TRANSITIONING FROM RATIONALIZATION TO CRITICAL REFLECTION THROUGH REFLECTIVE TEACHING CYCLES

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Practice-based professional development provides teachers with learning experiences that are connected to and contextualized in professional practice. Therefore, this type of professional development can also be customized to meet teachers at their point of need in part by the use of professional learning tasks (Smith, 2001), which takes teachers’ prior knowledge and experiences into consideration. The type of professional learning task I used in this study was the reflective teaching cycle (Smith, 2001). The reflective teaching cycle consists of three phases: (a) planning, (b) teaching, and (c) reflecting. The purpose of this study was to examine how a series of cycles influenced two middle school mathematics teachers’ selection and implementation of tasks that had the potential to facilitate higher-order thinking. I used a series of seven cycles to engage two seventh-grade mathematics teachers in conversations about mathematics, pedagogy, and higher-order thinking in order to provide students with mathematics lessons that could promote the use of higher-order thinking. During planning and reflection meetings, I recorded the conversations and used thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data.

In this poster, I present results from the study, which illustrate how the cycles helped one teacher transition from rationalizing to critically reflecting on her practice. Teachers rationalize when they do not, or cannot, view a problem in other ways and possibly see it as “residing within the students rather than in the practice setting itself” (Loughran, 2002, p. 35). Critical reflection involves teachers considering the best way of understanding, changing, or implementing their practice, where ‘best’ implies “considering implications of practice and weighing them against relevant goals, values, and ethics” (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 79). In this study, one teacher transitioned from rationalizing the reasons why she was unable to facilitate higher-order thinking in her classroom to critically reflecting on her practice to understand how it was inhibiting her ability to facilitate higher-order thinking.

The reflective teaching cycles allowed the teacher to make this transition through collaboration and the focus on mathematics and pedagogy. In particular, the teacher was able to hear what her colleague was doing, which helped her consider the implications of her practice and how she could change it. Also, as the facilitator, I was able to ask her questions about specific events in her classroom, which prompted her to think about her practice rather than the students. This research could help teacher educators and professional developers determine the most effective characteristics of the reflective teaching cycle and the types of facilitation that would be most successful at promoting critical reflection.

References