

Is It Just Natural?
Beginning Teachers' Growth
in Reflective Practice¹

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In 1998, the state of California added a two-year formative assessment experience to its decade-long, integrated approach to support and assessment of beginning teachers (BTSA) used by a number of school districts. The California Formative Assessment and Support System for Teachers [CFASST](California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CCTC] & California Department of Education [CDE], 1998) is framed around a cycle of reflective inquiry and uses the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CCTC & CDE, 1997) as the standard description of reflective practice.

Long regarded as an important aspect of effective teaching (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983), reflection involves conceptualizing a problem setting and re-framing it within the context of learning so as to make rational choices and assume responsibility for those choices (Feiman, 1979; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). CFASST embeds reflection in many of the activities that the beginning teacher and support provider complete together. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning—where learning is portrayed in a four-stage cycle of 1) concrete experience, forming the basis for 2) observation and reflection, which are used to 3) generalize or build an idea, from which 4) new action is created—forms the basis for the

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“Plan, Teach, Reflect, and Apply” cycle that is embedded in the support program.

CFASST incorporates several aspects of what research has indicated as effective staff development: a consideration of the developmental nature of learning to use reflection (Ross, 1988; Kitchener & King, 1981); the use of peer observation and coaching around a narrow range of teaching behaviors (McGreal, 1982; Showers & Joyce, 1996); and the use of classroom research or teacher inquiry to help teachers assess their own teaching (Cross, 1987). Acknowledging that self-assessment procedures enhance teachers’ abilities and willingness to be reflective about classroom instruction (Freiberg, Waxman, & Houston, 1987), CFASST provides beginning teachers with multiple tools that can be used to provide rich information for self-assessment of practice.

Methodology

During the second year of the implementation of CFASST, seven sites throughout the state were selected for case studies designed to provide policy makers and practitioners with pertinent information about the effect of the new system on California’s beginning teachers, their support providers, and the district organizations coordinating the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment programs. Methods used in the case studies included focus interviews with approximately forty beginning teachers, separate focus group discussions with support providers, and interviews with directors of BTSA programs. Those discussions were guided by structured protocols that asked beginning teachers to talk about such things as how they worked with their support providers, which CFASST events were most or least helpful to them, how they thought they had grown as teachers, and how they used the materials provided in the CFASST “box.”² Beginning teachers described their experiences working with CFASST events and with a support provider, offered their opinions and perspectives about those experiences, and related examples of ways in which their classroom practices and views of teaching had been influenced by the activities that they had carried out. The researcher at each of the seven sites summarized the findings from these focus groups, as well as from the discussions with program directors and support providers. Those summaries were included as part of the CFASST Implementation Report prepared by Educational Testing Service in October, 2000 (Storms, Wing, Jinks, Banks, & Cavazos, 2000).

Following the initial case study, the researchers collaborated on a secondary analysis of the data to analyze factors that led specifically to reflective practice. As one of the researchers, the author of this paper

provides access to the voices of the beginning teachers as they were captured during the taped focus group discussions, so that readers may learn how the end users of the CFASST—the beginning teachers themselves—perceived their own development as reflective practitioners. Transcripts of all taped beginning teacher focus groups from the seven sites were read and analyzed for patterns and categories of responses that emerged. In addition to presenting the teachers' voices, which predominate, this paper will analyze the nature and extent of teachers' thinking, and consider implications for policy and practice.

Findings

Analysis of the data in the transcripts provides evidence that beginning teachers in the CFASST program reflected regularly about their practice, and that they used a variety of formats to enhance that reflection. While many of the beginning teachers described themselves as being “naturally” reflective about their work, data indicate that the nature and extent of such thinking changed as they participated in a program of structured support organized around cycles of inquiry and reflection. Reflection became more focused on specific elements of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. At the same time, teachers began to examine larger issues related to the profession and to the organization of schools.

CFASST Provides Multiple Tools for Self-Assessment of Practice

CFASST incorporates several tools that new teachers may use to develop skills in assessing their own practice. Peer observation and coaching by their support providers, observations of other teachers, opportunities to attend professional seminars and workshops, and access to educational literature are among the tools built into the program. In addition to the opportunities to reflect provided by these components, specific guided reflection is an integral part of several CFASST events. Transcript analysis revealed that each of these formats was used by at least some of the teachers, and none of the teachers indicated they used all of the formats. Having a variety of ways to facilitate reflective practice appeared to be one of the strengths of the CFASST program.

Peer observation and coaching by the support provider is an integral part of five CFASST events. These include inquiries into the learning environment, instructional practices, and assessment, as well as two extended analyses of teaching that provide a profile of practice. Each of these observations follows the peer coaching protocol (Showers & Joyce,

1996) where the observation is preceded by a planning conference and followed by a feedback conference. A significant component of these observations is that each CFASST event asks the beginning teacher to focus on a specific aspect of teaching, and refers to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession [CSTP] (CCTC & CDE, 1997) for the teaching behaviors to be explored. Many beginning teachers in the case studies expressed how these observations and coaching helped them think about their teaching.

I thought it was very helpful because I don't think I would've done that on my own. I would've just focused on "Oh, my God, what do I do? ..What am I going to teach the next day?" With her [the Support Provider] help, we looked at the standards, or we looked at one goal that I was going to do. "Ok, these are the people you should go and look at—they're good at doing this—and by this day you should complete — let's focus on what your goal could be at about two weeks or at about four weeks." (BT Site 7, 6/00)

Some teachers identified another aspect of the support provider's assistance: the non-judgmental recording of observed teaching, which later provided a focus for a reflective conversation about teaching.

I found it much more helpful to have my support provider come in and just write down what she saw and just write down my words as I said them. I actually found I was more positive and encouraging that I thought I was, which made me proud and want to do it more. Then a few things, like focusing on a couple of students too much. I was also favoring girls for a while there, and I found that out through the POP [Profile of Practice]. So I really found out some real practical information and ways to solve that. So, just little, little things like that have really made me more aware of myself. (BT Site 3, 5/00)

Observations of other teachers is frequently a component of BTSA. New teachers related how these observations complemented the self-assessment work that they were doing with CFASST. This was especially true if the support provider and the beginning teacher visited other classrooms together, and then had opportunities to talk about what they had observed.

... my support provider and I watched for a whole day this fabulous fifth grade teacher ... After we went and saw her together, I said, "I want to be like this. This is how I want to handle my day. This is what I want to do." But then I said, "But this is what I have and this is what I am doing [presently]." So, having her be in both places with me, we were able to sit down and talk, "Ok, how can I get from where I am to where this is? How can we find a medium ground that's going to start me to eventually get to there?" ... It's the observing and the observing together—because then if I wouldn't have gone there with her, it would have been a lot harder to

come back and describe, "Well, she does this. I want to do that too." . . . It's been kind of nice that she's almost held me accountable, saying, "Remember that thing we saw in that classroom, have you tried it yet? How's that coming along?" . . . The observation just has so many different aspects to it that are really beneficial, I think. (BT Site 7, 3/00)

Workshops, seminars, articles, and professional conferences provided opportunities for beginning teachers to learn new strategies and think about ways to incorporate them into their own teaching. Transcripts of the focus group interviews indicate that for several teachers, these were significant tools for self-assessment.

I'm a former military naval intelligence and stuff—so I kind of come from a hard line of things. So kids come and get out of line at the beginning, [and I'd yell] "Hey, sit down . . ." But then I started thinking about, why were [they] doing that particular thing? Were they trying to get my attention in the first place? Is any attention good attention for them? They don't care what kind of attention it is. So I've learned instead of coming down hard—just ask them a question, "What's going on? What's the problem?" instead of nailing them. It kind of starts their day off, maybe a little bit, especially in first period, if they're getting nailed coming in right off the bat, it might ruin their whole day and other teachers may experience similar problems that I have. Maybe I can set the tone a little different for their day . . . The guest speaker talked about the way you ask a question of the kid or the way you give a demand or a command can change the situation in general. It has changed some things. I've noticed a difference. If I've got some kids acting up, instead of going back there and nailing them, I'll come back . . . and instead of standing up and saying over the class, I'll go around to the back and kind of put my hands on their shoulders and say, "Is there something I can help you guys with? No? Get back to work?" Instead of a confrontation taking place, it's more of a subtle approach. Maybe sometimes you have to, but not all the time. So, I changed from last year. I would nail them and I was writing all kinds of paperwork out—referrals, detentions and stuff. I've probably written a third, maybe a fourth as much as I did last year. (BT Site 4, 3/00)

Beginning teachers noted that although they may have read or heard the ideas previously, they took on new meaning once they began teaching.

For me, especially some of the articles that are in there for you to read and some of the extra reading materials, those have been some of the most beneficial things . . . A lot of it is stuff I learned in school, but I wasn't—I didn't have my own classroom then, so it went in one ear and kind of went to the back corner. Now that I'm in my teaching it's like, "Ah, I'm frustrated because this is not working." But going through that and reading some of those things and talking with my provider, it reminds me of the other things to try and other ways to do things. "Oh yeah, now

that I have my own room, I can try this.” So it makes me, definitely, kind of reevaluate and change things more . . . That helped me to be able to read those things. (BT Site 7, 3/00)

Structured reflections are required in all CFASST events. Reflection is one of the four components of the Plan, Teach, Reflect, Apply cycle that is embedded in the program. The lavender-colored papers in each event signify that beginning teachers consciously and explicitly will use the skills of reflection; they are asked to record their reflections by writing responses to specific prompts. While this aspect of the CFASST process often drew criticism from the beginning teachers because it was “forced reflection,” most of the teachers in the focus groups indicated they not only realized the value of reflection, but recognized the significance for their teaching of their increased ability to reflect on their teaching and student learning. As one teacher’s transcript reveals, a personal tendency to reflect is enhanced by a framework around which to focus that reflection.

I reflect all the time, but it’s internally. CFASST made me actually write it down and look at it. Reflecting on growth—on the continuum really helps me . . . it just helps in everything I do because I’m a person that reflects—I see something, reflect that night and implement it the next day . . . Somehow when it’s on paper and you’re looking at the continuum—you have to actually write down what your reflection is—what you’re going to apply that to—it moves through the cycle a lot faster. I think that has helped me tremendously this year. (BT Site 3, 5/00)

CFASST Is Accompanied by Changes in Teacher Thinking

While many teachers in the case studies indicated they “reflected naturally,” analysis of their comments during the focus groups indicates that the nature and extent of the reflection changed. Teachers became more focused on specific aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Some comments indicated the way in which teachers thought about and used the Plan, Teach, Reflect, Apply cycle. A common theme was their recognition of their growth in being purposeful about their teaching.

Inquiry has really helped me to make sure that when I’m teaching, I sort of know what my purpose is for doing it. I can look back and there are times . . . when I couldn’t tell you what I was teaching—they were reading. I don’t know if we were reading for sound, if we were reading for a story—I mean, I just knew there were six kids at my table and we were doing reading, whereas now I know what we’re focusing on. (BT Site 1, 5/00)

Many of the comments included references to increased attention to *student work and the assessment of that work*. The following comment from a second year teacher illustrates how purpose, teaching, and

assessment are enhanced by the opportunity to think about a unit of instruction and then being able to talk about its development with a Support Provider. It also illustrates the frequently heard acknowledgment that the reflection would lead to changes in future teaching.

I didn't know why I was doing what I was doing . . . I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I didn't know if I was measuring learning or if I was measuring test-taking skills or if I was measuring critical thinking. I wasn't sure what my testing . . . just using the test that someone else has given me and writing my own test . . . I wasn't sure if I was getting a valid picture of whether they were standards, whether they were just parroting back . . . So, I was concerned . . . and being able to authentically assess, as opposed to this hunt and peck. So, for me, CFASST 8 helped me plan a unit from the start of the plan to the assessment. I knew what I was looking for, kind of backwards. That was, really, the first time that I had the luxury of having the time [to do that]. Last year, I was just—every day I was two days ahead, if I was lucky, making copies and trying to get stuff graded and back to them. I didn't sit down and look at, conceptually, what do I want them to have at the end? What do they need? ..[My support provider and I] spent time looking at it and afterwards, after the unit—I mean, it wasn't the best assessment ever, but she did ask me, "How did it go?" It wasn't right. I wanted to go back and re-do it, but at least I felt like I knew what I was looking for . . . I ran out of time, but my goal was clear. So I thought—like if anybody came in and asked me, "What are you doing and why?" I could say, "This is why and this is the standard it meets" . . . Now, over the summer, I can go back and look at all of my units that way, put them in an order that will make sense to the kids. (BT Site 5, 5/00)

As might be expected, many of the comments indicated that the teachers *were thinking about their students* in more complex ways. One high school teacher explained how the first event in CFASST—the Class, School, District, Community profile—helped her gain important information about her students that resulted in changes in both her thinking and her teaching.

I decided to choose a class that I was having problems with from day one. Thirty-seven students in a tiny room and I didn't really know why I was having so much trouble. I couldn't attribute it just to the number. There was something going on and they weren't getting anything I was giving them. That CFASST [event helped me find] not only what grade they were in, but their [test scores]. And I—it was like, 'OH!' All but five students in that class were the lowest level scores on the [test]. That was why I needed to approach them differently than my other classes. The CFASST questions and the data I had to come up with opened my eyes in a way about that class that I wouldn't have . . . though the paper work is tedious a lot of times and I don't have time for it, it helped those

students in that class a lot. (BT Site 1, 3/00)

An elementary school teacher acknowledged her increased awareness of the developmental characteristics of her students and her developing skill in planning more appropriate instruction. Her comments also reveal another frequently observed development: the teachers took more responsibility and blamed their students less.

Well, I think this year I just learned that the kids need to be more active. They can't sit still for very long. Last year I remember doing longer lessons, couldn't hold their attention. I was going, "What's wrong with this class?" So, this year I worked on breaking the lesson apart, having them sit for a shorter time . . . It seems to be working well. They sit for a while. They're done with the activity, we'll do something else. We just keep on moving. Last year, it was a struggle to have them sit for very long periods of time. I just didn't get it. Why couldn't they sit? So I had to change that. I made sure my lesson plans were shorter. Or, if it's longer, have them take breaks and do some sharing together—something active—involved in the lesson. Then that would break it up so they weren't just sitting there and listening to me. (BT Site 5, 5/00)

Many teachers identified the increased "focus" in their teaching as being the direct result of the reflection in CFASST.

I think as new teachers we want to focus on maybe—like I know at the beginning of the year I was so worried about the noise level of my room. But you know, that isn't really what's most important . . . If they're being noisy, are they interacting with one another? Like my concern was . . . the principal is going to walk in. Is she going to see them under control? But now, that's not what's most important to me. If she walks in, they're noisy, okay as long as she can walk over and see that they're doing something productive. So I think CFASST through those principles kind of says, "This is what you need to be looking for. This is what you should be focusing on." So it's helped me kind of refocus my thoughts. I don't like them noisy still, but it makes me think about what they're really doing. (BT Site 1, 3/00)

Teachers also noted that the process of doing CFASST helped them focus on more aspects of their teaching than those that might have been addressed by a particular CFASST event.

I've become more organized . . . the CFASST process gave me a vehicle to work on issues . . . it's given me a model to then take on my own . . . I can say, "Ok, sit down. Reflect. What's going on in my classroom? What are my biggest areas of need in this classroom? Let me pick one and work on it, and go to different people. Who are the people I need to see?" . . . They might direct me to some literature or I need to go look at some literature and read. Just get a background first, before I even change anything in my class, that I can take what I've learned from what I've seen and what

I've read and then reflect again and see what's happening in my class and see where I can apply those things, and change a little bit at a time, rather than all at once. So I think that sort of guided me in my professional growth cycle. Where I might have gone, "Oh, that's not working . . . let me try something else." You know, throw it away . . . I think it gave me some perspective on how to change. (BT Site 5, 5/00)

*Beginning Teachers Examined Larger Issues
Related to Profession and Organization of Schools*

The process of participating in BTSA and completing various CFASST events evidently contributed to new teachers' growing awareness of larger issues in the profession. One teacher, for instance, noted that although she was becoming more aware of the importance of looking at student work and adapting instruction accordingly, she also recognized the challenges of doing so within the expectations of her district.

I think the whole evaluation, summary, and collecting student work and assessing what they have accomplished, checking to make sure that the goal that I set is what they actually ended up getting and achieving, has helped me with it. It's also—it made me become aware of our district and the time constraints on us as far as what we can do, once we've seen the assessment of the student. I saw that my students needed remediation, but in our district, you can't do that because you've got to get on to the next lesson in math or the next lesson or report . . . it's like a double edge sword. You want to do it and you see it and then you try, then someone comes and tells you, you needed to do [something else] too. (BT Site 3, 5/00)

Other teachers expressed their awareness of the way in which CFASST addressed some of the challenges in teaching. "It really taught me that I need to reach out and ask for help and get help for the future . . . So it's like, I learn how to take care of myself as a teacher through this program" (BT Site 3, 5/00). Another noted his worry that the enthusiasm and optimism with which he was currently teaching faces potential diminishment as he continues to teach:

The one thing that worries me is that . . . we are forced to reflect. I don't want to get to a point where two years down the line, I'm years out of BTSA and suddenly I'm going, "I've got too much paper. I've got too much to grade. I got this going. I don't have time to reflect." That's the one thing I try to focus myself on, that it's not that CFASST is making me, it's just to give me another avenue to do it, because if I feel like I'm just being made to, then I, eventually, I'm going to download and become the vet that just sticks with what I do and it doesn't matter who comes in or out of my class; this is the way I do it. It could be ten kids; it could be 40 kids; it could be the problem kids, the honor kids—this is what I do. I don't want to get to that point. But, that's also a very stressing point, too, because you have

to change, not the kids. You have to be adaptable. So, it's a difficult part for me. It's hard to be fickle or chameleon-like in the classroom. It's much easier to be the one who says, "You change for me. I don't change for you." Which is what BTSA tries to get us to do . . . to change who we are or what we do per class, per person in the classroom and this is much more challenging than if I talked to the vet teachers who are like, "No, you abide by the rules that I've had for 20 years. I don't care who you are or where you come from, what your problem is . . ." It's much more challenging for us—even with all the stuff that BTSA gives to us. It's kind of like, with knowledge comes sorrow. I don't know where that comes from. I forget. I think it's from Shakespeare. (BT Site 4, 3/00)

Implications for Policy and Practice

Professional Development Is Enhanced by Individualized Support Within a System

Beginning teachers perceived CFASST as part of an organized, integrated system of induction that included opportunities to talk about teaching with their support provider and other teachers, to learn new strategies, and to reflect on their practice. The structured events in CFASST appeared to guide these new teachers by using common language and common descriptions of effective practice. Providing new teachers with clear expectations, and the means to achieve those expectations, requires systematic and comprehensive programs. One strength of the implementation at the sites in the case studies appeared to be the ability of the programs to meet individual needs of beginning teachers, while simultaneously using a uniform system. The transcripts revealed that having a variety of ways in which to reflect was effective: some teachers mentioned the observations of other teachers, some mentioned specific speakers, some spoke of the materials, and some named specific lavender colored paper in the CFASST box that prompted them to write down responses to thoughtful questions. This facility to individualize within a system is an aspect that should be of primary importance even as, or especially if, programs expand. One size does not fit all.

The Lives of New Teachers Are Complex

Policy makers and practitioners who, with all good intentions, set out to provide and/or require a formative support and assessment system for beginning teachers are reminded by those teachers to remember the complexity of teaching today.

There's times when it's frustrating because it's like, OK, I just want to read about it and do it. I don't want to have to fill out all these things.

But then there's other times that I really like it because it really makes me stop and think and process and go through. I almost feel a bit more rejuvenated because . . . they tend to make me stop and reflect and really think, "Ok, what is my [problem] or what do I need to work on or what comes next?" So that's nice. But then when you get into the business of life, it's like, "Oh, no, I have one more meeting with her [the Support Provider] today." I mean it's not that it's bad. It's just kind of like as a first year teacher, it's one more thing to juggle and that gets kind of frustrating at times. (BT Site 7, 3/00)

Another teacher describes some of the obligations that define her life. The reader will note that none of the following mentions classroom teaching.

Ok, then [I attend] MARA, which is the reading association, I think . . . Now the buy-backs. I've done a writing one, which is two times, two days. I've done a reading one and I'm going to do the other reading one . . . there's a math one we're going to do, so those are those ones . . . I did the diversity training and I've met several times with my provider. In addition to that, I do some of the reading and that kind of thing in the box, which is very helpful for me. I haven't written as much this year, but it's helpful. I took a California history class and I plan to take three English class, upper division English classes because I want to add to my credential . . . Then I want the social science . . . which means I need some upper division work in English. I'm going to finish this summer. We have the Math Matters . . . that's been, let's see, this summer we did five days, then we've had another five days this year—pull out from our classes. Charter has taken days and days. It's been incredible. (BT Site 7, 3/00)

While this last teacher may represent the extreme case of demands placed on new teachers, this refrain echoed throughout the interviews: good teaching, accompanied by the reflection and action upon reflection, takes time. And teachers' time is already brokered by many competing demands. Policy makers and practitioners who work with new teachers need to help teachers set priorities and to do all they can to see to it that teachers have the time to plan, teach, reflect, and apply. It is of utmost importance that any program that is instituted with the intention of enhancing that reflective process be empowering, rather than overwhelming. Used wisely, BTSA and CFASST enable new teachers to grow; used prescriptively, they are perceived as burdens and obstacles to growth.

Teacher educators may note with some concern that many of the new teachers expressed their inability to think beyond one or two days at a time, to understand and accommodate their students' developmental needs, to remember (let alone implement) some of the theories and practices they studied during their teacher preparation programs. Continued efforts to strengthen the connections between preservice and the

early years of teaching will no doubt help new teachers, and everyone interested in the future of our children must recognize that good teaching requires enormous skill that is developed over time.

Conclusion

... but with BTSA, it's so ingrained now that I reflect every day. I plan on a weekly basis. I teach the lesson. Every day I go home and reflect and say, "Ok, what could I have done better?" ... it's not that you're going to think, "Oh, I'm going to do an inquiry now" ... But it's constantly reflecting what can I do to get that kid engaged, because today he wasn't or she wasn't. What can I do to commit more strategies in there? What can I do? ... you don't have to think about it because it just happens ... (BT Site 3, 5/00)

The transcripts from the focus group discussions provided access to beginning teachers' keen insights and analyses of their own professional growth as they participated in the implementation of the CFASST. This researcher's analysis indicates that while teachers often express their proclivity to be reflective about their teaching, the systematic structure and support provided by CFASST allows them to focus their reflections on specific aspects of teaching, and to act on those reflections in order to accomplish specific goals. It doesn't just happen naturally.

Notes

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April, 2001, Seattle, WA.

² Each beginning teacher and support provider work together on a series of formative assessment tasks. The materials for each task reside in a folder; the set of folders is stored in a plastic container known colloquially as "the box."

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