Chapter 3

Tracing Assessment for Learning Capability in Teachers (TACT): A Danish Perspective

Kathrin Otrel-Cass
Aalborg University, Denmark

Jette Nørgaard Agerbo
Aalborg University, Denmark

Anette Skipper-Jørgensen
University College Nordjylland, Denmark

Steffen Elmose
University College Nordjylland, Denmark

ABSTRACT

The focus on assessment literate teachers who know how to construct, administer assessments and communicate learning outcomes on student learning raises questions on how student teachers can develop the necessary skills to assess their students’ learning. This is so important since there is evidence that beginning teachers continue to feel under prepared to assess student learning. This chapter presents findings of a study conducted in Denmark with the aim of investigating how student teacher candidates develop the capacities to become ‘assessment literate’ over the course of their teacher education program. This chapter presents preliminary survey and focus group interviews data after tracing 21 pre-service teachers over two years. Our findings reflected a picture of Danish student teachers who value in particular formative assessment practices, while summative assessment is acknowledged as necessary but unwanted and perhaps even unproductive process.

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that assessment practices and policies are interlinked and that assessment practices should complement, rather than undermine, the curriculum. Assessment should measure students’ learning outcomes, representing what has been taught and this should mirror in turn the intentions that the curriculum had set (Pellegrino, 2009). Student assessment has not only a direct impact on individual student’s educational pathways by providing feedback on students’ performances, but is also used to compare educational systems against each other and substantial resources are being invested in producing various large-scale state testing tools. These tools have been characterized and critiqued based on their proximity (or lack of) to what actually happens in the classroom (Ruiz-Primo, Shavelson, Hamilton, & Klein, 2002). It has been argued that to better support the learning intentions of the curriculum, more focus needs to be on finding an alignment between curriculum, classroom instruction, and assessment practices (Pellegrino, 2009). It is therefore not surprising that policy attention has shifted focus towards teacher assessment literacy/capability as a key to the improvement of schooling and student achievement since ‘quality teachers’ are professionals who are able to take evidence-based actions to monitor, evaluate and develop student learning (Black, Harrison, & Lee, 2003).

Assessment-literate teachers understand how to construct, administer and score reliable assessments and communicate valid interpretations about student learning (Popham, 2011; Stiggins, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2012; Volante & Fazio, 2007). They also know how to use evidence to adjust their teaching to meet students’ needs, and support them in developing the skills to formatively assess their own learning. Since research highlights that teachers need to be able to understand the connection between learning progressions and assessment (Brookhart, 2011; Gong, 2008) attention has turned to the role of initial teacher education in preparing teachers who are ready and able to assess students for both formative and summative purposes.

Initial teacher education programs, such as the Danish Bachelor Program for Primary School Teachers (covering the compulsory schooling year aging between 6-15) include explicit, integrated and blended assessments to prepare student teachers to meet the demands of assessment literacy (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2016). The requirement that teacher candidates successfully complete at least one explicit course is the most common approach. However, DeLuca and Klinger (2010) point out that despite current assessment education efforts, beginning teachers continue to feel under prepared to assess student learning and maintain low assessment literacy levels (see also Campbell & Evans, 2000; MacLellan, 2004; Mertler, 2004). There is some evidence that suggests that much of what (beginning) teachers know about assessment continues to be based on their own experiences as students (Popham, 2006). It is therefore important to better understand the basis of beginning teacher assessment ideas and literacy in order to identify if teacher training programs are preparing them adequately.

The objective of this chapter is to present findings of an investigation that involved a cohort of Danish student teachers who were asked to respond to a survey and reflect in focus group interviews on questions regarding their assessment practices during their first two years in a teacher training program. By analyzing their responses, we aim to identify the existing ideas at entry and the changes we noted as the student teachers progressed in their education to shine a light on the development of assessment capable teachers. Before outlining such findings, there is a need to account for assessment and assessment capability.