



Collaborative research for assessment for learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a collaborative research study between three secondary teachers and two university researchers, initiated by the teachers, into the practice and impacts of assessment for learning in science, geography and history classes. The research provides insights into how teachers and researchers can collaborate to develop a research and practice agenda. The study illustrates the need for a dynamic interconnection between the personal, micro or school-related level and the macro or policy level factors. The findings highlight the importance of external support, shared teacher knowledge and beliefs, professional experimentation, and shared reflection on student responses to classroom innovations.

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1. Introduction

Teachers are being encouraged to engage with research evidence and to participate in research studies related to their classroom practice with the aim to raise student achievement. Following the review by Black and Wiliam (1998), there has been a worldwide focus on the teacher use of assessment for learning practices to improve student achievement. This paper reports on collaborative research between a group of secondary teachers and university researchers, initiated by the teachers, into the practice and impacts of assessment for learning in chemistry, geography and history classes. It provides insights into one way that teachers and university researchers might work collaboratively to develop a research and practice agenda that is driven by the teachers rather than the researchers. The findings highlight the contribution of external support, shared teacher knowledge and beliefs, systematic professional experimentation, and shared reflection on student responses to classroom innovations if changes to teacher's thinking and practice are to be sustained.

1.1. Defining AfL

It is now widely recognised that Assessment for Learning (AfL), has an important role to play in enhancing student learning and achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Formative assessment is the process used by teachers and students to recognise and respond to

student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Typically it revolves around strategies such as: wait time; clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; comment-only marking; orchestrating classroom discussions using questioning and other learning tasks to elicit evidence of student understanding; providing timely feedback and peer and self-assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009). Teachers can plan to elicit and act on information about class and individual progress (Cowie & Bell, 1999) but the quality of interactive feedback is a critical feature in determining the quality of learning activity, and is therefore a central feature of assessment for learning pedagogy. Effective feedback is non evaluative, supportive, timely and specific in providing information about how a learner might modify their thinking or behaviour to improve their learning (Shute, 2008).

1.2. Teacher assessment for learning practice: a personal challenge

Teacher implementation of AfL is not without its challenges and has been the focus of numerous research and professional development initiatives internationally. One line of research focuses on exploring teacher personal knowledge and beliefs. Sato, Coffey, and Moorby (2005) working in the United States point to the role of teacher personal beliefs and background as an influence on how, or even if, teachers explore how AfL practices might be incorporated into their wider responsibilities. Black and colleagues provide evidence that different teachers adopt and adapt different practices consistent with their understandings of effective teaching (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003). They argue that teacher beliefs about their own learning and student learning and agency underpins the way AfL becomes embedded in classroom practice.

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The promotion of learner autonomy lies at the heart of AfL and if teachers don't appreciate this it appears that AfL can be implemented as a series of ritualised teaching strategies and hence loses much of its efficacy (Lee & Wiliam, 2005; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Sadler, 1989). Changing teacher assessment practice is not simply a matter of increasing teachers' assessment literacy through professional development about activities such as wait time it requires conceptual shifts for all stakeholders (Tierny, 2006, p. 259).

1.3. *Teacher assessment for learning practice: shaped by the context*

A second line of research, typically informed by sociocultural views of learning, has provided a more contextual explanation of how and why teachers might implement assessment for learning in their classrooms (see for example Black & Wiliam, 2006, 2009; Gipps, 1999; Pryor & Crossouard, 2007). School case studies of the implementation of assessment for learning across schools in Jersey (Jones & Webb, 2006) highlight the impact of variations in-school priorities and cultures for change, along with the role and importance of leadership and trust when school communities are responding to changes, whether imposed externally or developed internally. This said, when teachers reflected on and analysed examples of formative assessment that worked, and examples when it had not, they were able to refine and develop their practice. Teachers involved in the Assessment Is for Learning programme in Scotland were also influenced by contextual factors (Hayward, Priestley, & Young, 2004). They appreciated taking research ideas into the classroom and were generally comfortable with the ideas and learner-centred classroom strategies that underpinned the formative assessment project. Nevertheless, they found the adoption of such approaches to be problematic because of the need to prepare children for national tests and the time involved. The study also highlighted the importance of credible leadership and regular dialogue with other professionals in scaffolding innovation. When the principal had a real and demonstrable commitment to the innovation they were powerful contextual catalysts for the teachers. Most commonly the teachers valued support from colleagues and the opportunity to talk with teachers from other schools. Local context clearly impacts on teacher AfL understanding and implementation.

Carless (2005) explicates the influence of the broader context, in conjunction with more local factors, on teacher and school change. He proposed that teacher practice is shaped by a nested set of factors at the personal, school and political level. Carless described how the personal level encompasses teacher understandings of principles and practices of assessment for learning and the congruence of these with their existing beliefs. The next "micro" level of the change environment is that of school support, school culture and school resourcing. This is nested within a "macro" level of external factors such as policy, infrastructure and external agencies. In this study we highlight the interactive influence of personal, school and political factors on teacher assessment practice.

1.4. *Collaborating to investigate and enhance teacher assessment for learning*

Teachers prefer information that is immediately and contextually relevant. Much of the research on assessment for learning involves collaboration through university school partnerships (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009; Sato et al., 2005; Tierny, 2006). The work of Torrance and Pryor (2001) is a rich example of this. They worked collaboratively with teachers within an action research frame to investigate and develop formative classroom assessment in primary schools by building on their own research. It was

important that the teachers wanted to change their practice (Priestly, 2005) and so the study began with the teachers examining their own practice, particularly the way they questioned and gave feedback to students. This was followed by classroom experimentation and careful reflection on practice. The collaborative study that is the focus of this paper differs from the initiatives previously described as it was initiated by a teacher rather than us as researchers.

1.5. *The research goal and question*

At the beginning of the study the overarching research question was negotiated between the teachers and university researchers. The question was: What do teachers see as the impact of their use of assessment for learning on student learning and student motivation and willingness to take more responsibility for their learning?

2. **Research design**

This study occurred in a large city high school of approximately 1500 students aged 13–18 years old, situated in a high socio-economic area. The school is coeducational and classes are organised into 25–30 students of mixed ability. Colin an experienced head of department became interested in AfL work carried out by the Scottish Executive Education Department designed to empower the learner and help encourage independent learning methods during a staff sabbatical. He was particularly interested in self-evaluation by students of their own learning needs and their participation in negotiating personal learning targets to improve their achievement. At around the same time Colin's school management carried out a strategic planning exercise that identified that student performance in the recent national examinations did not adequately reflect the calibre of the student body when compared nationally and set raising achievement in external qualifications as a school wide strategic goal. Colin considered assessment for learning had the potential to support this goal and with the support of his principal approached the authors of this paper.

2.1. *The participants*

Colin convinced some colleagues, also Heads of Department, that developing AfL practices would contribute to their obligations in relation to the strategic plan by raising student achievement. He invited the authors of this paper to present an overview of AfL principles to interested staff. After the presentation, the group strategised how the teachers and researchers could work together. Six teachers expressed interest in being involved in a research and development project that investigated the impact of AfL on their classroom practice and student learning in years 11–13 (15–18 year olds), these being external examination classes. Three teachers chose to participate in the full study; the other teachers withdrew due to other commitments. Each teacher selected a class to work with that they felt would benefit from using AfL strategies to support learning. Colin selected a year 12 Chemistry class (16/17 year olds), Simon a year 11 History class (15/16 year olds) and Campbell a year 11 Geography class.

2.2. *The context for teacher assessment practice*

Assessment for Learning has been of interest in New Zealand since the late 1980s (Department of Education, 1989) but to date, there has been no research that documents teacher use of AfL strategies across a range of curriculum subjects in New Zealand secondary classrooms. AfL was mentioned explicitly in the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* policy document (Ministry of

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