Teachers’ emotions in the reconstruction of professional self-understanding

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Abstract

This research study explores teachers’ specific emotions and the reconstruction of teachers’ professional self-understanding during a comprehensive school reform initiative. Through interviews and archival material, this study seeks to examine teachers’ specific emotions during critical incidents that occurred during the period of reform and to explore the reconstruction of their professional self-understanding. The findings illustrate that the teachers experienced fear and intimidation when their professional self-understandings were challenged. However, with the support of a literacy coach and university faculty they reconstructed these self-understandings, leading to improvements in student achievement and their own instructional practices. These positive changes led to emotions of pride and excitement. The study provides recommendations for state and local school administrators and highlights implications for future research.

Keywords: Teachers’ emotions; Teachers’ professional self-understanding; Teacher identity; Educational reform

1. Introduction

Day in and day out, public school teachers are faced with meeting the needs and demands of students, parents, colleagues, administrators, school districts, and governmental accountability officers. Research shows that the effort to meet the needs of so many varied constituencies often evokes teachers’ emotions (Godar, 1990; Lortie, 1977; Nias, 1989). The introduction of accountability standards in 1992 in the UK and Canada, and more recently in 2001 in the US, has further influenced teachers’ emotional responses and challenged their professional self-understanding. Jeffrey and Woods (1996), for example, explained that when teachers are challenged in educational reform processes they may experience a “loss of self” (p. 331). Other researchers (Adams, 2002; Golby, 1996; Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001, 2004; Hargreaves & ASCD, 1997; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Lasky, 2000; Woods & Jeffrey, 1998) have identified a variety of issues in school reform that evoke emotions. However, little research has investigated the ways in which particular educational reform initiatives evoke specific emotional responses or impact teachers’ professional self-understanding.

The importance of studying teachers’ emotions in relation to their professional self-understanding resides in the aim of educational reform: to improve instruction and student achievement. Teachers go
into teaching with the goal of facilitating student learning and making a difference in students’ lives (Lortie, 1977). However, what happens when educational reform initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act challenge this key purpose? Teachers play a key role in implementing such reforms in the classroom. If a teacher does not support the reform or if the reform challenges the teacher’s professional purpose, the reform may not be carried out as intended at the classroom level. The purpose of this paper is to highlight teachers’ emotions in response to a comprehensive school reform initiative that at first challenged the teachers’ professional self-understandings, but subsequently supported their reconstruction.

2. Teachers’ emotions in educational reform

Researchers in a number of countries have investigated teachers’ emotions in the context of educational reform. Their findings demonstrate that the issues of intrusion, administrative leadership approach, and pedagogical differences between teachers and administrators elicit teachers’ positive and negative emotions. Moreover, Canadian and UK perspectives on teachers’ emotions during educational reform highlight the continued importance of caring in the classroom, teachers’ need to control their emotions, and an intensification of teachers’ emotions when they perceive an intrusion by parents or government officials into their classrooms (Adams, 2002; Blackmore, 1999; Golby, 1996; Hargreaves, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001, 2004; Hargreaves & ASCD, 1997; Hargreaves et al., 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Lasky, 2000; Woods & Jeffrey, 1998).

Jeffrey and Woods (1996) used ethnographic methods to understand teachers’ emotions during governmental oversight of classroom practices. They found that teachers subject to such scrutiny experienced a sense of professional inadequacy; reduction of positive emotions; and loss of self, pedagogical values, and harmony. Jeffrey and Woods explain this deprofessionalization as a “move from professional to technician status” (p. 328).

Hargreaves (1998a, 1998b) explored the freedom teachers desired related to instructional approaches and classroom climate during the implementation of Canadian reform initiatives. He found that when learning outcomes and teachers’ perceptions of classroom climate improved, teachers experienced positive emotions. However, if the changes did not improve student learning outcomes and perceptions of classroom climate the teacher experienced negative emotions. The literature on teachers’ emotions in the UK and Canada provides a foundation for a broader understanding of the issues in reform that elicit emotions.

3. Teachers’ professional identity and self-understanding

van Veen and Lasky (2005) edited a special issue of Teaching and Teacher Education that focused on using emotions as a lens for looking at teacher identity and educational change. They noted that “the analysis of teachers’ emotions while implementing reforms can provide deeper understanding of the ways teachers experience their work and educational change, and can thus inform such areas as change theory and professional development” (p. 895). While five of the authors in this special issue use the phrase teacher identity, Kelchtermann (2005) argues that “identity” indicates a completed and static state, and recommends the term self-understanding to encompass self-image (the way teachers present themselves as teachers), job motivation (teachers’ reasons for entering and remaining in the profession), future perspective (teachers’ expectations for the future), self-esteem (teachers’ appreciation of their own job performance), and task perception (the everyday jobs a teacher completes).

Lasky (2005) employs a sociocultural perspective on emotions to examine how agency, context, and identity impact secondary teachers’ professional selves. Lasky defines professional identity as “how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others” (p. 901). Through surveys and interviews of four teachers, Lasky found that although the reforms conflicted with their moral purpose in making a difference in the lives of their students’, the teachers tried to remain focused on this purpose. This focus required them to remain respectful of the students, build rapport, and take risks, behaviors that made them “vulnerable” to their students in Lasky’s view. In addition, Lasky stated, “Teachers in this study believed in the legitimacy of public schooling; they also believed that their professionalism was being systematically eroded by the current reform context” (p. 913). Lasky’s study supports previous research affirming the need for teachers’ moral purposes to be upheld in order for reform to be effective at the school and classroom levels.
van Veen, Sleegers, and van de Ven’s (2005) analysis explored one teacher’s perceptions of educational reform from a social psychological perspective. In the interviews, the participant discussed anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, and happiness related to the reform. The researchers clustered these feelings into negative and positive emotions. The negative emotions of anxiety, anger, guilt, and shame came from “lack of time, enormous number of portfolios each semester, and the lack of support from his subject colleagues, school management, and government” (p. 931). The teacher exhibited positive emotions when his purposes or goals in teaching were upheld and when he had opportunities to improve his teaching and reinforce his professional identity.

Zembylas (2005) examined the discursive practices of one teacher from a post-structural theoretical lens over a three-year period. In addition, Zembylas conducted follow-up interviews that totaled 12 h. The data collection methods in his design involve interviews, field notes, video participant observations and an emotions journal. Zembylas found that while the emotional rules in the classroom and school were not written down, they were conveyed both verbally and nonverbally. The participant had to learn these rules to discern which emotions were appropriate and which were inappropriate in the context of this particular school. Her identity in teaching resided in these emotional rules, and she controlled her inappropriate emotions by focusing on her importance to her students.

Schmidt and Datnow (2005) incorporated sociological and educational theory to investigate the emotions teachers employ in making meaning out of specific educational reforms. The researchers analyzed 75 interviews of teachers at US schools undertaking comprehensive school reform initiatives. The reforms included in this study were Success for All, Direction Instruction, Comer School, Edison School, and Accelerated School. The researchers stated, “In general, as teachers made sense of any of the reforms at the school level (with the exception of Edison), they attached little emotion to them. On the other hand, when teachers made sense of the reforms vis-à-vis their own classroom practices, this led to more emotional responses, both positive and negative” (p. 961). The teachers responded strongly to changes at the classroom level because they required altering their instruction and daily practices; this in turn challenged how teachers viewed their role and identity as a teacher. The researchers argued that teachers need to understand and feel ownership of the reform, as well as receiving emotional support throughout the reform process, for change to take place at the classroom level.

Hargreaves (2005) uses a social-constructionist approach to examine teachers’ emotional responses to reform initiatives based on the number of years in the teaching profession. From his 50 interviews with teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools, Hargreaves found that teachers early in their careers tend to be energetic, enthusiastic, and intense. When educational change is required, new teachers are adaptable and flexible; however, beginning teachers are not as comfortable as experienced teachers with their role as a teacher and tend to be uncertain of their future in the profession.

In contrast to the energy of the beginning teacher, teachers later in their careers discuss being tired and emotionally drained. Veteran teachers’ years of experience make them skeptical of the longevity of reform initiatives. Over the years veteran teachers have been a part of many reform initiatives, so they tend to be skeptical of new reforms and liable to wait for the current reform or trend to pass. Only if they saw that the reform was going to remain would they decide they needed to adapt. Hargreaves (2005) described veteran teachers as “unsinkable” in their purpose of making a difference in children’s lives; however, the years of teaching also made them eager for retirement (p. 979). This research supports the notion that the number of years one has taught plays a role in teachers’ acceptance of and emotional responses to educational reform initiatives.

Existing literature on teachers’ specific emotions and teachers’ emotions under education reform provides a foundation for understanding teachers’ emotions in circumstances of change. However, little research links these bodies of literature to show the relationship between the teachers’ specific emotions, the support or challenge presented to teachers through educational reform, and the reconstruction of teachers’ self-understanding as a result of such reforms.

This study aims to expand the literature on teachers’ emotions by investigating the effects of a particular educational reform initiative on teachers’ specific emotions and professional self-understanding. In this examination, teachers discussed their emotions and the changes that occurred in their professional self-understanding. In defining teacher
identity, this study will employ Kelchtermann’s framework of self-understanding. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What are the teachers’ specific emotions? (2) What are the incidents that elicit these emotions? and (3) How do teachers discuss these emotions and incidents in relation to their self-understanding?

4. Setting the context: description of the elementary school undergoing a comprehensive school reform

McLeod CLC is located in a college town in the southeastern United States. Of its 295 students, 50% are African American, 40% are Hispanic, 4% are Native American, 4% are European American, and 2% are Asian American. Within this student population, 90–95% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, as compared to 74% of students in the school district as a whole. McLeod CLC has 36 teachers, 22 of whom have advanced degrees. On average, the teachers at McLeod CLC had been teaching for 13 years at the beginning of this study.

When McLeod CLC was identified by the state as a school in “needs improvement year 2,” the faculty and administrators mobilized to improve student achievement to prevent having their school taken over by the state. As a group, they agreed to become the Partnership for Community Learning Centers, uniting the school district, university, and community with the goal of improving student achievement. This Partnership for Community Learning Centers resembles aspects of Temple University’s Community for Learning (CFL) model, Success for All, as well as aspects of James Comer’s School Development Model of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR).

As part of the McLeod CLC comprehensive school reform initiative, the school changed from a traditional to an extended-year calendar (adding an extra 15 instructional days). When the funding was later cut they changed to a balanced calendar, which included 180 days of instruction spread out over the year, resulting in a shortened summer break. The school hired a full-time family resource coordinator, a full-time literacy coach, and a part-time math coach. In addition, the teachers and administration developed their own school governance model, providing the teachers with more voice and control in the governing of McLeod CLC.

The school also changed its literacy program from the SRA Corrective Reading Program to a comprehensive program based on a modified version of Cunningham’s Four Blocks. They changed programs because they realized that although the SRA Corrective Reading Program increased students’ word recognition, the students still had tremendous difficulty with reading comprehension. The modified version of Cunningham’s Four Blocks encompassed self-selected reading, working with words, daily guided reading and writing to improve oral language skills, phonics, vocabulary, exposure to different forms of literature, and instruction on how to improve students’ writing and how to publish their work (Cunningham & Hall, 1997; Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999).

Faculty at McLeod worked with the university partnership coordinator to invite university faculty members from the Departments of Language Arts, Science Education, Mathematics, Art and Recreation, and Leisure Studies into their classrooms to co-teach and develop approaches to improving their instruction. In 2000 McLeod CLC was given the classification “needs improvement” under the guidelines of NCLB and was at risk of being placed under corrective action. By 2003, the McLeod CLC faculty and students turned their school around so significantly that it was considered a distinguished school by the state.

5. Methods

This study uses the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction in an effort to understand the views of the participants. The study took place from fall 2002 through fall 2004. The primary sources of data used in this study are 19 critical incident interviews and 19 documents of archival data (Fivars, 1980; Flanagan, 1954; Kain, 2004). Due to the complexity of the reform initiative, I chose to employ critical incident interviews to allow teachers to identify the key events that occurred during the reform. Kain (2004) explained, “the critical incident interview invites the respondents to tell a story and explain why it is significant for a given context” (p. 74).

A limitation of this study is that not all of the school’s 36 teachers participated in the study. However, each grade level and special area (i.e., art, music) was represented. Nine of the teachers who did not participate had been at the school for less than 1 year, resulting in minimal experience with both the school and the reform initiative. The other eight teachers who were not part of this study participated in other interviews related to specific
aspects of the education reform, creating a saturation of the participant pool.

After transcribing the audiotaped interviews, I imported the interview transcripts and observations into the NVIVO data analysis software and analyzed them using inductive analysis. Inductive analysis “involves scanning the data for categories of phenomena and for relationships among such categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses on an examination of initial cases and then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases” (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, p. 254). The three analysis questions are: (1) Why is each incident critical? (2) What are the teachers’ specific emotions in response to these incidents? and (3) How do the teachers discuss their emotions and the critical incidents in relation to their professional self-understanding?

The second type of data used in this study involved the collection of archival materials (LeCompte et al., 1993; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The archival materials collected include the partnership vision statement, e-mail correspondence between the teachers and the researcher, publicity statements about McLeod CLC and the partnership, and documents from faculty meetings (deMarrais, Brandt, & Darby, 2003). All of these documents were used to further understand and explain various aspects of the reform initiative.

6. Findings

McLeod CLC faculty described fear and excitement in response to the task of changing their teaching approaches and reconstructing their professional self-understanding; that is, changing not only the way they taught but also the way they perceived themselves in their professional roles. In this process, the teachers experienced fear and intimidation when their instructional approaches were challenged, which they also interpreted as a challenge to their professional self-understanding.

In the process of reconstructing their professional self-understanding, teachers received support from university faculty members and the school literacy coach that led to improvements in the quality of their teaching. Through this process of transformation, McLeod CLC faculty and administrators recognized improvements in their students’ literacy skills, solidifying the teachers’ new perceptions of themselves. During this reconstruction process, McLeod CLC administrators celebrated the school’s success. The teachers’ recognition that new instructional approaches had improved student achievement and the administration’s celebration of the progress made by students and teachers reinforced the benefits of this new professional self-understanding.

6.1. Fear and intimidation in professional self-understanding

Faculty members described a number of incidents that elicited feelings of fear and intimidation in the process of reconstructing their professional self-understanding. While the incidents differed, they all related to the changes that were implemented in literacy instruction. The reconstruction of teachers’ professional self-understanding began with a decrease in the teachers’ self-esteem and task performance, but shifted over time to enhance their task performance and self-esteem. When the teachers’ task performance increased they exhibited more effective instruction and a restored self-image.

Chris, a veteran teacher, described how the first faculty meeting with their new literacy coach challenged the way he saw himself as a teacher. He explained:

She had a PowerPoint and she was putting up test scores... And it was very scary. It was the fact that the students we were turning out and promoting a majority of the population of people who are in jail were reading at the level our students are when they left us.

When a student leaves the fifth grade reading on the second grade level, middle school and high school are going to alienate them. I remember her statement was we are in fact generating criminals. We are generating people whose foundation in education is so poor that their lifestyle and means for success are going otherwise than through [a] high school degree and jobs that you can get through [a] high school degree, not to mention college.... We as a faculty, we as a staff have to assume responsibility for what goes on. We have to understand that what we have been doing has not been working....

And I remember in that faculty meeting the silence... the silence the silence as she talked. The shock.... I would be lying if I didn’t say to actually hear her say that we were producing
children who would be prepared for nothing but jail is a different reality... It scared the hell out of me. It scared the hell out of a lot of people on the staff. I can certainly tell you it scared the hell out of her.

Chris’ fear came from the realization that he had failed in his purpose of creating a better future for his students. In this fearful state Chris and the other teachers had to accept the self-image of producing low performing students. He feared for the future of his students and he feared for the professional he had become.

Similarly, in her critical incident Frances identified a challenge to her professional self-understanding. She described feeling “traumatized” when she had to stop using the books she was accustomed to using with her class. She stated:

I just remember last year how traumatized I was when we started guided reading. For example, it was like throw out everything you’ve ever done with reading. Let’s try something new. No you may not use any books in your room. It was overwhelming trying to learn to do that and now I am just really glad I did because it really [has] been successful with the kids. We’ve seen improvement made so I feel better but it was hard last year.

Not only was Frances’ self-image challenged but her self-esteem and task perception were also shattered at the beginning of this process; she no longer knew what it meant to teach reading. As a veteran teacher with years of experience, she was being told that she had not created success in her students and that her performance as a teacher needed to change. The process of restoring her self-image, self-esteem, and task perception was very challenging. However, the support she received in this unfamiliar place enabled her to increase student achievement, and this success ultimately left her feeling proud and professionally validated.

Faculty like Chris and Frances described feeling scared, overwhelmed, traumatized, or devalued in the face of this change process. As a result, they reconstructed their self-understanding and enhanced their instructional practices, renewing their excitement in task perception and restoring their self-esteem and self-image. Educational reform may challenge teachers’ professional self-understanding and create negative emotions, especially in its early stages. However, these emotions may turn around if teachers receive the support they need during this period of transformation. In the next section, faculty reported on the support they received in changing their instructional approaches and reconstructing their professional self-understanding.

6.2. Support systems facilitating change in teachers’ professional self-understanding

In their school improvement plan, McLeod CLC faculty advocated for a full-time literacy coach, whom they hired for the 2003–2004 school year. The partnership coordinators also provided the faculty with contact information for university professors interested in collaborating with teachers in writing, mathematics, art, and science. The McLeod CLC faculty were responsible for contacting the professors. Twenty-six of the 36 McLeod CLC teachers invited university faculty to collaborate with them.

When McLeod CLC teachers realized that they were not meeting their students’ academic needs, they accepted this challenge and reached out for support. During the 2003–2004 school year, McLeod CLC teachers received instructional support from their literacy coach and university faculty members. While 26 teachers invited university faculty into their classroom, the literacy coach was in all classrooms in the school. Both the university faculty and the literacy coach modeled new instructional approaches and supported the teachers during their use of these new practices. McLeod CLC teachers reported feeling nervous when they first made contact with a university professor to propose working collaboratively. Once the collaboration began, however, the teachers experienced pride in their professional and personal growth.

6.2.1. Literacy support

McLeod CLC faculty learned new forms of literacy instruction with support from their literacy coach and the university’s Department of Language Arts. In accepting support, the faculty acknowledged that their current instructional approaches and their existing self-image no longer met their students’ needs. This realization challenged their self-image and lowered their self-esteem; as a result, when they asked for help from the literacy coach or university professors they initially felt intimidation and a loss of control. However, once they saw their students improve, these teachers embraced their new
task perception, felt an increase in self-esteem, and delighted in their expectations for the future.

In one incident, Denise sought professional development in writing instruction by contacting a university Language Arts professor. When their collaboration began, Denise was afraid of being judged. However, as she learned the instructional process and saw improvement in the quality of her students’ writing, she herself became motivated to write, easing her fears. Denise described her emotions in the following incident:

When [the language arts professor] first came in I was really intimidated because I felt really inadequate in the field of learning. And I felt like she would come in and be judgmental or she would come in and give me advice. That was okay for a college classroom setting but not practical for a classroom setting, but I knew I needed help and I was willing to see whatever she could offer me.

She did *Amazing Grace* one day and *Boundless Grace* and she read the stories as a read-aloud and then modeled a discussion and modeled the reading lesson... Out of those two days kids wrote about feelings or things they wanted to do and [it] was exciting to see the high quality writing... I got really motivated to figure out how I could use literature in the classroom because at first I did not see the connection in using the writer’s craft to teach and so that really helped.

Denise illustrates the tension between protecting her professional self-understanding and enhancing class instruction. She knew she needed help in developing effective instructional techniques, but this meant acknowledging that her performance as a teacher was not adequate, which lowered her self-esteem. Before this collaboration Denise was afraid of how she would look as a teacher to this university professor. Once the collaboration began, however, Denise no longer felt threatened, and it proved to be an eye-opening experience. Encouraged by her students’ improvement, Denise gained confidence in her instructional approaches and task performance, which in turn enhanced her self-esteem and self-image in the construction of her professional self-understanding.

In addition to increasing her job motivation and changing her expectations for the future in writing instruction, the collaboration renewed Denise’s interest in her own writing. She noted:

[T]he thing with [the university language arts professor] stands out in my mind because I used to write and then I kind of closed myself off to writing now and didn’t develop that as a talent and a skill. I feel like I am a weak writer and I did not want to pass that on to my students... She not only inspired me to improve my teaching but she inspired me to write again... I feel like I have really grown professionally and personally.

Denise’s interaction with the writing professor enhanced her self-image, self-esteem, motivation, and task perception in her professional and personal self-understanding. To Denise’s delight this collaboration provided her with a renewed understanding of herself as a teacher and inspired her to develop her own writing skills. She felt proud that she overcame her personal fears for the good of her students.

Similarly, Leslie wanted to improve her writing instruction and contacted the same language arts professor. In this collaboration Leslie accepted her inadequacies of task perception of teaching writing, which lowered her self-esteem. Reflecting on the professor’s role in this experience, Leslie recalled:

I was excited that she’s going to work with me. [I was] very grateful because I did not know a lot about teaching poetry. I was just really trying to pay attention to what she was doing and trying to model what she was doing. I don’t know if there is a feeling for that like when you are trying to look up to someone I don’t know what that feeling would be called... You know just excited and you’re grateful that she was willing to come take time out of her schedule to help me.

Leslie felt pride and gratitude that this opportunity allowed her to grow in her task performance and self-esteem in teaching poetry. Like Denise, Leslie wanted to preserve her self-image. However, once the university professor came into her classroom, she relinquished her need to look good as a teacher, focusing instead on absorbing as much as she could to apply to her own teaching later. Leslie developed a new set of skills for teaching writing to her students that increased her self-esteem, task perception, job motivation, and future perspectives. Through this experience, Leslie emerged with a stronger, enhanced self-image and professional self-understanding.
By accepting their limitations and facing their fears about their task performance, McLeod CLC teachers identified the areas in which they needed help and requested the support that enabled them to improve. When a literacy coach or university professor demonstrated lessons and coached teachers in a nonevaluative way, they enabled teachers to be open to new teaching practices, resulting in more effective classroom instruction and producing a reconstructed, stronger sense of professional self-understanding.

The support the McLeod CLC faculty received from one another, the university faculty, and the literacy coach facilitated the reconstruction of their professional self-understanding. This growth in professional self-understanding, coupled with their students’ increased academic success as a result of the new instructional practices, ignited the teachers’ excitement about their improved teaching. Finding the courage to ask for help, learning new instructional approaches, and seeing the results in their students’ achievement created an enhanced sense of professional self for McLeod CLC teachers.

6.3. Excitement in the recognition of student and teacher progress and restored self-image

After 3 years of hard work, the faculty at McLeod CLC relished the fruits of their labor. The faculty revised their language arts program to Cunningham’s Four Blocks and tailored their instruction to the individual needs of the students with the support of the literacy coach and university faculty. The students’ reading improvements served as the basis for nine critical incidents from nine different teachers. Three of the nine incidents focused on changes among the teachers observed in the classrooms, media center, and hallways. As the faculty recognized that their new instructional practices had increased student achievement, they experienced a restored self-image.

Tiffany noticed that faculty talk in the hallways had shifted from primarily complaining to reporting students’ success. Previously, discussion among McLeod CLC faculty emphasized their struggles with the changed curriculum. Now, for the first time in a long time, McLeod CLC faculty saw improvements in their students. The improvements led to a new kind of hallway talk and a restored teacher self-image.

Tiffany reported walking down the hallway one day when a fellow teacher stopped her and said, “Oh [Tiffany], [Shantel] is on an M level... she has come two years [in her reading]. I mean from point A to point B in this year and we still have four more weeks of school.” Tiffany attributed such student success and the change in hallway talk to the new literacy program, although she acknowledged that many teachers were so immersed in their classroom instruction that they had not had time to reflect on the factors contributing to their students’ success.

Tiffany shared a second example of the change in hallway conversation:

I see them lined up coming in from recess and you know I will stop and speak to the children: “Hi, how are you? Are you having a good day? What is going on?” And [the teacher] might take a moment to say, “Oh [Tiffany], you know Jesus’ reading is just great.” It is just really good.

Noting improvements in student performance after the new literacy program was implemented, the teachers attributed the improvements to the program. They experienced positive emotions as a result of the student success and their enhanced self-image.

Similarly, Jane observed that in her 20 years at McLeod CLC, the literacy program had facilitated students’ reading success more than anything else. Unlike students at schools where populations are relatively stable, students transfer to and from McLeod CLC at different points throughout the school year. This high mobility rate occurs because many of these students’ families live in extreme poverty and are forced to move to wherever they have a place to stay. The transient nature of the student population forces faculty to continually revise their instructional approaches and reassess the reading skills of the students in their classrooms.

Each year and sometimes each week, McLeod CLC faculty members receive students whose reading levels are different from those of their current students. Jane noted that in the previous year her students improved tremendously, but she feared they might not repeat their success this year because new students were entering McLeod CLC with fewer skills. Jane was concerned that if this occurred, the teachers’ low self-image would return. She explained:

I’ve just finished doing the beginning-of-the-year testing for [my class], assessing and looking at those tests. The children we have this year have considerably lower scores coming in than what
we had last year. So last year may have just been a fluke, a really super class, but I don’t think so.

I do believe that we did a much better job... of writing instruction. I think we did a much better job doing the guided reading groups. Having the books... collected by the literacy coach, gathered and catalogued and put in the library for all of us to use... has been something that served the actual teaching of reading.

Jane described her excitement about the tremendous gains made by her students the previous year; however, she was cautious about the future and sought to protect her self-image by noting that her students this year came in with poorer literacy skills. Jane, like other McLeod CLC teachers, expressed excitement about her students’ past success but viewed the future with caution, knowing that some students were still struggling and needed her support. The changes in the literacy program and the new methods of instruction provided Jane with greater confidence, but she feared the day might come when they were once again considered to be failing teachers.

McLeod CLC faculty emphasized that improved and consistent instruction throughout the school was critical to improving student achievement. The faculty attributed the consistency of instruction across the school to the efforts of their literacy coach. Both Megan and Jane expressed their gratitude and pleasure at having a knowledgeable, consistent, and tactful person as their literacy coach. Megan was grateful for the coach’s ability to work with all the classes, stating, “I am pleased that someone is going around [to] other classrooms to see what others are doing. I think that is why test scores are going up.”

Jane likewise expressed her appreciation for the literacy coach’s knowledge and her tact in working with McLeod CLC faculty. Jane noted:

There has been tremendously wonderful change in the reading instruction I believe and it’s because of having a literacy coach who can deal effectively with classroom faculty... I think there has been a lot of positive change... a lot better instruction going on.

The literacy coach modeled instructional approaches and observed teachers in their classrooms. The teachers described the literacy coach as someone who tactfully identified areas for improvement and offered suggestions for improving instruction. The literacy coach supported the faculty throughout the process of learning new teaching approaches, resulting in enhanced task performance. Her support allowed them to reconstruct their professional self-understanding without feeling judged or devalued.

6.3.1. Improved self-image fostered in a reading celebration

On February 24, 2004, McLeod CLC faculty were called to an after-school meeting. Expecting a typical faculty meeting, they instead discovered a party in the media center. The purpose of the surprise party was to acknowledge their hard work and to demonstrate the profound growth many of their students had achieved. The teachers enjoyed refreshments while their literacy coach presented illustrations of students’ reading improvement.

Harriet expressed delight at the reading celebration and the students’ success. Finally, McLeod CLC faculty and students were being recognized for their hard work; this recognition went a long way toward restoring the teachers’ self-image. Harriet observed:

I think everybody in there was just taken aback at how much progress the students made. I think everybody... had tears in their eyes. To think that some of these children that we had known to struggle had made this enormous progress... There was such a huge gain in half a year in their reading level, especially from some children who we all knew had been struggling for their whole school lives and had made really remarkable progress... You know so that was a good emotion. I don’t know what brought it about but it obviously had to do with some reform that we had this year because it was a major change.

Harriet was surprised that the teachers’ efforts were being recognized, but more critically, she was surprised and delighted that children at McLeod CLC had improved so dramatically in their reading. Harriet’s emotions intensified when she saw students whom she knew had been struggling make such tremendous gains in 6 months.

These critical incidents show the positive results stemming from the faculty’s improved reading instruction and restored self-image. In their statements, the teachers expressed joy and hope for their students’ futures. McLeod CLC faculty recalled these incidents because they received recognition and because their students were making connections
with the literature as they never had before. These successes supported the importance of the sometimes painful process the faculty went through in reconstructing their professional self-understanding.

6.3.2. Pride in students’ poetry success

In acknowledging their success, McLeod CLC faculty repeatedly expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with the Language Arts Department at the university. Two faculty members talked about what it was like to have students from a university poetry class come over and work with McLeod CLC students on poetry. In this collaboration, McLeod CLC students developed and refined their poems, which were then published in a book and presented at a poetry picnic at the school. The focal point of this category deals with the faculty’s feelings of pride in their students’ poetry success.

In discussing this critical incident, Denise described the positive emotions she experienced in connection with the poetry picnic. She reflected on the event’s significance for her:

I loved the poetry [picnic] because usually when we do things in the classroom... we don’t get to see what was going on and we are kind of isolated... But being out there all together, it kind of bound the school together. We had a real culminating experience where we could hear all about what other classrooms were doing and hear their poetry... It really kind of bonded not only the families together but the whole school was like one big family.

Denise loved the poetry collaboration because the community came together “like one big family” to recognize students’ poetry accomplishments, celebrate the importance of poetry, and restore the teachers’ self-image. Denise valued this collaborative element of the reform as it made her feel less isolated in meeting the needs of her students.

Similarly, Harriett experienced positive emotions in response to the poetry picnic because she was so impressed with the quality of the students’ poems. She commented:

I opened it and I was like, “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it.” So I call the student first and told her what was going on what was happening. She got all excited... We made an announcement to the class [but] that wasn’t enough. I was so proud of her. So I sent out an e-mail to all my colleagues and everything. I sent a letter home to her parents and then at the award assembly... she was able to read her poem that was being published....

It was just a really neat moment because she was an ESOL student and when she first came she did not write straight lines on the paper. I couldn’t look at her writing really make heads or tails out of it. And that was one thing with poetry because poetry can take any form any shape. She was able to work with it and express herself very well. And for her to come the beginning of the year not really being able to write anything legible to be able to produce something and be the one out of the class that got published. It was just really an outstanding moment for her.... I was trying not to cry because I was so proud of her and this accomplishment. And I guess just wanting everybody to realize what an honor it was for her...
see her be able to shine at that moment, and to know how much she had done to grow.

Denise had to hold back tears when she reflected on her joy in her student’s progress and success. Like the faculty at McLeod CLC, this student had a dismal future at the beginning, but in the end she surpassed all expectations.

The poetry picnic and a student’s success in a national poetry contest elicited emotions of excitement and pride from the McLeod CLC teachers, restoring their once-shattered self-image. The collaborative efforts and the faculty’s investment in improving reading and writing instruction resulted in success in the classroom, at the poetry picnic, and on standardized tests, as well as changing the tenor of school discussions.

7. Collaborations facilitating changes in professional self-understanding

The collaboration between university professors and McLeod CLC teachers is a prime example of how reformers can work together for the good of students. When McLeod CLC faculty collaborated with university faculty members from the Department of Language Arts, students’ achievement levels rose and teachers expressed gratitude for the collaborators’ help. The students’ improved skills left McLeod CLC faculty feeling proud and excited about all their students could accomplish and restored their self-esteem and self-image. In the first stage of this reconstruction of their professional understanding, the teachers acknowledged the limits of their instruction, lowering their self-esteem and task perception. Confronted by this challenge to their professional self-understanding, the teachers sought assistance from the literacy coach and university faculty, who helped them brainstorm new ideas and demonstrated new instructional approaches in a supportive way.

The supportive and nonintrusive nature of the collaborations fueled the students’ improvements and supported the teachers’ process of reconstructing their professional self-understanding. In contrast to the findings of previous literature on teachers’ emotions in educational reform, although the McLeod teachers were initially fearful that the faculty would be judgmental, their motivation to improve their school and their students’ learning allowed them to overcome this fear and seek collaboration. This collaboration proved their fears to be unfounded (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Woods & Jeffrey, 1998).

In Jeffrey and Woods’ (1996) study it was clear that the inspectors were there to evaluate the school using governmental accountability measures. Jeffrey and Woods cautioned that “if surveillance continues or expands in this form as originally planned, on the basis of this research it could have long-term consequences for teachers’ sense of professionalism and for any genuine educational improvement” (p. 336). The teachers in Jeffrey and Woods’ (1996) study found the inspectors intrusive because they were evaluating their instruction rather than helping to find ways to improve student achievement.

The findings of the current study support some previous research on teachers’ emotions in educational reform. Jeffrey and Woods (1996) found that during the OFSTED inspections in the UK, “Professional uncertainty was induced, with teachers experiencing confusion, anomie, anxiety and doubt about their competence. They also suffered an assault on their personal selves, closely associated among primary teachers with their professional roles” (p. 325). The pressure from the inspections left teachers feeling intimidated. The teachers in Jeffrey and Woods’ study experienced a loss of self as a result of the OFSTED inspections because “the teachers’ self is indistinguishable from the professional role” (p. 325). The McLeod CLC teachers’ realization that their approach needed to change likewise resulted, in some cases, in a temporary loss of self and reconstruction of their professional self-understanding. However, the teachers in this study became reinvigorated by the reform when they saw that its purpose was not to evaluate them but to support them and advance their moral purpose of improving the lives of children.

Moreover, contrary to Schmidt and Datnow’s (2005) finding that teachers attached little emotion to a reform initiative, McLeod CLC teachers experienced strong positive and negative emotions in response to the initiative’s impact on their students as well as its challenge to their professional self-understanding on a variety of levels. The teachers expressed both concern and delight about the impact on all the students in the school, not just on the children in their own classroom.

Hargreaves’ (2005) results alternately support and conflict with the findings of this study. In Hargreaves study, as in the current study, veteran teachers were skeptical of reforms at first while new
teachers were more energetic and enthusiastic. Interestingly, however, while both the veteran and new teachers experienced fear as they confronted initial threats to their self-understanding, ultimately beginning and veteran teachers were both energized in their new skills and enhanced self-understanding.

This study is one of the first employing Kelchterman’s framework of self-understanding (as opposed to identity), and more research must be done to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this framework. Future research also needs to be conducted on the role of instructional support in educational reform. Such research may provide further support for these findings and lead to a more detailed understanding of the emotions involved in such collaborations.

8. Summary

Faculty at McLeod CLC initially expressed fear about changing their instructional practices. In reaching out, however, they found that their collaborators helped them to improve their task perception and self-esteem by enabling them to develop new instructional approaches. The collaborators showed McLeod CLC faculty new ways to teach, enhancing the key elements of their self-understanding: self-image, job motivation, future perspective, self-esteem, and task perception. As McLeod CLC teachers employed these new techniques they began to reconstruct their professional self-understanding and found their students improving beyond their expectations. These improvements left teachers ecstatic, and their pride and excitement in the students’ achievements and their own success made all the pain and uncertainty they had experienced seem worthwhile.

The way teachers come to realize that they may be failing their students impacts their view of the situation. When McLeod CLC teachers were simply told that the problem was with their teaching, many felt angry and wanted to leave the school. However, when the teachers were given the same message with the goal of brainstorming ways to improve student learning and change the future for their students, the teachers welcomed the reform. When administrators use accountability measures of legislation such as No Child Left Behind to blame teachers or make them fearful and apprehensive, some teachers get angry and dig in their heels while others just give up in frustration. However, when teachers are brought into the problem-solving process with the ultimate goal of helping students to be successful, they rise to the challenge.

This study demonstrates that universities and public schools can collaborate for the good of students. The way in which McLeod CLC faculty acknowledged their limitations and requested collaboration illustrates the importance of not just challenging teachers’ professional selves in accountability measures, but also providing them with the support they need to reconstruct their professional approaches and selves. When these collaborations are less evaluative and more supportive in nature, faculty respond more positively, which in turn leads to student success.

The key to these collaborations is the recognition of teachers’ knowledge of their students and university faculty’s knowledge of the research. Together, public school teachers and university faculty can change instruction and create positive emotions leading to enhanced student success. Accountability measures alone cannot improve student achievement, but collaboration with the goal of bolstering student achievement for long-term success can improve failing schools.

References


