Creating a context for growth-focused assessment

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Abstract: We present a naturalistic case study of one teacher's development of a growth-centered context for classroom assessment. In-depth interviews, analysis of student work, and observations were used to identify the processes this teacher used to engage her students in the assessment process. Data were analyzed using listening guide analysis to garner a holistic perspective on the nature of teaching, learning, and community established in this classroom. Findings are described by aligning the specific techniques used by this teacher to the growth mindset supportive instructional strategies noted in the literature and then providing tips for implementation in a middle grades classroom.

Keywords: *assessment*, *middle grades*, *growth mindset*, *case study analysis*

This We Believe **characteristics**:

- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant

Educators who embrace the *This We Believe* philosophy strive to create developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable learning environments in which young adolescents can develop the knowledge and skills to flourish in college, careers, and life. Within these dynamic learning contexts, educators are called to use "varied and ongoing assessments [that] advance learning as well as measure it" (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010, p. 14). Although researchers have designed studies to identify, describe, and examine the *instructional* characteristics of such learning environments to promote positive student outcomes for adolescent learners (Meece, 2003), less attention has been paid to examining teachers' assessment practices and the ways that assessment activities can be designed and implemented to support the relational and democratic goals identified in the middle school model.

Therefore, we present a case study of one fifth-grade teacher, recognized as having expertise in classroom assessment, in order to explore and describe the assessment-related craft knowledge she employed to promote a growth-centered context for classroom learning and assessment (e.g., Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992). Fifth grade (or age 10) is seen as the entry to middle level learning. For some learners, this is the last year of elementary school, when they begin preparing for the middle school transition. This transition has been identified as highly challenging due to the varied contextual, social, emotional, and physical changes that occur as students prepare for sixth grade (e.g., Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Explicit preparation of students with a focus on the development of a growth mindset may prove especially helpful to these early middle-level learners as they make a transition often fraught with concerns (e.g., Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015). In this article, we provide examples of classroom-level, naturally occurring, teacher-generated processes to illustrate the nuanced ways that one teacher enacted recommendations from research and theory into her lived practice. We also highlight the potential of the strategies she used for helping students to develop key relational skills as they faced the transition to middle school.

Teachers' craft knowledge and assessment at the middle level

Craft knowledge is a teacher's ability to bring "all of the knowledge bases to bear on the act of teaching," indicating an occupational "savvy" to engage varied bodies of

knowledge in specific contexts for defined goals developed through experience and reflection (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992, pp. 387–388). Teachers need to cultivate and engage their craft knowledge in order to enact the goals of national policy initiatives and to implement the findings of high-quality educational research. Policy initiatives and research findings tend to offer general and overarching strategies that teachers must adapt for their own contexts. As teachers particularize these strategies and engage in classroom practice, they construct integrated craft knowledge in practice that can be shared (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Teachers have a wealth of craft knowledge in relation to classroom assessment practices that extend beyond the general strategies offered in research studies and assessment texts (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992). Because craft knowledge is hallmarked by the integration of multiple bodies of knowledge, explorations into specific topics such as assessment should reveal connections to other relevant topics, such as adolescent development, classroom climate, content, and pacing. Thus, while knowledge of assessment has been characterized as either craft or scholarship (e.g., Goos & Hughes, 2010; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008), this perspective is overly limiting for middle level educators who must consider the entirety of the learning experience, social context, and students' needs while developing assessment practices to meet multiple goals.

Middle level educators are in the unique position of helping students exert greater independence as they transition from childhood into adolescence (Radcliffe, 2015). Advances in students' cognitive capabilities, social and emotional well-being, and use of self-regulation strategies (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002) allow middle level educators to design assessments that capitalize on students' developing capabilities to engage in more autonomous and challenging tasks (Barnes & Urbankowski, 2014). At the same time, middle level educators need to be sensitive to students' developmental limitations and provide appropriate scaffolding to support students' emerging independence. This is no easy task. By studying a middle level educator with expertise in classroom assessment, it is possible to identify specific processes and instructional moves as she enacts her craft knowledge (MacArthur, 2012) as well as to share this knowledge with other educators. In contrast to most research that tends to be theory or domain focused, this approach reveals an individual teacher's lived practice resulting from an integration of multiple theories, goals, and methods.

Classroom assessment and mindsets

Mindsets[1] have been defined as "core assumptions about the malleability of personal qualities" (Yeager & Dweck, 2012, p. 303). Mindsets exist about any personal attribute; however, in academic settings, the focus has been on mindsets toward intelligence. Individuals' mindsets can be characterized as fixed (i.e., intelligence is unchangeable, innate) or growth (i.e., intelligence is malleable, developed through effort; Dweck, 2006).

Mindsets about intelligence influence students' academic performance/behavior (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014), goal orientations (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), perspectives on effort as essential to growth or indicative of low ability (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), and resilience in the face of difficulty (Blackwell et al., 2007). Evidence indicates that learners' mindsets are malleable and can be shaped by feedback (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), expectations (Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2012), messages about risks and mistakes (Yamazaki & Kumar, 2013), and explicit instruction (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

In middle level classrooms, messages and discussion around assessment activities may provide a particularly salient context to inform learners' mindsets. For example, scholars have explored the relation of assessment practices to students' goal orientations and found that assessment contexts conveying mastery messages aligned with a growth mindset led to more adaptive responses in learners (e.g., Alkharusi, 2008). As the nature of instruction and content changes in the middle grades, these learners must develop the skills and beliefs needed to make use of assessment-related feedback and to interpret it in ways that support socioemotional health. The discussion that does or does not take place around the review of student work can send messages to learners that ability is either fixed or malleable. Middle level learners are in the early stages of identity development; thus, messages about the nature of their abilities provide the foundation for future decisions and actions. Recall that individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to accept challenges, continue in the face of adversity, and remain open to learning opportunities. The messages learners receive in the middle years about their ability and progress may shape their continued careers as learners.

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[1] Early research on mindsets referred to these beliefs as implicit theories; for clarity in this article we use the more recent term "mindset" to refer to these beliefs.

> **The messages learners receive in the middle years about their ability and progress may shape their continued careers as learners.**

Recommendations for teachers to support the development of a growth mindset include (1) promoting and modeling risk and mistake tolerance in learning activities (Yamazaki & Kumar, 2013), (2) offering timely, process-focused feedback (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), (3) emphasizing effort over products or outcomes (Blackwell et al., 2007), and (4) establishing and holding high expectations for all students (Rattan et al., 2012). These recommendations seem well suited for application to assessment activities and dovetail with the underlying focus of the middle school model that emphasizes the teaching of relationships.

Research question

What craft knowledge is employed by a middle level educator with expertise in classroom assessment to foster a growth-centered context for classroom assessment in her fifth-grade classroom?

Methodology

Descriptive, instrumental case study methodology (Yin, 1993), informed by the strategies of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was used in this investigation. A case study is an in-depth, detailed examination of a subject in an authentic setting in which the researcher relies on multiple sources of evidence to understand the phenomena (Yin, 1984). This case is *instrumental* because the participant was selected to provide insight and understanding into the phenomenon of teachers' growth-centered assessment practices (Stake, 1995). Adhering to the principles of naturalistic inquiry, we observed the participant without manipulating or placing constraints on the context or the data gathered. The results of our investigation may be limited in terms of generalizability; however, these methods are particularly advantageous when the purpose of the research is to garner an in-depth understanding and detailed descriptions of phenomena situated in context (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Reed, 2012). This study was conducted with approval from our Institutional Review Board.

Participant and setting

The teacher in our study, Kara, was identified as having expertise in classroom assessment. Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, and Gonzales (2005) identified a two-gate process for identifying teacher expertise. Gate 1 requires that teachers have a minimum of three years of experience in their present context and requisite degree(s) and certification(s) for their present position. Gate 2 requires recognition of expertise in a given domain (i.e., classroom assessment) from an informed perspective (e.g., principal, principal investigator). Kara met both of these criteria. In addition to holding the appropriate certifications, she was completing her third year of teaching at her current school, and was nominated for participation by her school principal.

At the time of this study, Kara was a fifth grade English/language arts (ELA) teacher in a K–5 school in a middle-class suburb of New York City (NYC). While this was her third year teaching at this school, she spent 10 years teaching fifth grade in NYC schools. She is also certified as a teacher of students with disabilities. Kara taught two sections of ELA, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, for approximately three hours with 28 and 24 students, respectively. The student population at this school is ethnically diverse, with 54% Caucasian, 24% Latino, 15% African American, and 0.04% Asian. Additionally, 22.6% of students at this school are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch.

Data sources and analysis

Data included classroom observations, semi-structured participant interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994), and artifacts from the classroom over a six-week period. We analyzed the data using a simplified version of Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch's (2003) listening guide method. First, data were read for the basic storyline of what occurred, and analytic notes summarizing segments of text and changes in the storyline were noted. Second, we looked for the voice[2] of our teacher across interviews and observations to determine her underlying purpose and goals. During the third and fourth reviews of the data, we used "memoing" to document evidence that could be used to address our research question (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008).

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[2] By voice we refer to the many and sometimes conflicting perspectives that must be engaged in the representation of data. Here we sought to provide this teacher with a voice in our discussion of her activities (Given, 2008).

Kara's classroom and implications for practice

In this section, we present examples of how Kara demonstrated craft knowledge through the use of many assessment strategies in her classroom and how these strategies illustrated the recommendations for developing a growth mindset proposed in the literature. We provide "Tips for Implementation" to describe how middle level educators can support and foster a growth-centered context for assessment and enact these strategies in their own classroom.

"Double check your writing and see if you agree with me": Modeling academic risk and error tolerance

Encouraging risk taking and communicating to students that it is acceptable to make mistakes is a key strategy to promote a growth mindset. Kara served as a model to students by taking risks, openly admitting she "makes mistakes" and that learning from her mistakes is important to her growth. In fact, Kara routinely asked her students to recheck *her* work and would change students' grades if they could provide evidence that her scoring was incorrect. For example, while passing back scored papers to her students and conferring with them on their progress, Kara remarked, "Double check your writing and see if you agree with me, see if you agree or disagree, and if you disagree you need to support your reasons and I will change your score" (Observation, June 9, 2014).

We observed her students actively reviewing their work. For instance, one student returned to his seat and began to reread his paper. While reading, he appeared to scan back and forth between Kara's feedback and the rubric descriptors. He returned to Kara, and showed her evidence from his paper where he addressed a point in his introduction that was later supported by evidence. Kara listened to his argument, reviewed the work, and ultimately agreed with the student and adjusted his grade. As evidence that she was truly open to this kind of interaction, she shared with the class that this student had found a mistake in his work and encouraged other students to do the same. Kara reinforced trust in both teacher–student and student–student relationships by helping students invoke strategies to further their learning. She actively focused on the importance of relationships among students, between the teacher and student, and the content

and students. This trust-building facilitated academic risk taking and helped students see errors as opportunities to learn.

Link to the literature. Learners with growth mindsets understand that errors and even failure are common and necessary aspects of learning in any field (Dweck, 2006). Consequently, they are more willing to take risks and make mistakes. Thus, Kara emphasized the development of skills that would allow middle level learners to assume responsibility for their own learning (NMSA, 2010). In Kara's classroom, she actively modeled this for students and helped them to see mistakes as part of learning.

Tip for implementation. Identify opportunities in your classroom context where you can model the advantages of making mistakes and support young adolescents in taking academic risks. Kara invited students to argue with her scoring practice using rubrics and students' work. For some middle level learners (and teachers) this discourse can be scary and seem argumentative. Kara managed this by being open and honest to the argument and comfortable with her own expertise. She also provided a well-structured environment by focusing arguments on evidence and scoring rubrics. The ability to argue a grade based on the evidence of the work and the alignment with rubrics is an essential skill for young adolescent learners to develop for the future. The support of this ability/skill in a structured and challenging way in the middle school classroom provides learners with the opportunity to practice how to be advocates who can and do play an active role in their own learning (NMSA, 2010).

"I'll actually refer to them as 'love notes'": Timely, formative, process-oriented feedback

Kara provided feedback that was timely, formative, and process-oriented by using "love notes." She explained, "I'll put Post-Its on their work, and I'll put an arrow [and write], 'What makes you say that,' 'Where is your support?' 'Tell me more'…. I'll actually refer to them as 'love notes'" (Observation, May 29, 2014). She referred to these post-it notes with feedback messages as love notes because she thought it was "sweeter than calling it criticisms or suggestions" (Observation, June 3, 2014). Recalling how she received feedback as a student, Kara explained, "When I was a kid my pages bled and I hated it. So I never use red pen. I don't ever want to write on someone's work because I think

that's disrespectful. And it's just my opinion [of the work] … so I give them a love note" (Observation, June 3, 2014).

Love notes served a number of purposes in Kara's classroom. First, they allowed her to provide feedback in a timely manner to students or groups of students. Kara explained,

> So it's on-the-fly with the kids. [For example I'll say:] "This is what I just noticed while I was working with your group. This is something you guys need to work on as a group. Here's a love note so you can remind yourself." (Observation, May 29, 2014)

Love notes were also formative in nature, seamlessly infused into each activity Kara engaged in with students. For example, Kara noted:

> I give them a note and I walk away, and I give them some time to reflect on it, then I come back. And I say did you guys do that, what did you come up with, where are we? So I'll re-check in with them. And I'll give them another post-it to work on. (Observation, May 29, 2014)

Finally, Kara used love notes to provide information to students about the methods or procedures used to understand a concept or complete the task. Kara shared with us a sample of student work to be returned and modeled for us how she reviewed the love notes on this independent reading task with the student, "*Student* I noticed this when you did your paper [referring to a love note on how to use evidence to support his argument]. Let's pull that book back out. Woah, where did you find that in the book? Let's go back." Kara elaborated, "And I actually show them the process of going back into the text to support what they're saying" (Observation, May 29, 2014). In Kara's classroom, love notes signaled to students that there was opportunity for growth and improvement and that skill development was an ongoing process. Beyond calling them "love notes," Kara also actively helped her students to process and use the feedback she provided.

Link to the literature. Providing timely, formative, process-oriented feedback can support and help to cultivate a growth mindset in students. Learners with a growth mindset are more likely to adopt the perspective that learning takes time and effort (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Thus, they are more willing to tackle challenging problems and exercise greater resilience following academic setbacks.

Tip for implementation. Brainstorm processes, procedures, and routines you can establish to integrate timely, formative, process-oriented feedback into your instructional activities. What was particularly effective about Kara's love notes was that they were detailed and personalized for each learner. Think about ways to help your students identify *how* to modify their learning strategies or knowledge construction so they can improve both their understanding and performance. Remember that feedback should be given soon enough so that learners can recall the task being evaluated and have opportunity to make revisions. Love notes alone will not suffice if students do not know how to make use of the feedback or suggestions. These notes were not about justifying a grade for Kara but were focused on helping learners improve.

Young adolescents are still developing their ability to self-regulate. By utilizing timely, formative, process-oriented feedback, you have the opportunity to model the expert practices students need to self-assess their abilities and motivational orientations and monitor their own learning.

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"*Student,* this chart is me keeping track of your informational writing all year": Emphasizing effort over products or outcomes

Kara emphasized effort and growth over outcomes during her teacher–student conferences. We observed her conducting several writing conferences with her students at the end of the school year. In these personal meetings, she explicitly discussed students' growth over time using her own scoring chart that mapped each student's progress on five major writing tasks for the year. In these conferences, we saw Kara provide growth-focused feedback for students to track their progress over the course of the year. Illustrated in this interaction was Kara's ability to communicate honest feedback that highlighted growth and

areas for improvement while also remaining sensitive to students' emotional reactions.

Using the chart to guide her discussion, she explained to *Student A*,

This chart is me keeping track of your informational writing all year. You started at a 5 [referring to the grade this student received on her first writing task], then you completed the essay on the three branches [of government]. On that task you received [a score of] 11, which is really good and on grade level, but you had my help. Then on the unit 2 essay on Antarctica you got a 16 out of 16, which was above grade level, and you did this all by yourself. Next was the biography essay on Albert Einstein [points to grade column], which you got an 11.5. This was a harder essay and look you were on grade level. Then unit 3 you had to persuade someone, the trophy piece [persuasive essay on whether or not students should receive trophies for simply participating]. Here [pointing to score in column] you got 13 out of 16, right above grade level. (Observation, June 9, 2014)

Kara further explained to the student that she was meeting and exceeding expectations in informational writing by performing at or above grade level on each of the writing tasks. Kara concluded by highlighting the growth the student made over the course of the year. Referencing her overall approach to classroom assessment, Kara explained, "This sounds really bad, but I don't care about the assessment from the district. I care more about them [students] meeting, making growth, and growing in whatever skills I am teaching. I care about learning" (Observation, June 9, 2014).

Link to the literature. Emphasizing effort and growth during student–teacher conferences (as opposed to focusing solely on outcomes) has the potential to support a growth mindset. Learners who participate in growth-focused teacher–student conferences are more likely to experience improved learning, performance, and achievement (Bell, 2002), positive perceptions of the learning experience (Young & Miller, 2004), and increased collaboration between teacher and student, which has the potential to enhance rapport (Stiggins, 2001).

Tip for implementation. For teacher–student conferencing to be successful, try to create a classroom climate in which adolescents feel comfortable discussing and receiving feedback on their work (Boynton, 2003). Teachers can do this by asking open-ended questions, keeping the conferences concise and focused, and

remaining open and attentive so students feel their ideas are valued (e.g., Boynton, 2003; Smith, 2005). While conferencing, Kara remained sensitive to the student's perspective and shifted her tone and approach to meet each student where he or she was. Like Kara, remember that the situational context of the classroom, students' background, and your communication style may affect how students interpret feedback messages.

An extension of classroom conferences focused on students' writing progress would be to support students in leading marking period conferences with their parents or guardians about their school performance (Goodman, 2008). This approach allows students to take an active role in understanding their own progress. Like conferencing with teachers or peers, students must learn how to engage in and facilitate these meetings so that a growth mindset can be supported. Goodman's (2008) article provides a detailed description of how this process was implemented in an urban school district. Many of the techniques described by Goodman are also supportive of developing a growth mindset in adolescents. For instance, students were expected to select work samples to share that were reflective of their progress, thus emphasizing effort and development rather than outputs.

"There shouldn't be guess work": Establishing and Holding High Expectations for All Students

Kara promoted a growth mindset by setting and communicating high expectations to students through assessment-related conversations. For instance, she explicitly discussed and analyzed scoring rubrics with students at the outset of assignments. Kara explained,

I give them the rubric before they even write and say, "This is what we're going to be looking at. You need to know this is how I'm going to be grading you. There shouldn't be guesswork. You should know. Like let's look at it. How do I get each of these scores?" And I'll say to them, "Put a little check marks next to the rubric like I did." (Observation, June 3, 2014)

She added, "So I have these conversations [with the students] where I actually discuss exactly what my expectations are and how they can meet those expectations" (Observation, June 3, 2014).

Communicating high expectations for all students is a lauded recommendation for teachers, but in Kara's class we saw her give a variety of feedback to students at all levels. During one observed writing conference with a

student who did not make the anticipated growth over the school year, Kara did not offer comfort feedback, which typically de-motivates students (Rattan et al., 2012). Instead Kara began the conference by acknowledging "Informational writing is hard for you [student]. This year has been a growing process for you. Do you agree?" (Observation, June 9, 2014). As Kara provided feedback, she pointed out where the student was (i.e., on or approaching grade level) and emphasized that when the student sought out help her scores increased. In this way Kara maintained her expectations while helping the student to see which strategies were more effective.

Working with the same student described above, Kara reviewed the student's persuasive writing piece with her and directed the student to the lack of a thesis statement in the essay and said, "So what worries me, and you know me. I'm always honest—I think you weren't quite sure about what you were writing. Use the writing prompt. The prompt will tell you what the reader wants to hear" (Observation, June 9, 2014). In this conversation, Kara again offered a strategy for how the student could improve while recognizing her progress over time.

Link to the literature. In a series of experiments, Rattan et al. (2012) found comfort feedback offered either verbally (e.g., you're just not a math person) or in practice (e.g., being assigned easier or less work) had negative effects on students' resilience. In fact, it led to decreased expectations for improvement and lower final grades. Instead, these researchers argued that the better way to provide feedback for students who do not perform well is to do as Kara did and help them see that they need better strategies. Thus, in communicating to students that their strategies can be improved, teachers are communicating high expectations for their learners that the learners can adopt themselves.

Tips for implementation. Research from the 1970s–1990s explored the ways that teachers intentionally or unintentionally communicated expectations (high and low) to students and how students internalized these messages (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1970; Graham, 1990). In the examples described from Kara's class we focused on her use of strategy-focused feedback for all students. This kind of feedback sent a growth mindset message that improvement was possible.

When communicating high expectations, keep in mind how verbal and nonverbal messages might be interpreted by students. For instance, allowing longer wait time after asking higher-level questions communicates to students that critical, reflective thinking requires time and that they are capable of responding. In contrast, asking simple questions with little wait time suggests a low expectation to students. In emphasizing high expectations while supporting a growth mindset, try to help young adolescents see that they are capable of growth and that the expectation is that they will do so.

Conclusion

We presented Kara's story as an illustration of one teacher's craft knowledge in classroom assessment and how she promoted growth-focused mindsets in her students during assessment activities. Kara's story and the accompanying tips for implementation provide examples of how general recommendations from research and policy can be enacted in practice. In this article, we illustrated the ways that teachers' assessment practices can be designed and implemented to support growth mindsets, the relational and democratic goals identified in the middle school model, and advance the tenets of the *This We Believe* philosophy.

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