, reflective conversation is essential to promote reflective, critical thinking. In addition, because educators are faced with more standards-based testing and grading, opportunities for teachers and students to participate in reflective conversations need to be elevated. The use of reflective conversations in an educational setting allow for students and teachers to have a collective understanding of learning, the progress being made, and the areas for improvement. Reflective conversations bring teacher and student voices together.

7. References

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