Chapter 2
Potentials and Challenges of a Situated Professional Development Model

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to describe a statewide professional development program designed to improve teachers’ knowledge and practices around formative assessment. The authors describe three key characteristics that guided the program design: (1) providing a framework for formative assessment; (2) providing opportunities for flexible implementation; and (3) providing support for capacity development. The chapter provides examples of the ways the program was instantiated at the local level, discusses the potentials and challenges related to the professional development implementation, and illustrates connections to teacher learning about formative assessment. The authors provide recommendations that may help individuals who design and deliver professional development that balance large-scale program expectations (e.g., state-level) with local and situated contexts of implementation. General implications for the design and enactment of situated professional development models are also described.

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INTRODUCTION

When implemented well, formative assessment, i.e., assessment for learning, has been shown to promote student-centered classrooms (e.g., Brookhart, 2004) and improve student learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006). Because learning to enact quality formative assessment practices takes time (Bennett, 2011; Harlen, 2013; Wylie, Lyon, & Goe, 2009), teacher candidates often leave their preservice preparation not fully prepared to enact quality formative assessment practices in the classroom (DeLuca, 2010; Lyon, 2013; Stiggins, 2009). Thus, professional development for in-service teachers is critically important for providing sustained opportunities to develop reform-oriented practices such as formative assessment (Wylie & Lyon, 2009).

Professional development that supports teachers’ learning has been shown to be a key factor in improving the quality of schools (e.g., Borko & Putnam, 1995; Desimone, 2009) and in improving student learning (Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005). When implementing new reform-based teaching practices, such as formative assessment, providing teachers with sustained opportunities to work in a community with others who are tackling the same types of instructional changes is an effective way to promote learning and change in instructional practice (e.g., Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006; Webb & Jones, 2009; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wenger, 1998; Wilson & Berne, 1999). One approach to develop communities focused on similar problems of practice is by using a model based on professional learning communities (PLCs). Professional learning communities have been shown to be an effective model for teacher development because knowledge is located in the experiences of teachers and schools, and best understood by ongoing, critical, and collective reflection (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Research suggests that in order for PLCs to help teachers implement formative assessment, they should focus on: (1) analyzing teachers’ formative assessment practices and instructional decisions related to student learning (Matese, 2005); (2) examining teachers’ beliefs, priorities, and assumptions (Black & Wiliam, 2005; Shepard, 2000; Webb & Jones, 2009); and (3) helping teachers make changes in formative assessment practices (Sato, 2003). Moreover, learning about formative assessment content needs to be specific, focused on classroom practice, and adequate to teachers’ personal approaches to assessment (Sato, 2003; Schneider & Randel, 2009).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe one professional development (PD) program focused on improving teachers’ knowledge and skills in formative assessment, Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME). Then key characteristics of the FAME model and the challenges and tensions for each characteristic are described.

BACKGROUND

What Is Formative Assessment and Why Is It Important?

Formative assessment is a process that is, “...used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes” (CCSSO, 2008, p.3). The key features are that: