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Investigating PE teachers' implicit theories of assessment: A study set in a Specialist Sports College.

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Background

Assessment is such a central and established feature of educational systems that it can be almost invisible. Assessment may be viewed as a practice whose function and purpose are always defined within particular socio-political structures (Delandshere 2001) and these assessment practices may be seen as defining features, "If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures" (Rowtree, 1987, 1).

Issues related to assessment have come under particular scrutiny in recent times because it has come to be seen to be associated with 'high stakes' measures of school effectiveness and also since the 1990s there have been concerted attempts to develop a more symbiotic relationship between assessment and teaching through the development of assessment for learning (AFL) (Black and William 1998; Black et.al. 2002).

It is perhaps inevitable that the 'message' of AFL will be subjected to different interpretations by teachers. In a survey of 83 teachers Hargreaves (2005) looked at their conceptions assessment implicit in their definitions of assessment for learning and found that teachers held different conceptions about the nature and purpose of assessment which varied from 'assessment as monitoring pupil's performance against targets' to 'using assessment as a learning event'.

Personal theories are thought to be formed as people experience the world and are said to serve to help them organise their world. These beliefs, personal theories or meaning systems (Dweck, 2000) are said to form schemas that allow people to make sense of their world although their influence on actions are less clear (Dweck et. al. 1995). People may hold these personal theories consciously or they may exist at the 'periphery of consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty, 2003), in which case they may be said to exist at an implicit level. This presents a challenge for research as before they can be subjected to scrutiny they have to be made visible.

Research Questions

This research seeks to make inferences about the participants' implicit theories of assessment and to consider the relationship of these theories with their personal theories of learning.

Methods

The study is based on the analysis of interviews with 7 PE teachers working at a Specialist Sports College in the South East of England. The data in this study was generated through 3 interviews over 25 months between June 2007 and June 2009. The first interview was semi structured and utilised a broad sweep of questions, the second interview was an unstructured interview where the participants were asked to describe a lesson that they had taught recently where they felt the children had learnt a good deal. The first 2 interviews were transcribed and subjected to an initial analysis and the emerging themes used to inform a bespoke schedule for a final semi structured interview.

Frame

The transcriptions were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a method that draws upon phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith et.al. 2009). The process of

analysis consists of the researcher moving between a position where they attempt to 'bracket out' or 'reduce' the influence of their fore understandings and then move back to consider their own perspective and how this might affect the emerging themes. A process referred to by Findlay (2008) as a 'dance' between reduction and reflexivity.

IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith and Osborn, 2003) which is to say that the researcher is making sense of the participant who is making sense of the focus of the interview, in this case their perceptions of assessment. In this study where implicit theories are sought then it is argued that there is a triple hermeneutic at work as the researcher has to go a step further and infer from their interpretations what implicit theories the participant might be holding.

Research findings

The findings in this study suggest that the participants saw that a principle purpose of assessment was to reveal the children's state of competence with a view to allocating grades thereby allowing the children to 'harvest' the capital afforded by meeting the requirements for achieving particular levels. There was a generally tacit assumption that acquiring the status of the grade would be valued by the children. The notion of 'pitching' lessons to an assessment level was viewed as an essentially good thing and there was an implicit assumption that the projects of learning in PE and the project of meeting the requirements of the grade were essentially congruent. 'Assessment for learning' formed a dominant discourse but implicitly it seems that it might be more accurately described as 'assessment for grading.'