

MTIP Nugget

Reflections on the MTIP experience 2017/2018

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MTIP has completed four years of work with teachers. In that time, our process for enabling teacher inquiry in mathematics has evolved. From starting with a “PATHWAY MAP” led by Dr. Skwarchuk to inviting school divisions and math consultants, we have always worked to improve our process. But do we know whether our process is improving. This MTIP report will consider one of the many tensions we have faced, namely how to describe teacher inquiry to those teachers new to the process. Our quest is this: Is the uncertain and open-ended nature of inquiry a necessary condition for its potential for teacher learning?

Since the beginning, our opening meetings have discussed the nature and qualities of teacher inquiry; that it is collaborative, iterative, classroom-based, teacher directed, and focussed on responding to the local challenges of teaching (for more details, see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). We provide readings of teacher inquiry, and lead discussions concerning its potential and what it could be involved in the process (e.g., Adams & Townsend, 2014). At the end of each year, we ask teachers for feedback. Although teachers unanimously believe the process is valuable, teachers new to process invariably comment that they wished there was more clarity on what to expect at the beginning of the year. As one teacher noted at the end of the 2016/2017 year, “The process is so muddy; it feels very disorienting at first.”

We have tried to respond to this concern. The tension for us is that the process needs to be open-ended and driven by teachers, so we worry that too much description will stifle creativity and potential of the process. We don’t want to overly direct the teachers, but we don’t want them to feel overly uncomfortable initially. It is like a pedagogy of “productive struggle” (Betts & Rosenberg, 2016): we are trying to scaffold in the zone of teacher empowerment and frustration. A certain amount of struggle is okay, provided it doesn’t devolve into frustration that stifles that experience of the teacher.

We have tried various techniques to respond to this tension. We have been thoughtful about the choice of readings to give teachers. We have provided abstracts from MTIPs done in the past. We have considered how to best describe the cyclic process of teacher inquiry, as well as its parallels to formative assessment. We have emphasized a focus on student learning as data/artifacts for teacher reflection and learning. We try to ensure a mix of MTIP rookies and non-rookie teachers, so that those teachers who participated in MTIP the previous year can mentor the rookies. Last year, we started the Nugget reports, in part to develop a repository of examples so that teachers could gain courage from the work of previous MTIP inquiries.

In the end, it seems our efforts to respond to the tension of clarifying the nature of teacher inquiry has had limited effect. At the end of the 2017/2018 year, we heard the following feedback from teachers new to the process:

- "More concrete examples of quests at the beginning would have been very helpful."
- "Felt alone in the process- left first meeting feeling frustrated because I didn't know what to do and was a first timer. Others had a quest well defined."
- "Having an implementation guide in the fall would have been more helpful."

It appears that we are failing to reduce some of the initial ambiguity and anxiety. We are grateful that one of the rookie teachers framed this tension as a positive:

- "That it was intentionally vague was hard initially, but the process turned into a positive."

Every year, at least one teacher tries to frame this tension as positive. We have informed teachers to expect this initial uncertainty, and explained that we are deliberately less directive because we believe it is necessary to sponsor an authentic learning process. Every year, we hear the same concerns.

We continue to struggle with this tension, and we share this tension with teachers. We will work harder this year to start developing a repository of reports, the Nuggets, for MTIP teachers to consider. We will reconsider responding to the feedback from our teachers. We will continue to evolve. Perhaps it is enough to always foreground a disposition of tension concerning the description and limited scaffolding of the MTIP process. Perhaps there is no ideal technique beyond our tensions and listening to teachers, beyond never becoming too comfortable.

References

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