Rural South Texas curriculum coaches' perceptions of the use and effectiveness of formative assessment by classroom teachers in guiding instruction

Esequiel Garcia Jr.
La Feria Independent School District

Gerri M. Maxwell
Texas A&M University Kingsville

ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of rural south Texas curriculum coaches on the use of formative assessment by teachers to guide instruction. A qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) approach method guided the lead researcher, whom has worked as an instructional coach himself, in gathering data needed to formulate emergent themes associated with the perceptions expressed by curriculum coaches. Emergent themes as perceived by curriculum coaches included: effective characteristics of instructional assistance, the limited knowledge by teachers in the area of formative assessment and the reasons for the limited use of formative assessment by teachers to guide instruction.

Keywords: formative assessment, instructional coaching, instructional leadership

INTRODUCTION

Increased emphasis on classroom accountability has focused the assessment lens of educators in the classroom (Diamond, 2007). With student achievement at the heart of the issue, this accountability has precipitated increased reflection on how student learning can be effectively monitored through on-going, formative means rather than only on a summative one time assessment (Black, & Wiliam, 2009; Harris, 2007). The use of formative assessment compliments a holistic view of student achievement through an on-going evaluative process of checking for understanding, thus improving equity for all students (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). This intentional learning feedback consequently narrows the achievement gap and minimizes learning disparities (Brookhart, Moss & Long, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). Black and Wiliam (1998) explained that formative assessment has the potential for a teacher to provide the key activities needed to elicit student reflection and self-assessment of learning standards. However, even though there is overwhelming evidence that formative assessment yields an impact in student learning, there is still a lack of understanding regarding how to use such a process in the classroom (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Teachers are not familiar with formative assessment as a tool to gauge student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). For assessments to be an effective part of the instructional cycle, different approaches to assessment practices must be further investigated to address the academic achievement gap among all students.

Defining Formative Assessment

At the heart of formative assessment, or assessment for learning, is the belief that classroom assessments can be utilized not only to inform the instructor of the student's level of understanding, per se a grade, but provide additional insight as to what critical information is not fully understood and share this through feedback to students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Brookhart, Moss and Long (2010) defined formative assessment as:

> Assessment conducted during instruction in order to provide teachers and students with a clear idea of how students' performance levels compare with the learning target (instructional learning goals or objectives), and how they might close the gap between their current level of understanding and the target.

A classroom assessment tool is considered to be formative if it plays a decisive role in informing teachers' and students' direction to areas of concern for the purpose of taking action (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2010; Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005; Wiliam, 2011). Bloom (1968) explained that failure to learn is closely related to instructional delivery. Commensurately, student failure is primarily affected by the lack of attention to instructional differences in students (Wiliam, 2011). Ultimately, by addressing those learning differences, educators can positively impact student learning (Black & Wiliam, 2010).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research analyzed the perceptions that curriculum coaches in rural high needs schools in South Texas have with regard to teacher use of formative assessment in the classroom. Gaining a better understanding through the eyes of these coaches who work elbow-to-elbow with teachers informs best practice for facilitating the necessary training needed to assist teachers to implement this on-going assessment practice.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study examined the perceptions that curriculum coaches had regarding the use of formative assessment in the classroom by teachers to guide instruction. The lead researcher's use of a qualitative naturalistic inquiry approach provided insights into the current assessment practice of teachers in a rural South Texas School district (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher as instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) also informed the need for the study given the lead researcher's experience as an instructional coach. That researcher insight also provided expertise in shaping the questions on the interview instrument based on an own understanding of formative assessment. This study was able to glean insight as to the degree that teachers as well as instructional coaches have around the concept of formative assessment.

Research Design

The research used open-ended, semi-structured interview questions as the basis for a qualitative case study on formative assessment. In this study, perceptions as to the use of formative assessment in the classroom of two instructional coaches in a South Texas school district were examined. Yin (2009) stated, "the distinct need for case studies arises out of desire to understand complex social phenomena" (p. 4). As explained further by Lincoln and Guba (1985), "The case study is primarily an interpretive instrument for an idiographic construal of what was found there" (p. 189). The purpose of this research described and analyzed findings as a result of interviewing coaches on the perception to the impact of formative assessment in the classroom.

Curriculum coaches were selected through purposeful convenience sampling (Erlandson, 1993). These individuals were recommended by the curriculum administration because of their role with assisting teachers in the area of curriculum and instruction. Prior to participants being selected for this study, permission elicited from the superintendent of schools and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction was granted for this study through a formal proposal letter and meeting. The meeting between the lead researcher and the superintendent of schools entailed a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, benefits and activities to be conducted within the district (Erlandson, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once approved, voluntary study participant consent forms were given to curriculum coaches as recommended by the assistant superintendent of schools of a South Texas school district. The two instructional coaches who completed the consent forms and agreed to participate in the study met with the lead researcher individually at a time convenient to their schedules for both the initial meeting and the interview. The initial meeting with participants entailed an explanation of the research topic, study procedures and scheduled an interview meeting times. Further emphasized in this meeting was the awareness that this study was strictly voluntary and ensured confidentiality of what was shared in the context of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participant was also reminded that at any point of the study, they had the right to withdraw themselves from the process.

Data Analysis

The data gathered through transcribing the semi-structured interview responses were analyzed through the coding process developing categories and themes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described this process as, "previously unitized data are organized into categories that provide descriptive or inferential information about the context or setting from which the units were derived" (p. 203). Both interviews were transcribed verbatim and then subdivided by emerging points made during the interview. These points were then separated in a word document where the lead researcher was able to match emergent categories with participant's statements (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This iterative process continued until the transcribed data was completely coded. After the data was transcribed and coded according to emergent categories, the information was organized in a manner in which the themes could be developed. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined this approach as open coding where the researcher is engaged in the coding process by constantly comparing new data with past data while categorizing emergent themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility of Study

Trustworthiness of a study is defined by the establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Certain activities were conducted within the context of the study to ensure that researcher bias was held in check throughout the process. One such activity conducted dealt with the process of member checking. A 30-minute follow up interview was used to debrief and check with the participant as to what was said in the interview. As Jackson, Drummond, and Camara (2007) explained, "Good qualitative research applies standards of trustworthiness such as member-checking, stepwise replication, and audit trails, each of which seeks to verify the substance of what participants said so that interpretations are not subjective iterations of the researcher's own belief system" (p. 26). This process insured that what was explained in the interview was accurately communicated as intended by the participant (Erlandson, 1993).

RESULTS

Introduction

While assessments play an integral part in the process of teaching concepts, the art of continuously adapting instruction based on formative learning data and the level of under-standing of its use was revealed in the study as an area of growth. Ms. Cruz, a curriculum coach in the area of mathematics from a South Texas school district, stated the following about the use of formative assessment to guide instruction:

> Too often formative assessment for many teachers that do have a concept of it. . ., they see it as their curriculum-based assessment. You know I'll wait for the curriculum based assessment to identify the areas of need or scary [thought would be for teachers to view] the final state assessment [as formative]… by that point you can't do anything about it.

This study gleaned insights to the assessment practices of teachers from this South Texas school district through the eyes of a curriculum coach's perspective. Though the role of an instructional

curriculum coach is supportive rather than evaluative, the candid conversations revealed the use of formative assessment by teachers is impacted by the current state and federal accountability measures.

Participants in the Study

The study participants included two instructional coaches from the same South Texas school district. They were recommended by the assistant superintendent based on their role of assisting teachers in the area of curriculum. The informants varied in years of experience working in the field of education and with teachers. Both coaches had background knowledge in the area of mathematics and educational leadership. The demographics consisted of a Hispanic female and white male, with ages of 23 and 47 years old. The interviews were conducted was held in a locations and times most convenient for the interview participants' schedules.

Description of Participants

Mr. Thompson

Mr. Thompson was the first participant to be interviewed for this study. When asked about the practice of formative assessment, Mr. Thompson stated the following:

> There are some very great teachers out there that do engage students into conver-
> sations . . . so they can gauge where they are all at. But I don't think we are doing a
> great job of it yet.

Recently hired as an instructional dean, he brought a different perspective to the perceived practice of formative assessment in light of his twenty-five years of educational experience. His total years of experience in education consisted of twenty-five years, twenty years being a math teacher at several school districts and four years as an administrator. Mr. Thompson's role as an instructional dean gave insight towards the possible challenges confronted by teachers when attempting to implement formative assessment in order to gauge student learning.

Ms. Cruz

Ms. Cruz was the second participant to be interviewed for this study. When asked about past leadership experience and how she worked closely with teachers, Mrs. Cruz stated the following:

> I became a small learning community or SLC coordinator when I was a teacher in
> my third year. I held that position for almost five years, I was the lead of that
> small learning community for almost five years and it was composed of about 20
> to 25 teachers of different content areas. I had some English, some math, some
> science, social studies and Spanish teachers along with coaches and it was
> difficult at first because I think the biggest challenge was getting the experience
> of different personalities.

Recently hired as a math curriculum coach, she brought a fresh perspective to the perceived practice of formative assessment because of her recent experience as a teacher. Her total years of experience in education consisted of seven years, six years being a math teacher at a neighboring school district and half year as a math instructional coach.

FINDINGS

Three emergent themes were prevalent topics that resonated in the conversations held with the instructional coaches. These consisted of the level of knowledge in the area of informed assessment practice by teachers, reasons for lack of use, and the role of instructional coaching. Figure 1 shown below is a visual representation of all these factors.
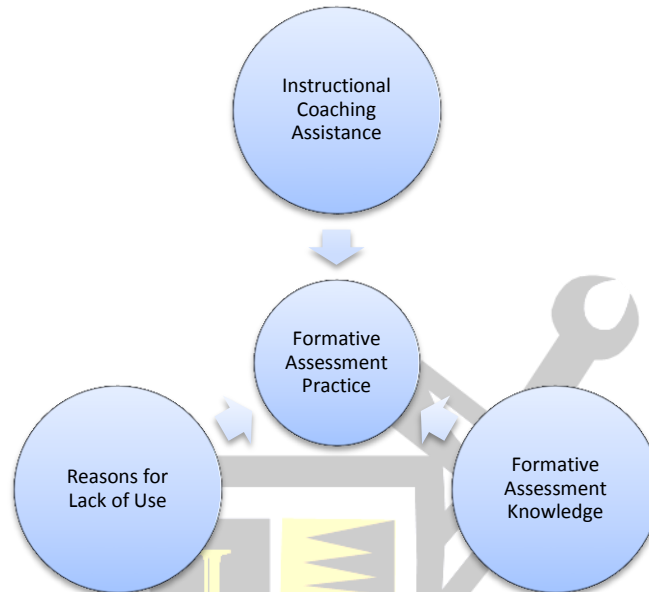

Figure 1. *Factors influencing the practice of formative assessment to guide instruction*

Formative Assessment Knowledge

Instructional Coach's Definition

The lead researcher first asked instructional coaches about their own definitions of formative assessment. Both interview participants described formative assessment analogously and often in laymen's terms as they might have explained the concept to the teachers with whom they worked. Ms. Cruz explained her definition in this manner:

> CBA's could be a form of formative assessment, however given how long it takes to administer a curriculum based assessment being six to nine weeks or more . . . it's too long to see where the needs are and by that point you have covered way too much material and that is the scary part… not lack of …but an unawareness of the fact that you are able to gauge it within an day or within an hour of a lesson and be able to quickly make those checks and make those corrections and identify where those needs are…

She further elaborated in her definition by comparing it to summative assessment,

> When I considered formative assessment its ummm, it's not summative. Summative would end up being like your state exam. Formative is ongoing in the classroom when you are doing your quick checks you pose a question and you . . . strategically expect students to respond.

Mr. Thompson also shared his definition in this context:

> Whether its questioning… answering, whether it is a paper and pencil test or whether it's class discussion . . . As a teacher you're assessing at all those points in time and they are not graded or graded things.

Both of these comments revealed the notion of what Mr. Thompson so succinctly explained, "it allows the teacher to take the pulse of what is going on in a student's learning," Ms. Cruz also provided a detailed description for the process of formative assessment as she explained in her comment:

> I think in terms of an analogy that I heard a few years ago . . . It's (formative assessment) kind of like a doctor doing the diagnosis in an ongoing way versus summative being the end where there is no hope and its' already too late. Formative assessment in that case would be like that medication in between so that you don't have to wait until the very end where its' too late so . . .it's use . . . it again goes back to the same the impact on the students. …You get kids holding up white boards and you . . . do not need a grade to know if kids can do it.

Mr. Thompson shared in the interview in his comment "it's like you know where they are in their journey" is another way to describe the intended use of formative assessment in the classroom. Ms. Cruz concluded, "Too often an individual teacher goes out and about teaches an entire unit or entire lesson without stopping in between to see where the kids are at."

Instructional Coach's Perceived Teacher Definition

The lead researcher also interviewed instructional coaches regarding how they perceived teachers understood formative assessment. Instructional coaches revealed that in teachers' minds, they rely more heavily on end of the unit standardized tests rather than what they classify as formative assessment. In fact, the instructional coaches perception of teachers was that they have a limited understanding as to the classroom practice of formative assessment.
Mr. Thompson said that teachers

> Wait to grade a test to know if kids know something… a test is always at the end of the unit so there's very little chance that the teacher is going to go back and review or reteach in any in depth or any detail . . . I have seen us put band aids on these concepts students don't know and move on.

He also stated,

> I think they [teachers are] gonna think it's that chapter test at the end of the chapter… and they use [it] to see who passes this chapter or not before I move on to the next chapter… Sorry to say that … [long pause]…That does not mean that they are not doing some formative assessment within their classroom…they probably do not realize what they are doing.

As Ms. Cruz shared, "For those who do have some concept of formative assessment their definition is probably, and again it's subjective, slightly different if not completely different than my definition." She concluded, "It is very unfortunate that a vast majority have very little concept of formative assessment."

Perceived Reasons for Lack of Use

Curriculum Based Assessments

The lead researcher asked the instructional coaches about why they thought teachers did not understand formative assessment. One coach expressed the opinion that teachers perceive there is too much time already being lost for periodic benchmark assessments, and thus teachers were reluctant to take the time to implement what they perceived to be another test or formative assessment process. Mr. Thompson said,

> Teachers think, we have so many tests and we have curriculum based assessment tests to prepare for those tests. Then we have instructional days to [review] the curriculum based assessments. Then when teachers have time to teach …they [have a] number of lessons to get done. The fastest way to [accomplish this is to] stand up and show everybody …and [then] explain it really fast. But what else can [teachers] do … [to] get through the material in a rich environment of conversations? [Teachers] don't have time to have conversations with students.

Ms. Cruz also stated that the use of curriculum-based assessment could be another determining factor because of the teachers' understanding of its use. She explained,

> I think that's the biggest challenge that we are encountering is the misinterpretation of what is [considered formative assessment] …Whether a curriculum based assessment can be a formative assessment or not. I wouldn't wait [for a] curriculum based assessment. Formative assessment is a lot of things. I think that is the challenge. They [teachers] wait too long to be able to provide those interventions for those students or to be able to gauge the area of needs for some students.

Consequently, the information gleaned from our informants gave insight into the possible reasons the practice of formative assessment is limited by teachers knowledge of the concept or construct of formative assessment. In the next section the instructional coaches describe how they perceived their role in assisting in implementation and supporting the practice of formative assessment in the classroom.

Instructional Coaching Assistance

Conversations between the lead researcher and instructional coaches revealed several key themes regarding how coaches work with teachers effectively. By this point in the interview process, it had become evident that Ms. Cruz had much more to say and a deeper understanding of the formative assessment process and how to coach teachers in that regard. These key themes for supporting teachers in their improved understanding of formative assessment included the need for: a positive attitude, providing teachers with feedback, listening and treating teachers with respect. These themes were all key for implementing a change in teacher understanding of formative assessment expressed primarily by Ms. Cruz.

Coaching Attitude

Jim Knight has described the role of an instructional coach as a learning partnership, where the existence of mutual respect is evident (Knight, 2006, 2007, 2011). In an effective

learning partnership, the coach's attitude and approach contributes to success in implementation of formative assessment. Ms. Cruz explained how the instructional coaches' approach was critical in influencing teachers to attempt new assessment practices. As Ms. Cruz said,

> I would say that one of the things I have learned most specifically is to strengthen the impact of a community itself or an organization. Your people have to be happy. The way you express yourself [personal attitude] can be contagious positively or negatively. You have to set up the standard. If your expectations are very high [goals], [then] they themselves will try to set up their own expectations.

Ms. Cruz's comments were contrasted by Mr. Thompson's comments. He said, "We have not been training our teachers to do formative assessment and we should be." The difference in statements by the interviewed instructional coaches leads me to believe that further training is needed as well for instructional coaches. The widespread use of instructional coaches on school campuses who may also have a minimal or laymen's understanding of formative assessment could also could be a contributing factor for limited assessment practice by teachers.

Providing Teacher Feedback

Another emergent topic revealed in conversation was the use of feedback as a coaching tool in providing with teachers with formative information concerning assessment practices. Knight (2011) expressed the following when describing such a learning relationship, "We see a coach as a thinking partner for teachers, and coaching as a meeting of minds" (p. 21). Ms. Cruz said,

> I know one of the things I try to do is to provide feedback for the teachers. Would you consider this or consider that ...So in a way [provided feedback] would [be] considered a formative assessment for the teacher. Teachers can use that formative assessment provided for them to create their own [practice of] formative assessment throughout the classroom [assessment practice]… [Consequently] it needs to modeled, ongoing throughout the year. We need to start creating better monitoring programs for the newer teachers and for transfers.

The lack of feedback on the topic of formative assessment may also be another contributing factor to the limited use of formative assessment in the classroom.

Listening

What was also revealed in the conversation with the curriculum coaches was the importance of listening to teachers. Listening is described by Knight as another product of an effective learning partnership (Knight, 2006, 2007, 2011). Ms. Cruz revealed in her comment the power listening has among a learning community. As she said,

> A lot of the times even if you don't do anything and all you do is listen, that completely changes and revamps the culture within that that community. Be it in a math community where I am working with my math teachers or a community of different content area teachers. A lot of the times the support they [teachers] are looking for is just [for somebody to] listen.

Ms. Cruz in her comment explained the importance of developing a supportive and non-evaluative relationship needed to change a culture of learning.

Treating Teachers with Respect

Another factor described as a critical component part of a learning partnership is the practice of treating others with mutual respect (Knight, 2006, 2007, 2011). When an instructional coach is respected, then the practice of learning new things is a collaborative approach rather a top down approach. As Ms. Cruz stated,

> You should always not only model or set yourself at a higher standard and never ask them something that you yourself can't do. I think that is among the biggest things I have learned. Aside from that you never put them down. You always have to treat them with professional respect, and you always have to try to be accessible and listen.

CONCLUSION

Data in this study revealed reasons why teachers do not use formative assessment. The lack of understanding about the concept of formative assessment was evident as perceived by the instructional coaches but even more surprising was that not all instructional coaches understand the concept of formative assessment deeply. While Ms. Cruz was able to contribute and converse throughout the length of the interview, Mr. Thompson's responses, many in laymen's terms, ultimately revealed his own lack of a clear understanding of the concept much less how to convey that understanding to the teachers with whom he supports as an instructional coach.

While the number of informants in this study included only two instructional coaches, the lead researcher himself whom has worked in that role brought expertise in framing conversations with coaches around instructional coaching. Moreover, the thick description provided in interviews revealed data suggesting future study is not only on the need for improving teacher understanding of the concept of formative assessment, but also the need for improving instructional coaches' understanding of the concept.. Understanding the root of these issues with regard to implementation of ongoing formative assessment can only contribute to improved student achievement. The need for intensive professional development regarding formative assessment not only for teachers but also for instructional coaches is evident.

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