

Action Research: Investigating Educators’ Feelings about Rubrics

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Teacher candidates who worked with small groups of children during a semester long pre-student teaching practicum developed four point rubrics for each of the lesson plans they created on a weekly basis. The scope of this practicum is discussed along with an action research project pertaining to the rubric assessments they utilized. Findings suggest ways this assessment practice might be enhanced in the future.

Investigating Educators’ Feelings About Rubrics

Teacher reflection is greatly supported by educational authorities (edTPA/NCATE, 2012; Skelton et al., 2014). In fact, a fair number of authorities profess that rubrics help teachers to become reflective (Allen & Tanner, 2015; Brookhart & Chen, 2014; Danielson, 2013; Skelton et al., 2014). Rubrics allow educators to reflect on the learning process of their students and examine where changes or improvements are needed in their instructional practices (Danielson, 2013; Skelton et al., 2014). Rubrics are tools that allow educators to measure a students’ mastery on a given task that has been taught. They allow educators to plan and set clear expectations with regard to learning objectives and curriculum goals (Danielson, 2013; Skelton, Rodgers, Ellis, & Lyles, 2014). Danielson (2013) notes that through rubrics, educators can monitor students’ learning, determine their strengths, and weaknesses, and realize the instruction that can allow them to progress. De La Paz (2009) suggests that rubrics can be used to improve students’ writing. An appropriately designed rubric can identify the skills that students need to acquire in order to progress in their achievement. For example, rubrics can remind the students of essential parts of a specific genre, and provide them with supports for their writing development in that genre. She argues that rubrics can be used as tools to help develop writing strategies (De La Paz, 2009). There is agreement amongst a fair number of authorities that rubrics allow learners as well as educators to reflect on the learning process and examine where changes or improvements

are needed in outcomes (Allen & Tanner, 2015; Brookhart & Chen, 2014; Danielson, 2013; Skelton et al., 2014).

On the other hand, some educators have criticized the use of rubrics arguing that the focus on what must be done to obtain a certain grade can result in students who think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in learning (Kohn, 2006). Kohn argues that with the standardization factors associated with rubrics that call for speed, efficiency, and alleged precision in grading comes a loss of attention to subtleties in student's writing, that can make grading subject to unwarranted biases (2006). Rubrics, like other forms of standardization, can dictate what is taught and valued by teachers (Kohn, 2006). Kohn does acknowledge, however, that teachers may benefit from rubrics when designing curriculum in order to analyze their own criteria for assessment and that as long as these rubrics are not given to the students they are unlikely to affect the students' work (2006). He contends that students can become over-reliant on rubrics and lose confidence in their voices, and find it difficult when expectations are not explicitly stated (Kohn, 2006). Livingston (2012) counters that many of the arguments against rubrics specifically target assessment in general and that rubrics, if used properly, can enable students to consider the quality of their writing. Educators in favor of rubrics do acknowledge that teacher individuality and responding to students' work in a personalized way is vital (Livingston, 2012).

This study set out to examine how mentor teachers at a professional development school (PDS) viewed rubrics created by teacher candidates (TCs) who were assigned to teach a given group of students in their classrooms over the span of a semester. Along with lesson planning centering on performance objectives aligned with the assigned group's needs, appropriate design and use of rubrics was a requirement for each of the TCs enrolled in their first of two pre-student teaching field experiences at the PDS. How the mentors viewed the development and implementation of rubrics with reference to the students being taught as well in evaluating the TCs performance was of significant interest as it could determine the relative value of the assignment for future classes engaged in field experiences at that PDS.

Method

The Context for the Study

The demographic for the students enrolled at the urban based charter PDS where the study took place was 57% Black, 37% Hispanic and the last 5%, a combination of 3% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islanders and 2% White. Adding even more diversity to the school was the 11% of the student body who were English language learners. With 97% of the student body receiving lunch either free or at a reduced price, it is clear that the majority of students at school came from either poor or working class families.

For over a decade, the school has served as a PDS for TCs enrolled in an integrated English-Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies (SS) methods block preparing them for elementary teaching certification. Typically, the TCs are at the school for approximately 5 hours both on Mondays and Wednesdays of each week during the semester. On each of those days they each spend half their time in an assigned classroom observing and practice-teaching as directed by the mentor teacher, and the other half debriefing about their lessons, attending to lectures, and viewing demonstrations specific to ELA and SS instructional strategies and practices.

With implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) at the PDS over the past two years, the TCs, regardless of their assigned grade assignment have been expected to perform Guided Reading (Fontas and Pinnell, 1996) with an assigned group of students considered to be “Tier 1” or on or above grade level-- this during the time their respective mentors work with struggling readers in their classroom. This facet of the experience has generally occurred over the last eight weeks of the semester once the TCs have been prepared to design 2 day lesson plan sequences that reflect contiguity with respect to performance objectives (POs) stemming from the Core Curriculum Standards (CCSs). They have also been prepared to design rubrics that correlate with the planned POs for their assigned groups. Plans for each week reviewed by the instructor were made available for the mentor prior to instruction and included a coversheet for the 2 day sequence displaying the POs, CCSs and Rubric. See Appendix 1 for a completed lesson plan by one of the TCs.

During the first year of RTI implementation at the PDS, concern was initially expressed about the mentors’ inability to closely monitor both the TCs and the students’ performances during the time the activity took place. However, because this approximately 40 minute segment of their field practice varied across the different grades in which the TCs were assigned, the

monitoring of performances by the course instructor was deemed possible. That the lesson plans and rubrics composed by the TCs for their assigned groups were to be screened by the mentor teacher and the course instructor at least 2 days prior to implementation seemed to provide an additional solution relative evaluating the TCs performance. Immediately after teaching the two day lesson plan sequence, the TCs filled in the rubrics corresponding to the performance objectives for the plans they had executed and gave them to the mentor teacher to examine. This study was completed in the spring of 2015.

Participants

The K-5 student groups taught by the TCs ranged in number from 3-5 students. Each group was selected by the TCs' respective mentor teacher's assigned classroom. Various assessments used at the school had designated the students to be on grade level or above. The TCs chose leveled reading materials from a book repository room housing the Fontas and Pinnell graded texts to work with their assigned groups throughout the weeks they were at the school.

The TCs were 7 graduate and 2 undergraduate level students enrolled in a combination ELA and SS methods block required for the program leading to initial teacher certification in New York State. Throughout the semester, all of the TCs created at least 6 two day lesson plan sequences with corresponding rubrics as described above. Due to school scheduling of RTI time 8 teachers who taught ELA at a time when the TCS could participate served as mentors. Seven of the mentor teachers were each assigned 1 TC and one was assigned two.

The specific role of the mentor teacher was to guide teacher candidates in creating lesson plans that corresponded with material being taught each week, and to provide feedback on the plans when necessary. The demographic of teachers participating in the study was 8 white women and 1 white male.

Procedures

In designing the rubrics, the TCs used the 4-point Danielson format as noted in the table below.

1	2	3	4
Does not meet any facet of target	Close to target	On Target	Beyond target

As shown on the lesson plan found in the appendix each of the rubric scores was paired with descriptors corresponding to a performance objective on the lesson plan. Each lesson plan with corresponding rubrics was screened by the course instructor and the mentor teacher prior to lesson plan implementation. As required on the syllabus, mentor and instructor screening of plans prior to instruction was done online and/or through Blackboard generally by the Friday or Saturday of the upcoming week of instruction. Scored rubrics were presented to mentor teachers after each set of lessons had been completed to be reviewed at their convenience. Reflections relative to the success of each lesson were submitted by the TCs to the instructor along with scored rubrics and lesson plans.

At about mid semester, the seven graduate students created a survey centering on the mentor teachers' views on the rubric activity the TCs had been using. Each TC contributed ideas for questions that were later compiled into a final questionnaire. Each of the five "yes" or "no" questions that were ultimately decided upon was followed by space on which the mentor teachers could leave additional comments if desired. The principal of the PDS distributed and collected the questionnaires, returning the completed surveys for analysis by the TCs. The final survey is can be found in Appendix 2.

Findings

The table below shows the number of mentors who responded to each survey question.

	Question	Yes	No	Unanswered
1	Part of our lesson planning assignment requires that we compose four point rubrics related to the performance objectives of our lesson plans. Do you think this is a good idea?	8	0	0
2	Do you keep for your records the rubric evaluations we submit pertaining to the children we taught.	5	3	0
3	Do you find the rubrics provide helpful information in any other way?	5	1	2
4	Do my rubrics reflect your evaluation of the students in my group?	5	0	0
5	Do you think the children in a group should be given a copy (or adapted copy) of the teacher candidate composes prior instruction?	7	1	0
6	Do you have suggestions on how the rubrics we create can be changed or extended so they are more helpful to you?	1	7	0

For reasons unknown some of the teachers did not respond to all of the questions on the survey. However, with regard to question 1, all eight mentors felt that creating 4-point rubrics that were consistent with our plans was good practice and should be one that is continued by the TCs. One teacher also noted the rubrics she received were similar to the rubrics the teachers already use when evaluating their students. She expressed the notion that rubrics they are beneficial for keeping track of student learning. Also noted was the preference for 4-point rubrics as there possibility of regressing toward the mean in making choices as is often the case with 3 or 5-point rubrics. With 4-point rubrics a student is better evaluated in the sense that the teacher must choose whether they are on target, or the extent to which they require more practice.

Five of the nine mentors who responded to question 2 indicated they kept the rubrics submitted by the TCs. Comments relative to this question reflected the notion that the rubrics submitted by the TCs were supportive evidence that could be used during their conferences with the students or students' parents.

Five of the nine mentors responding to question 3 indicated they used the rubrics for other reasons. Two comments relative to this inquiry suggested the rubrics were used in part to evaluate the TC's performance. One teacher explained that it helped her see what prospective teachers are learning, and what new practices are being utilized. Another mentor teacher noted that rubrics are great tools that help promote self-evaluation as well as evaluation of the students

Five of the nine mentors who responded to question 4 indicated they believed the TCs' rubric evaluations accurately reflected the students' performances. This suggests that the TCs rubrics, as designed, were reliable instruments for assessing student progress and achievement.

With regard to question 5, only one teacher of the eight who responded thought the students should not see their evaluations after each set of lesson plans had been carried out. A comment by one of the eight who responded positively noted that providing students with rubric evaluations helps them understand whether or not expectations are being met. However, students should also be given the opportunity to discuss each segment of the rubric so that they understand expectations. Seven of 8 mentors expressed the notion that it would be beneficial to provide and discuss the rubrics prior to instruction so the students would know before they start a lesson what it is they are expected to achieve. Thus there was a strong belief that making the rubrics available to students would further expand the benefits of instruction by the TCs. While

it is not known whether or not provision of rubrics prior to teaching lessons was actuated by any of the TCs, in discussing this project it was noted that prior provision of rubrics should be applied in the future.

Of those who responded to question 6, only one had any suggestions with regards to rubrics that are kept in the future. This mentor indicated that a reflections kept by the TC should include some plan for future instruction for students who were not successful or some comment on what is to be done in terms of instruction for those who are successful. While the teacher had given feedback on lesson plans prior to instruction, only the instructor was given the reflections that pertained to it; and as this study progressed it was apparent that the TCs were in fact reflecting on their assessments of students. Provision of reflections on each set of lessons along with rubric assessments will be employed in the future.

Implications & Limitations

Given the amount of attention that can be given to TCs enrolled in their first practicum within a class size of 9, a significant limitation of the study stems from the small number of surveys from which the TCs could derive findings. Unfortunately, only 8 mentors were part of the data pool. Coupled with this is that of the eight mentors who did return their questionnaires only five responded to all the yes/no questions. Despite this, limitation the results do support the practice of coupling rubrics with lesson plans created by students enrolled in any early practicum. It is hoped that a follow up study on this topic can result in responses from all mentors. In the future, including school personnel in the preparation of a survey to be used for the action research assignment may result more complete data returns on the part of mentors.

Appendix 1

TC: Lauren Metzen

Grade: 2nd

Cooperating Teaching: Ms. D'Angelo

Performance Objective:

- I. Given the West African folk tale book *The Adventures of Spider*, students will be able to complete a story grammar chart retelling the important parts of each short story.
- II. After reading all six of the short stories from the West African folk tale book *The Adventures of Spider*, students will be able to list the character traits of Spider (the main character).
- III. Students will be able to list the characteristics of a folk tale.

Common Core Standards:

Standard 2: Recount stories, including fables and folk tales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.-**Students will be recounting each West African folk tale and determining the lesson of each story.**

Standard 3: Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.-**We will be discussing the events in each short story and discuss how Spider deals with each problem. We will discuss what we learn about Spider from each story.**

Standard 5: Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action. - **We will be practicing retelling with each short story and students will eventually be independently filling out a grammar story chart.**

Standard 10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in the grades 2–3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.-**We will be working with a white IRLA level book which is higher than one of the student's independent reading level. She has experience with white leveled books so I am confident she will succeed with this book. This will be a more difficult book for the group and it is exposing the students to a new type of literature, folk tales.**

Rubrics:

	1 Does not meet any facet of target	2 Close to target	3 Target	4 Beyond target
	The student is unable to retell even with prompting and support.	The student is able to accurately retell some aspects of the story but not all even with prompting and support.	The student is able to accurately retell the important parts of the short story but requires prompting and support.	The student is able to accurately retell the important parts of the short story without any prompting or support.
Avianie				
Yosias				
DaJanae				

	1 Does not meet any facet of target	2 Close to target	3 Target	4 Beyond target
	Student is able to list less than 2 appropriate character traits of Spider even with prompting and support.	Student is able to list 2-6 appropriate character traits of Spider but cannot use evidence from the text even with prompting and support.	Student is able to list 5-6 appropriate character traits of Spider using evidence from the text but requires prompting and support.	Student is able to list 5-6 appropriate character traits of Spider using evidence from the text without any prompting or support.
Avianie				
Yosias				
DaJanae				

	1 Does not meet any facet of target	2 Close to target	3 Target	4 Beyond target
	Student is unable to list any qualities of a folk tale even with prompting and support.	Student lists some qualities of a folk tale but not all even with prompting and support.	Student is able to list all of the qualities of a folk tale but requires some prompting and support.	Student is able to independently list all of the qualities of a folk tale.
Avianie				
Yosias				
DaJanae				

Lesson Plan

Character Traits & Re-telling

Setting: Enterprise Charter School

Name Lauren Metzen Date 3/30 & 4/1

Grade 2 # of Students 3 Length 2- 40 minute lessons

<p>I. Instructional Goal(s) [1]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Students will be able to identify the characteristics of a folk tale.2. Students will be able to retell the important parts of the short story including setting, characters, beginning, middle, end and lesson.3. Students will be able to list character traits of the main character.
<p>II. Performance Objective(s) [2]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Given the West African folk tale book <i>The Adventures of Spider</i>, students will be able to complete a story grammar chart retelling the important parts of each short story.2. After reading all six of the short stories from the West African folk tale book <i>The Adventures of Spider</i>, students will be able to list the character traits of Spider (the main character).3. Students will be able to list the characteristics of a folk tale.
<p>4. Common Core Standards</p> <p>Standard 2: Recount stories, including fables and folk tales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.-Students will be recounting each West African folk tale and determining the lesson of each story.</p> <p>Standard 3: Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.-We will be discussing the events in each short story and discuss how Spider deals with each problem. We will discuss what we learn about spider from each story.</p> <p>Standard 5: Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action. - We will be practicing retelling with each short story and eventually students will be independently filling out a grammar story chart.</p> <p>Standard 10: By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in the grades 2–3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.-We will be working with a white IRLA level book which is higher than one of the student’s independent reading level. This will be a more difficult book for the group and it is exposing the students to a new type of literature, folk tales.</p>
<p>5. Materials [1]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Pencils, white board, dry erase marker, story grammar worksheets, folk tale anchor chart, re-telling anchor chart, paper.b. Arkhurst, Joyce C. <i>The Adventures of Spider: West African Folk Tales</i>. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1964. Print.
<p>6. Physical Space [1]</p> <p>Children will be seated around a table with their books and worksheets in front of them. I</p>

will be seated so the children are seated around me. All students will be able to see the white board as we work on it as a group.

7. Instructional Procedures [3]

A. Initiating Strategy:

Day 1:

- Begin the lesson discussing folk tales, specifically West African folk tales. I will show the anchor chart that describes what a folk tale is:
 - A way to hand down traditions from one tradition to the next
 - Teaches a lesson
 - Originally, told orally
 - No one specific author
- Do a picture walk of *The Adventures of Spider*.
- Discuss how each short story explains why spiders are the way they are. Read through the titles of each short story and discuss what the story could be about.
- Read the introduction together as a group.
- Present the following vocabulary on the whiteboard and use each word in a sentence approximately 5 times:
 - Folk tale or folktale- **Definition:** a story that is shared orally and started before there was writing; often about a community's culture, history and traditions
 - Mischevious-a person or animal that is causing trouble in a playful way.
 - Puzzled-unable to understand; confused.
 - Wrinkled- A line or crease in the skin, as from age.
 - Puny- small, insignificant, or weak.

Day 2: (depending on how many students finish reading and activities from day 1)

- Review what we read in the first two short stories.
- List the characteristics of spider that we learned about in the first two short stories.
- Do a picture walk of the next two short stories and discuss what we may learn about spider today.
- Present the following vocabulary on the whiteboard and use each word in a sentence approximately 5 times:
 - Greedy- wanting more than you need or deserve.
 - Appetite- a physical need especially for food or drinks.
 - Pity- sympathy for the misfortune or suffering of someone else.
 - Mend- to make repairs or to fix.
 - Fastened- to attach firmly.

B. Teaching Procedure/Instructional Events:

Day 1: (All day 2 activities are dependent on how much gets done on day 1)

- Students will read the first short story: How Spider got a Thin Waist
- Question to answer while reading: Why do spiders have a thin waist according to West African folk tales?
- We will practice re-telling as a group using anchor chart prompting: setting, characters, beginning, middle, end, and lesson.
- Students will read the second short story: Why Spider Lives in Ceilings
- Question: Why do spiders live in ceilings according to West African folk tales?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will re-tell independently: setting, characters, beginning, middle, end, and lesson. <p>Day 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will fill out a worksheet listing the qualities of a folk tale. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Told orally Passes down traditions Told to learn a lesson No specific author We will review the folk tale anchor chart and discuss what we forgot and what we remembered about folk tales. Students will read the third story: How Spider got a Bald Head Question: Why do spiders have a bald head according to West African folk tales? Students will re-tell independently: setting, characters, beginning, middle, end, and lesson. Students will read the fourth story: How Spider helped a Fisherman Question: How did spider get tricked into helping the fisherman? Students will re-tell independently: setting, characters, beginning, middle, end, and lesson. <p>C. Closure:</p> <p>Day 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will end the lesson talking about Spider and listing his character qualities. We will use evidence from the text to help support the traits we list. <p>Day 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will end the lesson adding to the list of Spider’s character traits. We will use evidence from the text to help support the traits we list.
<p>8. Assessment [1]</p> <p>1. Student Assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students will be assessed using a rubric for each performance objective listed above. Additionally, I will keep notes while the students read noting any difficulties with specific words or concepts.

NOTES:

	Avianie	DaJanae	Yosias
Day 1:			
Day 2:			

Appendix 2

Survey of Mentor Teachers' Views on the Creation and Use of Rubrics by TCs

Name of Cooperating Teacher _____
 Name of Teacher Candidate _____

Rubric Evaluation Questionnaire

1. Part of our lesson planning assignment requires that we compose 4-point rubrics related to the performance objectives of our lesson plans. Do you think this is a good idea? For example

1	2	3	4
Little or no learning	Learning has occurred, but the student needs more practice.	Reached target for learning.	Beyond target for learning

Yes No

Comment: _____

2. Do you keep for your records the rubric evaluations we submit pertaining to the children we taught?

Yes No

Comment: _____

3. Do you find the rubrics provide helpful information in any other way?

Yes No

Comment: _____

4. Do my rubrics reflect your evaluation of the students in my group?

Yes No

Comment: _____

5. Do you think the children in a group should be given a copy (or adapted copy) of the teacher candidate composes prior instruction?

Yes No

Comment: _____

6. Do you have any suggestions on how the rubrics we create can be changed or extended so that they are more helpful to you?

Yes No

Comment: _____

References

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