

Critical Reflection on Instantiating “Foreign” Theory in the Korean History Teacher Community

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the extent to which a community of history teachers in Korea applied foreign theories, such as *Reading Like a Historian*, into their classrooms and how they enhanced their theory-driven practice through reflections. The history teachers' community in Korea has been at the crossroads of multiple types of teacher communities as they need to span learning, inquiry, a sharing of beliefs, and practice groups. The teacher community enables individual teachers to be competent teacher-practitioners engaged with the learning and inquiry cycle as well as with collaborative reflection. The teacher community is a platform on which teachers can assess the applicability of educational theory to local contexts. This observation highlighted the significance of positioning teachers as agencies for the interpretation and application of theory in Korean contexts to develop “Koreanized” learning theory. Therefore, as prosumers of learning theory, teacher communities need to have a firm grounding in the systematic use of protocols and critical reviews of academia when collaboratively transforming educational theory to practice.

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I. Introduction

In South Korea, the mission statements of the *National Curriculum of Social Studies/History* require schools and teachers to promote both critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to the 2015 *National Curriculum*, students will be able to “develop genuine ideas and critical thinking skills through the process of investigating and interpreting multiple historical materials” at the end of the course of ‘History.’ Because they have little knowledge and experience in teaching inquiry and historical thinking skills, many history teachers have found these objectives difficult to achieve. Therefore, to apply these learning theories to their own practice, they often only skim through learning theory literature to decide what to do (Baek, 2014; Kim, 2015a).

As teacher education and professional development programs in Korea focus mainly on application of knowledge and experience, learning theory does not seem attractive to many Korean teachers as they feel it is inapplicable in their own classrooms. Interestingly, the teachers’ preference for ready-made teaching materials often parallels their enthusiasm for own historical research. Some history teachers find it more satisfying to develop themselves with challenging historical works rather than implementing theory-based learning in the classroom (Kim, 2015a).

Theory can play a pivotal role in providing the ideas and guidelines to improve teaching practices. However, despite the emphasis on educational theory, most teachers choose to ignore the available teaching and learning theories (Thornton, 1991). The standardized test for college entrance often positions teachers as gatekeepers for the application of emerging learning theories. Further, a phobia for foreign theory restrains many teachers from pondering the possibilities and constraints, as was found in a Korean history teacher community until they implemented a well-known framework (Kim, 2016). While this antagonism has individual difference, collaboration was found to make it easier for the teachers to unpack new, complicated learning theories in a foreign language.

I have spent more than eight years participating in and studying a Korean history teacher community that has striven to identify suitable theoretical frameworks to help them improve their teaching practice. While I have observed and analyzed the teachers’ application of the learning theory of *Reading Like a Historian*, originally developed by Wineburg and his colleagues for enhancing historical literacy, this study investigated what mechanisms assist or constrain a group of teachers to implement a foreign theory into their teaching practice.

II. Literature Review

A. Educational Theory and History Teacher

Theory and practice are inevitably intertwined in the classroom, with teachers unable to perfect their practice without the guidance of theory (Willinsky, 1998). Therefore, the role of theory in guiding teaching practice is essential, with theories related to good history teaching in particular enabling teachers to heighten classroom learning.

The application of learning theory is heavily emphasized in teacher education and in the teacher examinations in Korea; however, as history teachers have rarely considered educational theory as suitable for their local contexts, it is often overlooked to focus on “good teaching.” The knowledge and theory that teacher education has often pushed onto them in the first stages of their teachers’ career are often replaced by a set of practical guidelines and teaching materials (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Giroux’s distinction between the “pedagogy of theory” and the “pedagogy of theorizing” (Giroux, 1994) allows us to explore the differences between teachers learning about theory and learning from theory.

Critical review of teachers’ own practice inevitably invite them to rely on the review of theoretical approaches such as teachers’ knowledge and/or pedagogical content knowledge. Most of the current research on history teaching in Korea reveals that its heavy reliance on the pedagogical content knowledge as a theoretical framework with which researchers strive to identify teacher knowledge to distinguish experienced teacher’s instructional explanation or to build history teacher professionalism. (Kim, 2015b). As much as teachers need to be able to think historically through recent research and its application (Newmann, 2012), it is necessary to examine inhibiting factors and the defense logic of teachers in the point that educational theory has little influence on teachers’ efforts and attempts to improve history teaching (Kim, 2014).

Revisiting the teachers’ own practice and the associated student learning required teachers to construct classroom reading and writing activities based on primary sources with the goal of encouraging the students to think like historians. The approaches in *Reading Like a Historian* focus on developing student abilities to read primary documents and generate evidence-based arguments and include materials and teacher training programs to develop skills such as “sourcing,” “contextualization,” “corroboration,” and “close reading” that both mimic the work of historians and develop the analytical skills seen as important for all citizens in democracy (Avishag, 2012).

Wineburg’s framework could be seen as a type of “theory” as it guides teachers to facilitate students by developing historical literacy using primary sources. While learning

theory can be emphasized in providing insights on how cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors can influence students' understanding of the outside world as well as on retaining knowledge and skills, learning and applying new theories and reflecting on own practice takes a great deal of time and effort for individual teachers. Therefore, developing research and practice through collaborative teaching communities can alleviate this stress and lead to better classroom application.

B. History Teaching Community and Action Research Group

For a decade, a collaborative history teaching community in South Korea has striven to unpack and implement “foreign” theories into their instructional practice. This study focused on the development of this teaching community and how it operated (Shin, 2011). The history teaching research community can be defined as a cooperative group of teachers to jointly recognize and solve problems related to their own classroom practice focusing on history subject. While this teacher community shares the focus of voluntary learning to be more competent in teaching with the well-known approach of professional learning group, this group of teachers can be distinguished by their critical review of own teaching practice as well as by revisiting on their own beliefs and conceptions on history, education and history education. The four conceptual constructs of teacher community (inquiry community, teacher professional community, community of learners, and community of practice) emphasize distinctive features of teacher learning. These concepts of teacher community are not necessarily mutually exclusive but frame the core activities and supportive conditions needed for successful collaborative learning (Levine, 2010).

The learning community is a community of learners that can promote learning for teachers as well as for students, whereas the inquiry community is a teaching community that learns by collaboratively raising questions and finding answers. The first appears to focus on learning from initiative and practice, often resulting in the passive acceptance of other professionals' ideas with little further consideration. In contrast, the inquiry community facilitates a scaffolding of teacher learning through systematic inquiry and discussions about teaching practices. The professional teaching community is where teachers develop social norms, practices, beliefs, and shared trust. Despite its main interest in teaching practice, the community of practice can be distinguished from the other communities as it fosters teacher learning through the sharing of practices, within which newcomers can participate in the acquisition of knowledge and skills specific to these practices. (Levine & Marcus, 2010).



Figure 1. Four constructs of Korean history teacher community

Drawing on four concepts of teacher community, this study identified specific mechanisms of teacher community to trace the pathway from learning to adapting to applying the pedagogical expertise.

III. Action Research on History Teaching

To investigate how new learning theories may shape and change teachers’ perceptions of theory and teaching practice, the Teaching History Research Division(THRD), as one of subdivisions of the Institute of History Education founded in 2009, was observed and their action research was analyzed. Depending on their individual workloads, approximately six to twelve teachers with 10–30 years’ teaching careers from elementary to secondary schools participated in each community meeting.

Data were collected from 2013 to 2016 from several sources; teachers’ monthly meeting logs, three focal lesson plans, discussions and analysis of video-taped teaching practice, and three individual interviews. Participatory observation was conducted when the group began studying *Reading Like a Historian*, which included an observation of the action research on their practice from 2014–2015. The interviews and data analyses focused on the changes made when applying the theories in *Reading Like a Historian* into classroom practice and on their teaching reflections.

<Table 1> Time Frame and Agenda for the Teaching History Research Division(THRD)

Year	Agenda	Major activities
2012	Seminar on <i>Reading Like a Historian</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close reading & discussion Developing a framework of applicable Korean history topics and units& identifying dozens of modern Korean history units
2013	Lesson study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing lesson plans for elementary &secondary classes ● Personal & collegial research on historical topics and resources On & offline reviews and lesson plans revision
2014	Action research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conducting focal lessons in three different schools ● Follow-up discussion &teacher reflections Modifying lesson plans
2015	Research presentation &workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Action research draft ● Public presentation to practitioners and academia ● Teacher workshops

Most teachers in the THRD have significant teaching, curriculum development, and textbook-writing experience. In addition to participating in national-level assessment test development, a couple of members are also famous authors and professional development instructors. <Table 2> gives specific details of the teachers interviewed in 2016, all of whom had participated in the 2014 action research.

<Table 2> Focal Observation and Interview: Participants

Teacher*	Gender	Years of teaching	School, district	Membership	Academic background
Ms. Chin	Female	18	Elementary/5th, Seoul	2010	Doctoral program
Mr. Eun	Male	28	Intermediate/8th, Seoul	2010	Master's degree
Ms. Lim	Female	23	Intermediate/8th, Metro Seoul	2012	Master program

* All pseudonyms

The classroom observation and data analyses indicated that the teachers were eager to learn new theories to improve their classroom practice. Regardless of their teaching experience, all had found themselves novices to historical and educational research and

the analyses of primary sources. In spite of minor differences in individual engagement, the action research process revealed the difficulties faced in terms of how to start and where to find the relevant literature.

Analysis was focused on a comparison between the framework proposed in *Reading Like a Historian* for a unit on Rosa Parks and a Korean teaching module about Kwan-soon Yoo. The modifications made from the original approach for the Korean application were analyzed in terms of the principles used, the core questions developed, module construction, thinking skills employed, and the resources utilized and developed. The analysis also covered the teachers’ perceptions when delivering the theory-driven module.

The Korean history teaching community holds a position at the crossroads of multiple types of teacher community such as learning, inquiry, and the sharing of beliefs and practices as previously mentioned in Levine’s work; Therefore, the analysis examined the roles these specific teaching community features played in the understanding and the instantiating of “foreign” theory into the local Korean history teaching context by determining the extent that each feature influenced understanding when implementing the unfamiliar approaches in *Reading Like a Historian*. The analyses focused on the learning/comprehension dimensions, lesson plan designs, classroom practice, and reflection and internalization.

IV. Collaborative Understanding and the Application of Foreign Theories

A. What does the Korean version of “*Reading Like a Historian*” module look like?

The THRD teachers had read *Reading Like a Historian* together in their monthly meeting for 6 months and the reflective dialogs regarding their lesson plans and practices led to develop a modified framework and detailed approaches. Most participating teachers agreed that the use of primary documents needs to accompany pedagogy such as small group work, student-led inquiry, discussion and debate, and student-tailored instruction that are less common in Korean history classrooms, noting that document-based learning modules can be designed with relevant topics from the modern Korean history.

Of the eight modules in Wineburg’s book, most teachers found the module on Rosa Parks to be most impressive. The module, starting with a simple question, “Where did Rosa Parks sit?”, made the teachers wonder whether her heroic story was purposefully

<Table 3> Comparison of Rosa Parks and Kwan-soon Yoo Modules

	<i>Reading Like a Historian:</i> Module of Rosa Parks	Korean module of Kwan-soon Yoo
History unit	Civil Rights Movement	Anti-Japanese movements: March 1 st Movement(1919)
Core questions	Where did Rosa Parks sit? Why did the Montgomery Bus Boycott succeed?	Who led/participated in the March 1 st Anti-Japanese Movement?
Scenarios	S1: Resolving a question as to where Rosa Parks sat like a historical detective S2: Close examination of two texts, the Montgomery City Code and the Alabama State Code S3: Starting with a typical story and identifying what led to the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott	S1: Unpacking Kwan-soon Yoo’s prisoner record and grappling with what happened on March 1st, 1919 S2: Role-play of unknown protagonists in the March 1 st Movement S3: Identifying significant anti-colonial activists with reasons
Key historical thinking concepts	Distinguishing between myth and history Evidence-based thinking and argumentation Narrative- Questioning accounts	Analysis of primary documents Evidence-based thinking and making accounts Historical empathy and reenactment
Teaching strategy	Analysis of student writing and legal documents	Analysis of prisoner record Role-play and writing letters

The Kwan-soon Yoo module included document-based instruction, far from the traditional textbook-centered lectures in Korea. The Korean version module adopted a learning activity structure that had multiple historical sources from different perspectives that students have to analyze, compare and contrast, and evaluate (Kim 2015). Such teaching and learning strategies as interdisciplinary approaches and making informed decisions, suggested in the original framework, were not all able to be included in the pilot version.

Although the teachers had little evidence of their students’ thinking skills or inquiry abilities, some teachers were confident that they would be able to facilitate the units of inquiry and succeed in the use of the primary documents:

- In addition to conducting historical research on Kwan-soon Yoo by myself, the Korean module strives to incite student’s interest by unpacking numerous unheard participants.

- A particular topic that was thoroughly scrutinized with regard to historiography and educational objectives was transformed into a series of teaching scenarios for elementary to secondary levels.
- It demonstrates what can be conducted as stressed in the “student-centered” design.

The Korean module was designed for a one-day or no longer than a two-day lesson as Korean public education curriculum schedules are demanding. Degrees of variation in class design depended on whether the teachers opted to adapt *Reading Like a Historian* to Korean history or conducted “good history teaching.” Therefore, reflections on classroom practice revealed several layers for the definition of “good history teaching” (Kim 2011). While one teacher acknowledged her pessimistic approach toward this benchmarking effort, another teacher highlighted student engagements quite impressive compared to those in routine explanatory lecture classes with textbooks and visual aids.

The teacher’s reflections varied depending on the construction of the original framework or on their action research agenda for effective teaching. Teachers’ disagreement about the degree of students’ doing history provided an opportunity to further action research. Their understanding of the form and contents of *Reading Like a Historian* was shaped by their individual instructional decisions, educational settings, and the different language. While they constantly checked whether their comprehension was the same for certain mutually agreed unit decisions, each teacher used their own judgment for the personal instructional modifications.

B. How did the teaching community instantiate the learning theory?

As the THRD teachers have conducted seminars with a close reading of the relevant literature together, as well as research articles published in English and Korean, it is not surprising that they regarded themselves as primarily a learning community as pay close attention to background knowledge and its transformation to pedagogical content knowledge. Reading the literature on historical thinking and inquiry encouraged the teachers to realize the need for further research on what “doing history” meant.

The first phase in instantiating *Reading Like a Historian* included an evaluation of the teachers’ own experience in “doing history” through historical inquiry. The construct of the “inquiry” community was identified when formulating questions such as “Who initiated the March 1st Anti-Japanese Movement?” as well as in their attempts to find answers together through a review of up-to-date historiography and extensive primary sources. As a result of the historical research, the teachers discovered Kwan-soon Yoo’s prisoner record, which was well-known to professional historians but somewhat unknown

to the history teachers and students in terms of its educational significance.

Instead of applying a systematic inquiry procedure, the teachers searched for what they believed was worthy of instructional use. As they were familiar with historical accounts in their college programs, this previous exposure to historiography assisted them in developing compelling questions and pedagogical applications and encouraged them to become heavily involved in historical research for the first time in their lives.

Ms. Chin: [We] spent a great deal of time developing the core and module questions, which guided us in the selection and transformation of the original documents into learning materials. It provided us with the opportunity to conduct history research like a historian, which we had never done before. It was very different from what we had done in the National History Teachers Association. It went beyond the production of useful teaching materials to demonstrate the feasibility of teachers’ doing their own [historical] research.

Their engagement in “doing history” called for their teaching practice to be student-centered with teacher-led questions from original sources. Individual teacher lesson plans and classroom practice accompanied by collegial feedback was the collaborative output of the THRD. The regular meetings involved the sharing of observations and the review of video-taped teaching practice.

Aside from generating questions for the discussion, Mr. Eun brought up the student learning experiences to investigate whether there was any legitimate “content” to be taught. This question led to an exploration of the prior concepts both teachers and students bring to a class, what ultimately shapes the learning objectives and learning content, and what benefits the students could get from any alternative approaches. Mr. Eun’s interpretation and transformation of the framework for *Reading Like a Historian* had been shaped by and intermingled with a previous instantiating effort of foreign theory, “learner’s community” from Japan in the early 2010s(Kim 2016).

It can be noted that the history teachers as a learning community evolved into a community of practice, with five teachers implementing own teaching units through collaborative reflection and revision. While engaging in the shared practice of teaching and reflective feedback, this community of teachers felt more confident in dealing with real world challenges. More experienced teachers provided support and reflection for the class design and implementation, while newcomers to the group learned by engaging with the discussions and reflections. As they all shared a vision for a student-centered classroom, the community of practice was effective and meaningful for all teachers.

Ms. Lim: When evaluating the *Reading Like a Historian* approach, teachers across the country seem to be intrigued to find the applicability and feasibility of a foreign theory. Presenting our long-term study on this new teaching and learning experience seems to attract

interest from other teachers' interests. Therefore, the THRD needs to open its doors to new members and to encourage their participation by sharing our skills and expertise.

As the teachers could share their values and beliefs on teaching, learning, and student-centered instruction, the community was able to provide advice to members who were struggling with and even resisting oppressive top-down school policies and troublesome classroom management. Teachers spent a lot of time in their regular meetings sharing lifetime experiences and providing inspiration. As a powerful example, one teacher shared her devastation over a national tragedy in which almost 300 people, including students from her neighboring middle school, had drowned in a cruise ship accident (the sinking of MV Sewol, 2014. 4). Because of internal and external censorship, she was unable to disclose her devastation to her colleagues and students at school. When she finally shared her feelings with the community member teachers, she found that the community worked like a therapy session, providing healing and creating camaraderie.

Unlike the conventional categorization of a "professional community" for the sharing of expertise and skills, the Korean history teaching community shared their aims as history teachers. Their beliefs regarding the role of teaching to contribute to a better democratic society were strongly associated with the ideas of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union(KTU) and the National Association of History Teachers. Their approach was aligned with Wineburg's position that history education should be a pathway for developing democratic citizens in terms of engaging historical heuristics and argumentation.

As the participating teachers acknowledged, the THRD is a community of learning, from which they acquired the knowledge and skills by learning the new theories and empowered themselves with historical inquiry as they individually conducted research. The collaborative development of the lesson plans and reflective critiques characterized the community of practice as they continued to work as a team as on-site teaching consultants and professional development instructors using this module as an example. All teachers felt that attendance at the meeting was essential because of their shared beliefs, values, and mutual respect as a feature of the professional community of teachers. The observation reveals that the multiple features of teaching community played a critical role for the THRD teachers to instantiate new foreign theories into their teaching practice.

C. In what ways has collaboration in teaching community assisted the teachers?

Acting as an action research group, the teachers engaged in inquiry, shared ideas about teaching materials and methods, reviewed their own practice, and gave feedback to others to enhance practice. This engagement, both action research-oriented and classroom/school reform-oriented, was rooted in their association with the history teachers’ association. The membership of a non-hierarchical community enabled interactions between all participants, thus engaging in rewarding and satisfactory participation.

The community of history teachers enabled individual members to be a part of collaborative action research. The role of the THRD in interpreting and instantiating foreign theory was described as a platform on which the teachers could filter the applicability to local contexts based on an in-depth comprehension derived from the collaborative learning process. The interpretation and theoretical approach emphasized their efforts to synthesize the theories to develop a “Koreanized” learning theory.

These collaborative efforts allowed the community of teachers to realize that history was a contentious and interpretative field, which requires them to decide what to teach and emphasize when connecting the past with the present. However, while these collaborative efforts in “doing history” were significant for the teachers, it may not have provided enough to engage the students. While the teachers revealed an enthusiasm about the instructional potential of primary sources, the heavy reliance on primary sources does not guarantee that students are able to engage in authentic historical inquiry to build an understanding of the past. Since historians do not use sources identified by educators, the teachers’ source packages did not seem to provide a chance for the students to initiate authentic historical inquiry (Barton 2005).

Another problem that emerged from the community of practice reflection was that the participants used a “mechanistic approach” to the sourcing of documents. According to *Reading Like a Historian*, sourcing, one of the discipline-specific literacy, refers to drawing attention to the author and identifying the specific features and contexts with the authors. Students were asked to answer the height, birthplace, length of imprisonment, and types of penalties when scrutinizing Kwan-soon Yoo’s prisoner record; however, this exercise did not seem to be strongly related to the core question but was merely a check of the given single primary source by practicing “sourcing” for sourcing sake.

Therefore, it could be seen that the teachers’ insights gained from a learning theory did not necessarily generate genuine student-engagement learning. The Korean teachers were aware of the powerful engagement of learning activities structured around debate, role-plays, small group activities, and analysis and discussion over original primary

sources rather than textbook-centered instruction; however, the classroom activities turned out somewhat different from what they believed to be valuable, partly because educational policy and decision making in Korea are still heavily influenced by standardized tests, and therefore the rote learning of names, dates, and places and maybe because of the lack of teacher education programs that focus on the development of such teaching expertise. As a result, the highly articulated instruction with primary sources turned out to leave little room for students to confront the conflicts and challenge the interpretations in the historical accounts. Shared practice, followed by a reflection on the teaching agenda allowed the teachers to discuss these limitations (Kim, 2015; Kim and Jeong 2016; Shin 2011).

While critics have pointed out that the Koreanized module did not Wineburg's approach of "inquiry" as suggested, the teachers did not take this criticism seriously; rather, they concluded that they had instantiated the foreign theory in a significantly meaningful manner, indicating that they saw the criticism academically rather than field-grounded and that the dichotomy between theory and practice has been reconciled in the community of teachers. The "voluntary" participation and "critical" reflection was regarded as "grounded on field," which convinced them to construct a Korean version of the learning theory. The procedures that the teachers suggested for "introducing" foreign theory into a Korean framework as follows.

- Publicize any basic models first and begin discussions on whether they are suitable for introduction into the examined context. Teachers need to know the common features of current practices and strategies.
- Only after teachers have sufficient understanding of the context of the teaching and learning theories in foreign countries should they be guided toward implementation. Teachers need to be aware of all the pros and cons of introducing such theories into Korean educational settings. New learning theories should be accompanied by reviews and multiple simulations.
- As no single theory can dramatically transform teaching, any theory needs to be critically and thoroughly examined. Any theoretical approach should be gradually implemented to observe what does or does not work in certain topics and units.

Since the community of history teachers witnessed a foreign theory applied and resonated in local contexts, they proposed the venue of introducing any new theoretical framework on their practice grounded in field research. Like THRD, the Korean teachers I interviewed felt that a teachers' learning community can play a significant role in filtering, modifying, and Koreanizing any theory.

Even though the teachers were supplied with a particular protocol to structure the discussions on their experiences of working with these new ideas, they failed to use it.

Therefore, as much as they advocated engaging in voluntary collaboration, a more systematic review protocol is needed so that the modeling process can achieve higher expectation (McDonald et al., 2003).

IV. Conclusion

In recent years, history teachers in Korea have been exposed to new and foreign theories which educational policies often mandate to be incorporated into classroom practice and thus result in increasing teacher anxiety and stress. While it has been recognized that foreign theories can be effective for increased learning, most teachers in Korea seem unwilling to go beyond a superficial understanding and instead tend to act as gatekeepers against any theoretical input. Aside from the focus on college entrance exams and student academic performance, Korean teachers are not confident to engage with theoretical frameworks in their classroom practices and not competent to collaborate with teacher colleagues.

This study focused on a Korean history teaching community’s instantiation of a foreign theory over six years to examine the multiple constructs of the teacher community. Their wealthy collaboration in instantiating *Reading Like a Historian* revealed that the teachers had little fear or hesitation in unpacking unfamiliar theories and positioned themselves as competent teacher-practitioners who were empowered by the cycle of learning, inquiry, classroom practice, and collaborative reflection.

The effective communication of educational research cannot be realized without teachers’ engaging with theory. From the longitudinal study of this history teaching community, the teachers were willing to be active consumers of theory and produce a localized pedagogy from their instantiation of a foreign theory by conducting joint action research and collaboratively and critically reflecting on their own practices. The teaching community members relied on interpersonal alliance to promote sharing and collaboration; however, the salient membership has tended to prevent novice teachers from entering the community and expanding their teaching horizons.

This study highlighted the transformative bridge between educational theory and practice. Active involvement in teaching communities has been known as beneficial for both in-service and pre-service teachers to immerse themselves in a community of practice, engage with new learning theories, develop and plan collaborative action research, and receive critical feedback so as to improve their classroom practice.

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