

TITLE: “What students are facing now...”: An investigation into teachers’ understandings of context

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This paper takes a different approach to an understanding of the impact of local context on the ways in which teachers understand their students, their schools, and themselves. Instead of defining context beforehand, it presents a series of interviews in which teachers were asked to speak about the contextual factors that they saw in their work, the ways in which these factors interrelated, and the sources of contextual issues. It then presents an analysis of these interviews and suggests a new framework for working with teachers around issues of context, as well as implications for further study.

Rationale

There is a substantial body of research that talks about context, but ‘context’ in this research is defined almost exclusively by the researchers themselves. This presents a major issue in discussions of context due to the disparate definitions held by many researchers of what ‘context’ is, and the many ways in which the term is used. For example, some researchers consider context to relate to a relatively binary comparison of factors like school location or student achievement level (e.g. Ben-Peretz et al., 2003), others describe it as comprising elements of classroom situation and school culture (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2000; Friedman & Kass, 2002), and still others broaden their definition to include geographic, economic, neighborhood, and experiential factors (e.g. Flores, 2001). This merely represents a difference among *researchers*, who often make reference to similar bodies of literature and frameworks, and does not even begin to consider the differences in understandings of local context that might be held by possible community partners such as local businesses or governmental organizations and by other educational stakeholders such as families (if these groups consider context at all). Thus, I argue that defining context in advance of investigating it can cause researchers to miss major factors that *teachers* see as impacting their context, and that, as teachers are the ones who are ultimately responsible for responding to their understandings of what their students need, it is extremely important to have an idea of what contextual factors they might identify and how they understand their impacts. Additionally, Sharkey (2004) argues that teachers are more likely to form trusting relationships with those who demonstrate knowledge of their context. If this is the case, before improvements can be made in the relationships between stakeholders and teachers, groundwork needs to be done on attempting to understand how teachers might understand their own context, since even though a partner in a possible relationship may *think* he or she understands a teacher’s context, the teacher her/himself may disagree. In this paper, then, rather than relying on the work that others have done around context, I attempt to investigate how four teachers in two different schools understand and talk about their own context, without bringing in any definitions of my own, in order to develop a framework that can be used to understand what contextual factors teachers may identify, what or whom they see as the sources of

these factors, and what or whom they see as the targets of (in other words, those they see as being influenced by) these factors. It is my contention that such a framework can lead to more respectful and fruitful relationships between teachers and scholars, as well as to a deeper understanding of teacher actions and the ideas behind them, that can then create trusting relationships and effective partnerships.

Methodology

Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted with four different teachers in two schools located in two different Midwestern cities, both of which can be described as struggling financially. Due to the extremely low sample size, no attempt was made to differentiate between these cities, but merely to acquire a set of data that was not tied to one single location. Interview participants were located through a partner who serves as a part time teacher at one school and as a provider of professional development at both. Interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, were designed to ask basic questions about the factors teachers saw as impacting, or being impacted by, their community, their school, themselves and their classroom, and their students (see Appendix A). With the goal of employing Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as faithfully as possible in order to truly focus on what these teachers had said and how they had said it, I did not consult any literature on the subject of context or meaning making until after analyzing the completed interviews. Once given, interviews were coded by first identifying contextual factors and issues discussed by teachers. For each issue, two further things were examined. One was the source of the issue (the person, thing, or group from which the issue is seen as arising - for example, one teacher cited attendance as an issue arising with students and their poor attitudes about the importance of class, while another cited it as arising with families and their inability to get students to school - while the issue is the same, its source is different). The second is the target of each issue¹. The codes² were then organized both by source and by target in order to draw conclusions about the major places in which teachers see contextual factors as arising and the major people or groups they see them as influencing.

¹ As briefly mentioned above, I define a 'target' as the person or group identified by the teacher as being impacted by an issue. For example, a teacher might indicate that poor student attendance hurts students because they are constantly forced to catch up (in which case students are the target) or he might indicate that poor student attendance causes him a huge hassle in constantly trying to stay on top of who needs what and when things are due (in which case the teacher is the target).

² In some instances, of course, it was unclear as to what teachers were identifying as the source and/or target of an issue. However, this only occurred for 16% of sources and in 8% of targets and thus did not impact the majority of the data. Issues with an unclear source but a clear target or an unclear target but a clear source were still analyzed. Additionally, when I refer to 'all sources' or 'all targets' below, I include those which were unclear in my count.

Findings

A sampling of results as relates to the sources and targets listed by teachers is given in the following table:

| Sources | | Targets | |
|-----------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| School | 22 | School | 15 |
| Students | 22 | Students | 63 |
| Families | 26 | Families | 4 |
| Classroom | 0 | Classroom | 3 |
| Teachers ³ | 5 | Teachers | 3 |
| Teacher | 13 | Teacher | 11 |
| Other ⁴ | 37 | Other ⁵ | 26 |
| Total | 125 | Total | 125 |

Table 1: Items cited by teachers as sources and targets of issues

When organized, it became clear that six different people or groups constituted the majority (over 70% and nearly 80%, respectively) of the sources and targets described by teachers. These six people or groups were the school, students, families, the classroom, teachers, and the particular teacher being interviewed. Of these, the majority referred to schools, students, and families. In addition to this general breakdown, several notable results emerged. One was that while ‘students’ made up a little under a fifth of the sources of contextual issues mentioned by teachers, this category makes up more than half of all targets. In other words, it appears that these four teachers were thinking of the results of issues on their students, rather than on themselves or on the school, for example, a disproportionate amount of the time. However, they did not see students as the source of many of these issues. A second, and perhaps more interesting, major

³ The ‘Teachers’ category refers to instances in which teachers referred to teachers in general, for example if they made a comment like “student behavior makes teachers’ jobs harder”. The ‘Teacher’ category refers to instances in which teachers referred to themselves, for example if they made a comment like “student behavior makes my job harder”.

⁴ Other things listed as sources of issues included the city (2 mentions), social class (2 mentions), administration (2 mentions), the private sector (2 mentions), the teacher’s own high school, the teacher’s own teachers, the teacher’s mother (2 mentions), school staff (2 mentions), and the neighborhood (3 mentions), as well as 20 instances in which the source of an issue was unclear from a teacher’s comment.

⁵ Other things listed as targets of issues included black students, suburban schools, urban schools, student aspirations, the district, the city (2 mentions), ‘people’, the public schools, and socioeconomic problems (2 mentions), as well as 10 instances in which the target of an issue was unclear from a teacher’s comment.

observation is that students' families were the most common source given by teachers, but appear only four times as a target (and all four of those comments are from the same teacher, meaning that three out of four teachers did not list families as the target of a single issue). This points to what may be a very important quality in the way these teachers are thinking. While it is clear that families are impacted by many issues, the teachers interviewed saw them as being only the source of issues. This may be a contributor to the historical difficulty teachers and families often have in communicating usefully. Viewing families as responsible for many student issues (and even for some that, as mentioned, may not normally be thought of as being caused by families, such as attendance and charter school expansion), but not as themselves being susceptible to influence, may cause teachers to hold unreasonable expectations about what families can do and about the homogeneity among them. After all, if families cause these issues, then shouldn't all families be capable of impacting them?

Both of these results also suggest that the ways in which things like school reform or suggested pedagogical changes are presented to teachers might be more or less effective based on the chain of meaning with which they are presented, so that, for these four teachers, a program presented as improving student outcomes might have been received as more logical than one presented as improving the classroom, which was mentioned as a target less than 5% of the time. In stark contrast to sources and targets given, however, the actual issues cited by teachers followed no pattern, with the most commonly mentioned issue appearing six times. In fact, out of 125 mentions of issues by the four teachers, there were 82 different issues. This suggests that, although these teachers were in many ways in agreement about where issues come from and who they impact, they were in no way in agreement about what these issues are. This result, however, supports the statement that teacher conceptions of context are far more complex and nuanced than might be assumed, and that understanding these conceptions is an important and certainly non-trivial goal.

References

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

[Note: before the interview, each teacher will be asked to fill out a form which asks for their name, age, classes and grades taught, number of years teaching, number of years teaching at this particular school, place of birth, and any other places they have lived]

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I'm going to be asking you some questions about local context and how you think it influences what you do. This interview will not be in any way an assessment of your or your teaching. Instead, your responses will be used along with the responses of other teachers in this school to try to look for some patterns about how math teachers think. Your name will never be associated with anything you say, so please try to answer each question as honestly as you can. With that said, you are under no obligation to tell me anything, and you can feel free to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you otherwise do not wish to answer.

Is it okay if I record this interview?

1. I'd like to start by getting some basic information from you.

- a. What subjects do you teach and to whom?
- b. What are your students like? [If not discussed in their answer, continue with 'do you know any demographic information about them?']
- c. What do you think about [school name]?

2. Now I'd like to talk to you specifically about your local context. When I say 'local context', I mean any factors that relate to the school, neighborhood, or city that you think are important. If you think there are state influences that impact your local context, you can speak about those as well. I'm going to ask about your relationship with the school, with students and their families, and with teaching itself. Can you start by talking about what you see as the relationship between your local context and this school?

(PROMPT): In general, what about your local context do you think influences the way this school operates? [If necessary, prompt again with 'do you think anything about the city, the neighborhood, or anything else makes this school different from schools that might be in other neighborhoods or other cities?' and 'can you talk a little more about why you see X as important?']

(PROMPT): Do you think that any important factors about the school influence your own classroom in any way? How do you think they do that?

2a. If I were trying to describe [School Name] to someone who hadn't ever been here, what do you think would be the most important things for me to say to give that person an accurate picture of the school?

3. Now I'd like to talk about your relationship with your students and their families. I say 'your' students, but if you think there are differences between your students and a typical student at this school, please speak about both groups. Can you start by talking about the relationship between your local and school context and your students and their families?

(PROMPT): In general, what about your local context do you think influences your students? [If necessary, prompt with 'do you think anything about the city, the neighborhood, or anything else makes your students different from students one might find in other neighborhoods or other cities?' and 'can you talk a little more about why you see X as important?']

(PROMPT): What about the school do you think influences your students? [If necessary, prompt again with 'do you think anything about the school makes the students here different from students one might find in other neighborhoods in other cities?'] [NOTE: If teacher spoke about the school in response to previous question, this question can be skipped or rephrased as 'is there anything else specific to the school that you think...']

(PROMPT): What about your local context do you think influences the families of your students?

(PROMPT): How do the families of your students influence the school and your own classroom?

(PROMPT): How do your students themselves influence the school and your own classroom?

3a. How familiar are you with the families of your students? What can you tell me about them?

3b. If I were trying to describe your students to someone who had never met them, what do you think would be the most important things for me to say to give that person an accurate picture of your students?

4. Now I'd like to talk to you about your own teaching. First I am going to talk about your beliefs. Don't worry about what you actually *do* in the classroom for this part, just about what you *think*. Can you tell me what you think are the purposes of teaching in general as well as why you personally are a teacher?

(PROMPT): What do you think are the purposes of teaching in general?

(PROMPT): Why are you a teacher?

(PROMPT): In general, what about your current local context or that of any previous places you have lived do you think influenced how you feel about teaching as a profession? [If necessary, prompt again with 'do you think anything about this city or neighborhood or any other cities or neighborhoods you have lived in has impacted your understanding of what teaching is?' and 'can you talk a little more about why you see X as important?']

(PROMPT): In general, what about your current local context or that of any previous places you have lived do you think influenced your own reasoning for being a teacher? [If necessary, prompt again with 'do you think anything about this city or neighborhood or any other cities or neighborhoods you have lived in has impacted your identity as a teacher' and 'can you talk a little more about why you see X as important?']

5. Now I'm going to switch from talking about beliefs to talking about actions. These questions are about what you *do* in the classroom.

- a. How do you think your actions in the classroom reflect your beliefs about the purposes of teaching or why you teach? [If necessary, prompt with 'in what ways do you think I could see your philosophy of teaching by watching you in the classroom?' and 'are there any differences between your ideals and your classroom actions?']
- b. How do you think factors of your local context, the school, and your students impact the actions you take in the classroom? [If necessary, prompt with 'is there anything you do in the classroom that you can imagine doing differently in a different place or with different kids?']

6. I'm going to conclude by asking you about two terms you may use or hear others use.

- a. Have you ever heard the terms 'equity' and/or 'social justice'? Can you define one or both of them for me?

If yes...

- i. Do you think that ideas of equity [and/or social justice] have influenced your ideas about teaching or about your students? How have they done that?
- ii. Do you think that ideas of equity [and/or social justice] have influenced your classroom actions? How have they done that?

[NOTE: One final question related to a specific professional development done by a community partner and has been removed]